

Non-COVID Update - June 5, 2020

Hi all-

It's been more than a minute since my last update. I took a little time off, and we've successfully stayed the course with our COVID-19 prevention efforts. But things have been anything but quiet – both professionally and personally. We're holding the line and will continue to do so, but it's not COVID-19 that's been occupying my thoughts.

I was horrified by the death of George Floyd at the hands of four police officers in Minneapolis last week. I couldn't believe what I was watching, and frankly, it pissed me off. I'm still angry. I'm also humbled. The ensuing conversations about race and inequity have been powerful, and it's a humbling experience to be confronted with just how little I know. I don't know how else to say it, but I simply can't understand the challenges people of color confront every day. To suggest that I understand would be a disservice to those who have lived it. But, I can acknowledge the pain that's being expressed, I can listen and learn, and I can choose to act in ways that move our system toward greater equity and inclusion instead of "otherness." I'm committed to doing that and hope all of you will choose to take similar actions.

One way I've been able to partially reconcile a lot of mixed emotions is by simply acknowledging that two things can be true at once. You can believe that what happened to George Floyd was criminal and also have pride in law enforcement generally. You can hear and admire the message of people peacefully expressing their pain, while condemning the ugly violence and looting perpetrated by others seeking to hijack that message. Two things can be true at once.

That realization really hit home for me on Saturday when I received the call that every IDOC Director since 1984 has wanted to receive. It was a call letting me know that a judge granted IDOC's motion to terminate the Balla case. For those of you who are not familiar with the Balla case, it is a class-action lawsuit brought by a group of inmates in the 1980s. The Balla case has been a shadow over this agency for almost four decades, but the celebration was muted. I can't tell you how proud I am of Warden Ramirez and his team at ISCI, and Prisons leadership, and all the people who have spent countless hours through the incident command structure over the years to bring this case home. I'm so incredibly proud of them. But it's equally important that we don't forget how Balla happened. It's a part of our history. Conditions of confinement were so poor in the early 1980s that a group of inmates filed a lawsuit alleging inhumane treatment and conditions, got it certified as a class-action suit, represented themselves in front of a conservative federal judge, and prevailed. They proved their treatment at the hands of the state of Idaho was cruel and unusual by constitutional standards. We can be proud of what we accomplished while also being mindful of our history of which we're not proud. Two things can be true at once.

We are the largest public safety agency in Idaho. Over 1,500 of our staff have taken an important oath. It's worth talking about what that oath represents for our agency and those who took it. When you raised your hand, you were not pledging loyalty to a Governor, a legislature, a political party, or even a director. You took an oath affirming your loyalty to the United States Constitution and the Constitution of the state of Idaho. You swore to faithfully serve and protect your fellow citizens. . . *all the people of Idaho*, to include those in our custody and under our supervision. What happened in Minneapolis was a violation of that oath in the worst imaginable way by the officer whose conduct took the life of George Floyd and by the officers who sat idly by. Santa Cruz Police Chief Andy Mills said it

best, "You see it, you own it!" The same standard applies here at IDOC. Just think about this: Across this country, tens of thousands of protesters and millions of people at home are frustrated because they feel powerless to affect the system. WE ARE THE SYSTEM. We work public safety every day, and we decide how we wield the incredibly fragile power with which we've been entrusted. Before us is the opportunity to set the example and standard for how public safety agencies should operate. If you betray that trust with your actions, or fail to report others who do, you are not long for this agency. It will not be tolerated, accepted, or ignored within our agency.

I have a heavy heart with everything going on in the world right now, but I'm incredibly optimistic and excited about the work we do and where we're going. The best part about being willing to embrace our history is we get to also acknowledge that we're making history now. How we write that next chapter isn't a tough choice to make. We're not choosing between treating people with dignity and respect or trying to improve public safety. We can do both. Two things can be true at once.

Please take care of yourself and each other. Have a great weekend!

Thanks-
Josh