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\$10,000 Charter Flight With Unrestrained Inmates and Unarmed Staff Highlights Bureau of Corrections Lapses; Whistleblower Warns of Risks

A junior officer's report says BOC staff left inmates unrestrained overnight in Miami before a \$10K charter flight, while in St. Croix, untrained technical employees allegedly supervise detainees, sparking calls for urgent audits of policies and practices

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An aerial shot of the John Bell Correctional Facility on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Most Virgin Islanders expect that when inmates are in the custody of the Bureau of Correction, they are monitored and supervised at all times by qualified, trained correctional officers. On at least two occasions thus far, however, this appears to not have been the case.

Over the past seven days, Consortium journalists have been reaching out to BOC officials, seeking clarification and comment about these troubling allegations. In the face of silence from the institution, however, it is our hope that publishing the corroborated claims of a concerned whistleblower will prompt authorities to investigate and take appropriate action.

In April 2022, two inmates reportedly needed to be transported from Miami to St. Croix. According to a statement filed contemporaneously by a junior corrections officer and seen by the Consortium, he and a “civilian” member of staff were tasked with that operation, and dutifully set off for the psychiatric hospital where the inmates were being housed. When they arrived, they reportedly quickly realized that they would not be able to make it back to the airport in time for their return flight. Additionally, because the inmates had already been discharged from the facility, staff at the hospital would not be able to allow them to spend another night in their care.

Stranded, the unarmed BOC staffers then reportedly decided to remain in their vehicle with the two inmates, who were unrestrained, overnight. According to the report seen by the Consortium, they did so, setting off at around 5 o'clock the next morning. The inmates and BOC staff members arrived at the airport and boarded a private plane back to St. Croix. The charter flight cost \$10,000, and staff members were reportedly unarmed and inmates unrestrained the entire time, an apparent violation of Federal Aviation Administration. Although an incident report was allegedly filed following the highly irregular trip, it is unclear whether there was any subsequent investigation of the matter by senior BOC staff or management.

More recently, a minor accused of a serious crime was transferred into the custody of the John Bell Correctional Facility. According to unofficial communications between BOC staff, seen and heard by the Consortium, staffers not trained as correctional officers are occasionally being used to supervise this inmate, ostensibly to ease the burden of officer shortages. The young inmate is reportedly not being housed with the rest of the prison population, and thus cannot be monitored by the same officers supervising other detainees. Correctional staff queried whether it was legal to place untrained technical staff in a position to supervise inmates. “Dah place jus lawless,” one officer remarked, in a text thread seen by the Consortium.

The two incidents outlined above are just two examples of the dysfunction at the Bureau, according to the whistleblower, who reached out to Consortium journalists out of concern over serious operational deficiencies at correctional facilities. Current practices must be audited against existing policies and standard operating procedures, the whistleblower says, with gaps and deficiencies corrected immediately if the Bureau is to have any hope of being freed from the longstanding consent decree currently guiding BOC operations.

The Consortium will continue reaching out to BOC officials for comment or clarity, and will publish any response that is forthcoming.