

There's been a lot of media coverage recently about alleged incidents of sexual impropriety between staff and inmates within our state prison system. While the most recent incidents revolve around Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, this is an issue that impacts each and every state penitentiary, and I'd like to offer my perspective from inside the state prison walls.

I believe I am a credible "witness." I have been a Department of Corrections employee for nine years and a Correctional Sergeant at Coffee Creek for almost six years. I am the chair of our union's statewide Corrections Coordinating Committee and I was recently nominated to fill a vacancy on the Corrections Policy Committee of the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training. Suffice to say, I am intimately involved and knowledgeable with the profession and with labor issues involving the Oregon Department of Corrections.

First and foremost, I want to say this: *When* such allegations are proven to be true, there are no excuses and a zero tolerance policy, both from DOC management and our union. Any form of relationship between inmates and staff, sexual or otherwise, undermines the entire structure and mission of our work. Period.

However, it's also extremely important to note that many of the recent allegations of impropriety are just that — unsubstantiated and as-yet-uninvestigated *allegations*. It is unfortunate that the names of those accused have been released before investigations are complete, as these people's reputations will be blemished no matter the eventual outcome.

Let's be realistic, these allegations capture the public's attention because of the salaciousness of the charges. You can go to any video store and find trashy "B movies" about sexual escapades in prisons. But most of you reading this have never been inside a state prison. Consider yourself fortunate. There is a distinct inmate culture inside the walls that includes "messin' with the man whenever possible" — "the man" being anyone in authority, male or female. Over the years there have been many instances of blatantly false and/or unproven allegations by inmates against Corrections staff. Frequently these are inmates simply playing out a public "con game" and hoping to get lucky with a settlement in their favor. The way the system works, they suffer no consequence for submitting false claims, so what do they have to lose?

Again, I want to be clear. *If* and *when* such allegations are proven to be true, it's beyond unacceptable and an embarrassment to our profession. But please, when you read about such charges, take that information with a grain of salt until investigations are complete. The vast majority of my peers are dedicated professionals who report for duty each day determined to do an honorable day's work — work that is difficult, work that most Oregonians would want no part of. We are appalled when one of our co-workers steps over the line and taints everyone. But please, don't judge the 99-plus percent of us by the foibles of the very few.

*Amanda Rasmussen is President of Local 405 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville.*