



PRESS RELEASE

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Governor and Commissioner Announce New Correctional Public Safety Measures

Governor Ronnie Musgrove and Mississippi Department of Corrections Commissioner Robert Johnson today announced new measures designed to strengthen public safety in the state's correctional system. The measures include wholesale changes in items provided to maximum security and death row inmates.

"Items that you and I may take for granted as harmless, like toothbrushes, bars of soap, and brush handles are viewed by many prisoners as weapons that can be used to harm MDOC staff, other prisoners, and potentially the public," said Governor Musgrove. "We don't intend to stand idly by and let this happen. We are taking steps to protect our employees and taking measures to ensure our prison system is safe for staff and inmates."

Maximum security and death row inmates will immediately begin to receive personal hygiene items that are clear, including toothpaste, deodorant, shaving gel, soap and shampoo. These clear personal hygiene products provide inmates less of an opportunity to hide pieces of metal and additional items used to harm others with.

In addition, maximum security and death row inmates will be issued writing pens no thicker than a quarter of an inch, handleless toothbrushes and razors with blades that immediately break into small pieces if the razor head is compromised. Cleaning brushes will have wooden not rubber handles that can be melted and fashioned as weapon handles. Both the razors and cleaning brushes will be logged out and collected, affording these inmates only limited time for use.

"It is because of the inmates own behavior that we are taking these steps today," said MDOC Commissioner Robert Johnson. "I do not take lightly any inmate purposefully trying to harm correctional officers. MDOC correctional officers are as vital to all Mississippian's public safety as any law enforcement officer in the state and their job is just as dangerous."

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MDOC's investigation following the December 6th shooting at correctional officers by two death row inmates reinforces the changes announced today. Items provided to inmates were fashioned like a gun, called a zip gun. A plastic cleaning brush was used as the guns handle and a radio or television antenna was used as the guns barrel. A screw and pieces of underwear elastic were used to fashion the firing pin.

"Radio's and televisions purchased through the canteen by death row inmates whose behavior allows such a purchase now have no antennas," said Commissioner Johnson. "If we find any contraband in a death row inmates cell it will be stripped and the inmate will lose the radio and television in their cell."

MDOC's investigation of this incident did not reveal where the two, .22-caliber bullets that were recovered came from. Death row inmate Willie Russell fired one of the bullets at a correctional officer. The second bullet was found inside the zip gun recovered in the possession of death row inmate Jimmy Mack.

"We have nothing conclusive to indicate where the bullets came from," said Commissioner Johnson. "What we did, however, was immediately order that all staff assigned to maximum security units be searched following their muster, or roll call, and prior to entering the maximum security unit they are scheduled to work in. In addition, any personal items brought with them must be carried in clear bags."

MDOC correctional officers will also receive more comprehensive training as to the types of items used as lethal weapons. Correctional officers are also increasing their searches of maximum security and death row inmates.

The changes come one year after Governor Musgrove appointed Johnson as Commissioner of the MDOC. Governor Musgrove made the announcement on February 21, 2001.

"A year later, I'm even more committed to my choice for Commissioner and for his leadership in the Department," said Governor Musgrove.

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