Early morning fire destroys Angola offices

By JAMES MINTON
(baker zachary bureau)

ANGOLA — Fire destroyed four offices and caused varying degrees of damage to 11 others early Monday in an area of Louisiana State Penitentiary's Main Prison.

No one was injured in the fire, discovered about 12:45 a.m., in a room adjacent to an office used by the inmate staff of the prison's award-winning news magazine, The Angolite.

Prison spokeswoman Cathy Fontenot said the room where the fire originated was used by mental health treatment staff and other employees.

The fire spread to another room on the same side of the building and two more across the hall, including a second room used by The Angolite staff.

Fontenot said the magazine was about to go to press with its next issue, but the staff may be able to recover their work because the computers in the larger Angolite office did not appear to be damaged.

Warden Burl Cain said firefighters believe the fire was caused by a defective cord for a window-mounted air conditioning and heating unit in the mental health office.

The state Fire Marshal's Office is scheduled to begin an investigation of the blaze Wednesday, Cain said.

"We know it wasn't of inmate origin. That's the last place they'd want to see burn," Cain said.

The fire began on the ground floor of a two-story wing of offices used by prison employees and inmate organizations.

The second-story offices were not damaged, but those on the ground floor not destroyed by flames sustained smoke and water damage.

The wing is near and parallel to a cell block that joins "the walk" connecting the Main Prison's buildings.

"It was right beside the cell block tier, and I know the inmates could see the flames shooting out. It had to have been really frightening for them, but they maintained their cool," Cain said.

"It was a hell of a fire. Flames were gushing from both sides of the building, and the smoke was extremely heavy," the warden said.

Security officers placed leg irons and other restraints on 396 inmates in the cell block tier in preparation for their evacuation, but Angola Fire Department and West Feliciana Parish Fire Protection District 1 volunteers managed to bring the blaze under control before it spread to other areas.

Cain said seven fire trucks responded to the alarm.

Inmate Johnny Dixon said he was doing paperwork for his religious organization in an office two doors down from where the fire began.

Dixon said he heard security officers blowing whistles and opened the door of his office.

"The hall was thick with smoke. You couldn't see through it," Dixon said.

Later, after Angola's first trucks began arriving, Dixon said he and other inmates trusted help stretched lines from the trucks to fire hydrants.

"By the then, the flames were coming out pretty good," he said.

Assistant Warden James Felder, the warden on duty for the night, said his main concern was "the safety of the personnel — the inmates and free people."