ANGOLA — Despite their own misgivings, Louisiana State Penitentiary officials earlier this year believed a deputy state fire marshal was willing to certify that the prison met all state fire safety codes, the warden said last week.

"My safety officer said that we were this close to getting a certificate of compliance," said Warden John P. Whitley, holding his thumb and index finger a fraction of an inch apart.

At that time, the state's largest maximum security prison was on a fast track toward accreditation by the American Correctional Association and possible release from federal court supervision.

While planning for an ACA inspection, however, Angola employees began having serious doubts about whether the physical plant would meet strict fire safety regulations, the warden said.

"Getting people trained for ACA, especially in holding fire drills, made people aware of potential problems," Whitley said.

The rush to accreditation was derailed when Whitley reported that Deputy Fire Marshal Robert Keene offered, and sent, Angola officials signed letterhead stationery they could have used to write their own exemptions to fire safety requirements.

Whitley's whistle-blowing resulted in an unusual investigation: the Louisiana State Police, a division of the Department of Public Safety and Corrections, looking into activities of the state Fire Marshal's Office, a DPSC agency that is responsible for ensuring that the department's corrections branch complies with fire safety regulations. Keene was fired last week.

Angola officials also are expecting a federal investigation.

Meanwhile, DPSC Secretary Richard Stalder ordered the state fire marshal to reinspect other prisons that passed ACA accreditation audits this year and to thoroughly inspect Angola's buildings.

The new inspections turned up hundreds of code violations at Angola, and prison officials expect the fire marshal's deputies to find hundreds more as they work their way through the sprawling Main Prison complex, most of which was built in the mid-1960s.

Last month, Stalder and other top state officials decided to close Angola Camps A and B, two aging satellite prisons, rather than spend an estimated $12 million to bring them into fire-code compliance.

Correcting problems at the prison's hospital, cited for numerous violations, and the Main Prison will likely costs millions of dollars, but state officials appear to have little choice but to find the money.

The hospital is the state's largest medical facility for inmates, and often receives prisoners from other institutions.

Angola's 2,200-man Main Prison is, by itself, the state's largest penal facility.

Stalder said he is not aware of a final cost estimate for the hospital repairs, but said the state Office of Facility Planning and Control is working with the Fire Marshal's Office to determine what violations need immediate corrective action.

"We will do what the fire marshal says we have to do," Stalder said. "There's no question that the state will come up with whatever it takes."
In Cellblock B of the Main Prison at Angola, security Sgt. Michael Rowan demonstrates mechanical cell-door controls to Assistant Warden Dwayne McFatter. The state Fire Marshal has said this type of locking mechanism would be unreliable in case of a fire.

Prison

CONTINUED FROM 1B

Meanwhile, Whitley said the re-inspections were overdue and the two deputy fire marshals assigned to Angola are going by the book.

"This is the most thorough inspection that anybody here can ever remember," he said.

"I welcome the inspection process," said Angola Business Manager Harvey Grimmier, who oversees the prison's maintenance department.

"It was needed. We didn't realize the violations were there. We thought we were in compliance, but we really weren't," Grimmier said.

Stalder said earlier this week that Keene alone cannot be blamed for the safety conditions at Angola, saying the new inspections are focusing on "the last two decades."

Whitley said the problems stem from "years of neglect by the state and some poor reporting by the fire marshals."

Until a "state of emergency" was declared in 1989, "we've never seen a fire marshals in here," Grimmier said. "At least I can't remember one. If he did come, he didn't have any impact."

Before the letterhead incident, Angola safety officers took Keene to look at what they considered potential problem areas but which were in compliance according to his inspections.

They demonstrated the unreliability of a gang-locking mechanism on a 54-cell tier at Camp A, which resulted in headquarters officials deciding to close the 108-man tier.

Angola has 452 cell doors controlled by the same type of mechanism, Grimmier said. Fixing them will cost about $1.5 million.

He said 90 inmates were locked in their cells for six and a half hours in a Main Prison cellblock in August 1990 while employees worked feverishly to dismantle and realign the jammed doors.

Whitley said the inmates likely would have died if a fire had broken out on the tier.

Prison officials also had doubts that many other physical plant conditions, including leaking roofs, deteriorating boilers and air conditioning units, faulty fire alarms and ancient electrical control panels, could withstand serious ACA scrutiny, the two said.

The state's cumbersome capital outlay process causes problems to grow much worse before repairs are begun, they said.

As examples, they said the Main Prison gymnastics roof, damaged by Hurricane Andrew, is still not repaired, and a request for roof repairs at the hospital was first submitted in 1990 but work is not slated to begin until this fall.

With about 6,000 inmates and employees living on the 25-square-mile prison farm, Angola also has a "town," larger in population than 239 cities and towns in Louisiana, Whitley and Grimmier said.

The maintenance department, however, has only 23 employees, who are responsible for maintaining 522 buildings with about 2 million square feet of occupied floor space. The workers, and inmate crews, also maintain the prison's electrical distribution, water, sewage, flood control, natural gas and telephone systems, they said.

The electrical system alone has 60 miles of overhead and underground wiring.

"You see half-finished maintenance jobs around here because they had to leave and go fix something more pressing," Whitley said.

Baton Rouge Advocate
12 col.1
July 6, 1993

"This has happened over many years," the warden added. "When problems come up, the prison doesn't have the money to fix them. The maintenance department will rig it so that it will work. We're talking 10 to 15 years of neglect."

"We're putting fire and water fires' and not repairing the fire damage because we're going to another fire," Grimmier said.