Angola gets accreditation nod

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ANGOLA — Elated employees celebrated here Friday after an inspection team announced the once-notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary needs American Correctional Association accreditation requirements.

"For an institution of its size — and with the history of Angola — lot me say I'm glad to be a part of this historic moment," said Team Chairman Ray Hobbs.

Angola employees demonstrated the "highest level of professionalism that I've seen in my career in corrections. You're some kind of staff," said Hobbs, warden of Arkansas' Wrightsline prison.

"You're the most honest people I've met. If you knew something was wrong, you didn't try to hide it," Hobbs added.

The team of corrections experts said Angola met all 38 of the ACA's mandatory accreditation standards and 462 of the 484 applicable non-mandatory standards.

The 97.6 score in the non-mandatory guidelines compared favorably with scores earned by the state's 11 other adult prisons. A lower than 90 percent score on the non-mandatory portion of the inspection would disqualify a prison from accreditation.

The ACA inspection covers a wide range of prison operation, including staffing, the living conditions, sanitation, inmate programs and security.

An ACA rating will consider Angola and Phelps Correctional Center's accreditation recommendations next month.

Hobbs said Angola's image outside Louisiana is "backwards, the dark ages, brutal," and he was surprised when Corrections Secretary Richard Stalder first began promoting accreditation for Angola and other state prisons.

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"But I know Richard, so I said, 'Wait, something's going on in Louisiana.' "

ACA Regional Administrator Kevin Ashburn said Louisiana's maximum-security prisons, although it has changed over the years, has the same image of other older, large-state institutions.

"They're the places where you think of inmate labor, solitary confinement, violence, escapes, corruption, untrained staff and inmates always battling the staff," Ashburn said.

"All of those institutions that question Angola should come down and take a look," said Angola Ward John Whiteley. "We might be able to help them a little."

"This is a historic occasion. For the Louisiana State Penitentiary to be recommended for accreditation is indeed a historic moment," Whiteley said.

Commissioner of Administration Raymond LaBorde said he remembers "what Angola used to be" because he once represented many of its employees in the Legislature.

"Now we can hold our heads up high. This is a great day for Louisiana," LaBorde said.

In addition to praising Angola's staff, Ashburn lauded Stalder and Gov. Edwin Edwards for their commitment to meeting ACA accreditation requirements.

State officials are using accreditation to free prisons from strict federal court supervision. Eight of the 12 institutions already have been released.

Stalder told employees that U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola has worked 20 years to improve Louisiana's correctional system, and he "trusts you with the continuation of what he has helped establish in terms of a safe, stable and productive program."

"Inmate officials have said being removed from judicial supervision will mean administrators can be more flexible in operating prisons safely and efficiently."

Attorney Keith Nordyke, who represents state prisoners in the lawsuit that forced the court's supervision, said he withhold his opinion on whether Angola should be freed from judicial oversight until he reads the inspectors' written report and the state's formal motion to Polozola.

"Nordyke said he agrees that Angola has "an excellent staff and solid leadership." He added, however, "I have never equated ACA accreditation with being constitutional."

The Baton Rouge attorney also represents Angola inmates in a separate lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the prison's medical care.

"One of the most interesting things is that an accreditation team never talked to me about a medical unit that has been certified as a class action," Nordyke said.

"To some degree, ACA measures different things than perhaps the quality of medical care."

While Angola's staff prepared for the inspection, state fire marshals discovered hundreds of fire safety code violations, including major problems that forced the closure of Camps A and H.

Angola officials said the ACA does not count fire code violations against an institution seeking accreditation if it is working on a plan to correct the deficiencies.

"If a motion is filed, I would certainly want to look at all the issues raised by the fire and safety inspectors," Nordyke said. "That would certainly go into our decision as to how we would respond."

The four inspectors complimented Angola's staff for the prison's cleanliness, inter-departmental cooperation, training program, tool control, inmates' living amenities, preventive maintenance plan, control of hazardous materials and educational and religious programs.

"You have a top quality fire department and emergency medical services department," said inspector Tim Keohane, a Springfield, Mo., corrections consultant.

"The quality of life in this facility is good," said consultant Sam Sublett Jr., a former ACA president. "If you have to do time in a maximum security facility, this is as good as any I've ever seen."

Inspector Jackie Crawford, who also is a corrections consultant, said inmates told her "we feel safe in this institution."

"That says a lot for you," she told the employees.