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Open Letter Response to InDepth.org 7/10/2024 article titled “Rats Overrun State Prison for Men in Concord, Conditions Called ‘Shocking’: Reports

Today’s article by InDepthNH.org, written by Damien Fisher, shares an irresponsible and one-sided article to garner fear and cause alarm. For starters, the article references inspection reports going back five years, however, fails to make any mention of the monumental steps that the Department has taken to correct issues. In fact, the Department has no open violations in the October 2021, September 2022, May 2023, July 2023, or September 2023 reports.

The article states “the Department of Corrections did not respond to a request for comment.” Mr. Fisher sent an email to the Department’s public information officer inbox around 1:15PM without indicating any deadline for a reply, a standard practice among journalists writing a quick story. Yet the article was published on InDepthNH.org around 3:30PM offering the department a little more than two hours to reply.

Mr. Fisher writes that the facility has been cited “for violations at every inspection since 2019” which is inaccurate. Due to the hard work of NHDOC staff, contracted agencies and resident workers, the kitchen has corrected every noted violation on all kitchen inspections.

Rodents have been a significant issue at the NH State Prison for Men, one the department has spent a great deal of time and resources mitigating. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the department was not experiencing a rodent issue. When many restaurants in downtown Concord closed down due to the pandemic, the prison became one of the only operational food sources and the rats sought out food at the prison.

Further, I have not been shy about publicly sharing my concerns and the tremendous efforts made by department staff to mitigate the rodent issue. For months, I shared updates at Governor & Council meetings about the progress made in both the kitchen and with the rodents throughout the men’s prison while also providing tours to legislators that have asked to see the kitchen firsthand. The department, along with the assistance of pest control vendors, has identified several exterior points of entry for rodents to enter the kitchen area and these holes have been sealed.

The department currently has its pest control vendor visiting the prison weekly to assist with checking the traps and making recommendations for additional remediations. The

department's vendor has even utilized rat terriers in an effort to capture rodents in the kitchen. While this attempt did lead to several captures, it was not the most successful method utilized thus far. The department began using a product called ContraPest in 2023, which has proven to be the most successful tool in battling the rodent issue in the kitchen. ContraPest, while not a poison, is a form of birth control for rodents, and we have noticed a significant decrease in the amount of rodent activity since the use of this product began. The department has implemented every idea presented to us by the vendors.

Starting in September 2023, the department began contracting with professional cleaning companies to provide deep cleaning services for the kitchen, not to replace the daily cleaning that occurs. At present, this contract ensures the kitchen is deep cleaned on a quarterly basis.

There is water leaking from the ceiling in the kitchen, which the department is currently managing by using tarps with hoses to divert the water into trash barrels, this has been frequently presented as imagined in the department's request for capital budget resources. The leaking of the roof is currently being worked on as part of a separate capital project, where we are replacing the existing concrete walkway/plaza deck above the kitchen which doubles as the kitchen roof, which was a poor construction decision originally given our four seasons. This will include the removal of the existing walkway surface and insulation layers, repairs to existing drainage, and installation of new insulation and lock-down pavers.

While our current conditions in the kitchen at the NH State Prison for Men are challenging, the department takes this issue with the seriousness that it requires and is making every effort to address any concerns as quickly as possible while also recognizing we have a responsibility to serve more than 3,000 healthy and safe meals to residents every day.

We are excited by today's Governor and Council vote to contract the existing \$10 million allocated to begin the process of replacing the NH State Prison for Men. We are encouraged by the Governor's continued strong advocacy, and the legislature's recent approval of \$40 million in bonding authority given to the Department of Corrections that will enable us to complete the planning and engineering for a replacement for the NH State Prison for Men. Prison design has come a long way since the NH State Prison for Men was built in 1878. The Department is excited that we are one step closer to providing a better environment for staff, as well as a more rehabilitative space for residents.

Helen Hanks  
Commissioner