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2 Angola employees resign amid fresh scandal

Investigation: Gun instructors collected fees while on clock

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Two longtime employees of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola have resigned during the past week, in the wake of yet another scandal alleging self-dealing at the state's maximum-security prison.

Maj. Richard Barton and Master Sgt. Joe Turner were in charge of operating the rifle range at Angola, where correctional employees from around the state came for firearms training.

An investigation by the state Office of Inspector General found that Barton had been collecting fees privately for some of the sessions, even though he was on the clock and using state resources while conducting the training rather than to Angola or to the Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

The sources said the investigation found that Barton had shared some invoices to Richwood Correctional Center, a private prison operated by LaSalle Corrections, for training LaSalle's employees in firearms use.

Barton, who earned $72,113 annually, typically charged $75 per person; the invoices over a period of several years amounted to a little over $6,000, the sources said.

The problem was that the invoices stipulated that payment should be made to Barton rather than to Angola.

Correctional officials conducted their own probe after Inspector General Stephen Street's office shared its findings. Street said Tuesday he could not discuss the investigation publicly until a report is issued or charges are filed.

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The alleged self-dealing at Angola's rifle range comes in the wake of similar scandals involving a charity set up to provide the prison's employees with better recreation and another meant to benefit the prison's volunteer fire department.

The two women who oversaw the recreational fund — and who are accused of losing to the tune of more than $160,000 — have been charged criminally.

One of them, former Lt. Col. Shirley Whittington, pleaded guilty in February to federal wire fraud charges.

Those misdeeds came to light after former longtime Warden Burt Cain resigned in late 2015 and Louisiana's legislative auditor began a lengthy examination of the maximum-security prison's business affairs. The office published a scathing report in January.

Billy McConnell, managing director of LaSalle Corrections, which paid Barton's invoices, said in a phone interview he was not aware that the fees paid by his company were going directly into an employee's pocket. He said matters like arranging for firearms training typically would be handled by lower-level employees, such as wardens.

Reached Tuesday, Ray Hanson, the warden at Richwood and a former longtime employee of the state's corrections department, declined to comment.

Corrections officials had little to say about the matter. Ken Pastorick, a spokesman for the state department, said last week that Barton had been put on "administrative leave pending an internal investigation."

On Monday, Pastorick confirmed that Barton had resigned that day. He said the results of the investigation, which The Advocate has sought via a public records request, could not be made public because "there is still a pending investigation."

Pastorick said the corrections department has provided the results of its probe "to other law enforcement agencies."

He did not specify which agencies.

Pastorick said he could not say whether either employee had faced any discipline.

Sam D'Aquilla, district attorney for the 20th Judicial District, which includes the prison, said his office had been made aware of the findings about Barton and Turner. He said he planned to ask an "outside agency," such as the Office of Inspector General, to look into the matter further.

"I want to try and get someone to look at it and see if formal charges need to be brought," said D'Aquilla, adding that he deals with the Angola prison "every day."

This would be at least the second Angola-related case that D'Aquilla has punted to the inspector general recently. After the legislative auditor released its report — which found possible evidence of numerous crimes committed by prison officials — D'Aquilla sent the report to Street's office and asked him to decide whether anyone needed to be arrested.

Street sent back a terse response pointing out that D'Aquilla already had filed formal charges against two of the people whose alleged crimes were detailed in the report.

Barton could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Turner, reached by phone, said he had no comment and emphasized that he left the corrections department last week with an unblemished record.

"My boss (Barton) was a really good guy, and I worked with him for more than 25 years," Turner said.

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