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Head of prisons watchdog agency put on leave



Joanna Saul's state agency took an aggressive approach to inspecting prisons.

By **Alan Johnson**

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A dispute about privatized prison food service prompted state Sen. Shirley Smith to place Joanna Saul on leave from her job as executive director of the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee, *The Dispatch* has learned.

Smith, a Cleveland Democrat who leads the legislative prison-watchdog committee, said in an interview yesterday that she wanted to fire Saul for “insubordination” but lacked the authority to do so. Instead, she placed her on administrative leave with pay until the full eight-member board can meet.

A committee meeting scheduled for today was abruptly canceled.

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Saul, who has a law degree, is paid \$62,778 annually and has worked for the state since 2004. She did not respond to calls and emails seeking comment. She has been aggressive in investigating a wide range of prisons issues, including overcrowding, gangs, suicides and escapes.

The report that precipitated the dispute between Saul and Smith concerned Aramark Correctional Services, the private company hired by the state last year to provide food service for inmates in all Ohio prisons. Aramark’s two-year contract cost the state \$110 million. In recent months, the state fined Aramark \$272,300 for a long list of problems, including maggots on food-services lines and personnel issues.

Smith said both she and Saul prepared reports to send to prison officials and others after a July 31 public hearing on the Aramark contract. Smith told Saul to distribute her version of the report, but Saul preferred her version, calling Smith’s report “sloppy,” Smith said. After Saul distributed her own report, Smith asked her to resign or be fired.

Smith, who is term-limited out of office at the end of this year, denied she worked with Gov. John Kasich’s administration to get rid of Saul because she criticized the privatized food contract. The Kasich administration has championed privatization of state services.

State Rep. Bob Hagan, D-Youngstown, a committee member, said last week that he refused to support firing Saul. He said she has done “exemplary work.”

Smith responded by asking House Speaker William G. Batchelder, R-Medina, to remove Hagan from the committee and replace him with Rep. Bill Patmon, D-Cleveland. Batchelder has not acted on her request.

Many CIIC recommendations about Aramark have been rejected by state officials, in part because they say it would disrupt the “heart-healthy menu.” But others were accepted and some are being considered, according to a response issued yesterday by prisons chief Gary Mohr.

Mohr outright rejected the idea of pulling the Aramark contract completely, saying privatization “has exceeded financial expectations ... and the majority of prisons are experiencing few if any incidents.”

In response to complaints that prisoners were receiving smaller portions and less food, Mohr said the state is committed to a heart-healthy menu as a part of the settlement of a 2005 federal lawsuit about inmate health care. Mohr offered the same response to recommendations for boosting the caloric content of meals and adding a “hot bar” for side dishes.

The agency responded positively to recommendations for more training for Aramark supervisors, additional health inspections and increased Aramark staffing.

The prisons agency said it is raising the minimum prison food-service evaluation score to 84 percent from 79 percent. Below that level, Aramark must submit an “action plan” to remedy problems.

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MARTHA GARLIKOV (MGGARLIKOV)

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They could save even more money if the substitute sawdust for flour in the bread, pasta, etc. Use wood chips instead of hash browns. Rat meat should cost less than beef, and in hot dogs who could tell the difference. They could save a lot more by stopping the incarceration of low level "marijuana" drug users. The commercialization of our prisons is shameful. Good job John Kasich! - (David Garlikov, Not Martha)

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JOE SOMMER (J.C.SOMMER)

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The article indicates that the state is keeping a private company that has caused "a long list of problems, including maggots on food services lines, cleanliness, food shortages, personnel issues, and other contract violations." But some state officials are moving to fire a watchdog who wrote a report critical of the contract with the company. Before or after receiving the two-year, \$110 million contract from the state, how much did the company or its officers contribute to the political campaigns of state officials? Following the money often explains this type of injustice and insanity that goes on in Ohio's state government. Whatever the reason is here, Sen. Shirley Smith's behavior in the matter is outrageous and disgraceful.

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P C (MISTYMORNINGSTRANGER)

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Charter school, prisons. How is privatizing working out so far? Privatization, where no good deed goes unpunished.

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