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Private prison company CoreCivic's history of issues in Tennessee

Staff reports

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CoreCivic is one of the nation's largest private prison firms. In Tennessee, it runs four state prisons and several county detention centers, housing about a third of the state's roughly 30,000 inmates.

But the company has faced scrutiny for a number of problems at its facilities, including criticism from state leaders, local politicians and the public. Here is an overview of some of the recent issues that put CoreCivic in the headlines.

Audits: Mishandled abuse claims, gang activity, staffing shortages

CoreCivic was named in an audit released earlier this month, which detailed the Tennessee Department of Correction's failure to properly classify inmate deaths and mishandling of sexual abuse claims.

Health staff at two CoreCivic facilities — Whiteville Correctional Facility and Trousdale Turner Correctional Center — did not record any serious accidents or injuries in a state database during the one-and-a-half-year audit period, an "unlikely" absence of such incidents, the audit said. Allegations of sexual abuse and harassment were also filed 10 days late at Whiteville and Trousdale Turner, according to the audit.

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It wasn't the first time the company had been the subject of a critical review. A 2017 state audit cited gang activity and staffing shortages at Trousdale Turner as evidence of CoreCivic's "continued noncompliance with contract requirements and department policies" while

managing the prison. CoreCivic later acknowledged it had been fined more than \$2 million by the state for issues related to the 2017 audit.

A spokesperson for CoreCivic said the company was "committed to providing a high standard of care for every person in our Tennessee facilities."

Problems at Trousdale Turner

The Trousdale Turner Correctional Center has been among CoreCivic's most troubled facilities in Tennessee. The company has a five-year, \$276-million deal to run the a 2,552-bed prison in Hartsville.

In 2016, Trousdale Turner abruptly stopped accepting new inmates amid concerns about "serious issues" at the prison, including inadequate staffing, solitary confinement problems and allegations of excessive force. The Tennessean reported that year that 306 jobs were unfilled at the state's four CoreCivic-operated prisons, representing an 18.6% vacancy rate.

In 2018, state lawmakers heard testimony from a former Trousdale Turner inmate who said he was raped twice while incarcerated there, and that nothing was done when he attempted to report it. Testimony from the parents of another former inmate blamed a lack of staffing and oversight for their son's suicide at the prison.

A spokesperson for CoreCivic later said the company has boosted pay and recruitment efforts to improve staffing at Trousdale Turner, and said CoreCivic makes extensive efforts to prevent and address sexual assault.

Sexual harassment, diabetes lawsuits

CoreCivic has also faced lawsuits in Tennessee from both inmates and former employees.

A female guard at a Chattanooga prison run by CoreCivic said she was repeatedly required to work alone with male inmates who sexually harassed, groped and attacked her, according to a federal lawsuit filed in 2019. Coworkers repeatedly ignored the guard's calls for help and shrugged off her reports of harassment, according to the suit, with a supervisor telling her to "grow a tougher skin."

Multiple lawsuits also claimed that diabetic inmates were denied timely access insulin or other necessary medical care. CoreCivic has denied wrongdoing in those suits and said it is committed to "high-quality health care" for inmates.

Scabies outbreak

In 2017, an outbreak of scabies at the CoreCivic-run Metro-Davidson County Detention Facility spread the infestation to hundreds of inmates and staffers. A lawsuit filed by employees at the jail alleged that they faced retaliation if they spoke out about the problem, which echoed a lawsuit on behalf of inmates that claimed they would be placed in solitary confinement if they discussed scabies.

Later that year, a CoreCivic guard was arrested and pleaded guilty to misdemeanor assault for pepper spraying an inmate without justification. The inmate, James Nelson, alleged that corrections officer Oluwatobi Ola attacked him because he was considering filing a lawsuit against CoreCivic over a scabies infection. CoreCivic fired Ola.

CoreCivic did not admit wrongdoing in the scabies outbreak, but did pay medical expenses for some Metro employees. CoreCivic CEO Damon Hininger said jail employees "have followed the standard of care and accepted protocols in correctional health care for managing these types of situations."