

Lawmakers grill prison guards about their roles

Guards are still being blamed for prisoner's escape

AUSTIN (AP) — State lawmakers Tuesday grilled Texas criminal justice department officials about the Dec. 13 prison escape of seven inmates and accused them of placing all of the blame on the prison guards.

"I want to know, why is it Mr. Chairman, that you pointed the finger at the guards when we have this kind of salary schedule and you have a percentage of the vacancies in the prison system, particularly at this facility?" Sen. Carlos Truan, D-Corpus Christi, demanded to know.

Truan's question was directed at Mac Stringfellow, chairman of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice, but it set the tone for the rest of the day's hearings.

Stringfellow said he is not placing all of the blame of the prison escape on the guards, but said that two and possibly three guards did not follow procedures and could have prevented the escape.

"I was not pointing any guilty fingers," Stringfellow said. "The purpose of this report is not to find a scapegoat."

The TDCJ report released Thursday said inmates were able to break out of the maximum-security Conally Unit about 60 miles southeast of San Antonio because of mistakes by employees, including an officer who ignored a silent fire alarm tripped by guards being held hostage. Another prison employee at one point noticed the inmates were unsupervised but did not report it, also a violation, the report said.

The inmates — two murderers, two armed robbers, two rapists and a child abuser — are charged with

the Christmas Eve slaying of Irving police officer Aubrey Hawkins during a robbery at an Oshman's Super Sports USA.

TDCJ officials first appeared before the Senate Finance Committee for an overview of the department's budget request. They later addressed lawmakers on the Senate

"I want to know, why is it Mr. Chairman, that you pointed the finger at the guards when we have this kind of salary schedule, and you have a percentage of the vacancies in the prison system?"

— Carlos Truan
state senator

Criminal Justice Committee for the first of several hearings on the prison escape.

At the Senate Finance Committee, most of the discussion revolved around pay scales, employee vacancies, turnover and training.

"We've got folks not old enough to buy a beer, but they're guarding and moving some of our worst criminals," said Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston.

Currently, there are 23,622 guards working in the Texas prison system,

the nation's largest. A total of 2,595 positions are open. Those figures do not include supervisory officers.

Acknowledging there are problems with employee retention, Stringfellow told the committee that pay raises have been his top priority since he took over the post.

A starting prison guard makes about \$18,000 a year for the first three months he is working. The rate goes up every six months for the first three years he is employed by the department until the salary peaks at about \$28,000.

The criminal justice department is asking the lawmakers for about \$171 million in raises for prison staff during the 2002-2003 budget period.

"I am not denying that we have a problem," Stringfellow said.

Willie King, a prison guard in Houston who was at the meeting, said higher salaries are key to maintaining staff and said that if the guards were given raises, some of the guards who have left probably would try to get their jobs back.

"There's enough blame to go around for everyone, including the president-elect," King said.

All state employees, including prison guards, received a \$100 a month raise in 1999.

Wayne Scott, executive director of the Criminal Justice Department, told reporters later that he was not angry at the attacks he and the other officials were taking from the lawmakers.

"They want answers. I certainly understand that," Scott said. "They are angry. They are frustrated. I understand that."

Fire up the grill



PATRIC SCHNEIDER/THE BATTALION

Celso Tumax, an eight-year grill chief at a local restaurant, prepares grilled chicken over a hot fire.

Billionaire Icahn vying for TWA

DALLAS (AP) — Carl Icahn, the billionaire financier and corporate raider who formerly ran Trans World Airlines Inc. (TWA), is trying to make a power play against American Airlines for the financially ailing carrier's assets.

Icahn, whose earlier alternative against American's proposal for \$200 million in TWA emergency financing

was rejected by a judge, is now discussing a competing bid with third parties, his attorney said Monday.

Executives of Fort Worth-based AMR Corp., the parent company of American Airlines Inc., announced last week they would spend \$3.5 billion on TWA's assets and aircraft leases.

However, the purchase

by AMR is dependent on TWA, the nation's eighth-largest carrier, first filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

The bankruptcy filing, which occurred Jan. 9, left open a door for other bidders to emerge even though American had received interim approval to provide a \$175 million loan to TWA to keep it operating through bankruptcy proceedings.

AMR officials declined to comment on Icahn's proposed bid or any other moves he plans. A final hearing on the company's loan to TWA will occur January 27.

Icahn's attorney, Edward Weisfelner, would not reveal the identity of any third-party clients.

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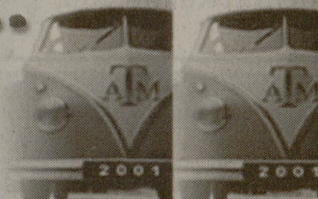
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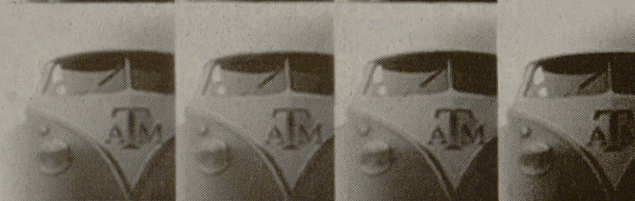
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