

Arizona prisons gain favor with isle senator

By Robert Shikina, rshikina@starbulletin.com

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A group of Hawaii senators ended their tour yesterday of two Arizona prisons ~ home to about 1,800 Hawaii prisoners ~ with one senator saying he was “pleased” by what he saw.

Sen. Will Espero, chairman of the Public Safety Committee, traveled to Arizona with Sens. Clarence Nishihara and Norman Sakamoto to tour the facilities and talk with inmates, staff and administrators.

“I think we are moving in the right direction,” Espero (D, Waipahu-Ewa-Ewa Beach-West Loch) said by phone yesterday.

Hawaii’s Department of Public Safety consolidated its prisoners from three states into two prisons in Eloy, Ariz. ~ Saguaro and Red Rock prisons. There are 1,374 Hawaii inmates at the recently opened Saguaro facility, a \$95 million medium-security prison with 1,896 beds. At Red Rock prison, a majority of the 474 Hawaii prisoners will be transferred to Saguaro by the end of the year.

Both prisons are operated by Corrections Corp. of America. The state has a \$50 million contract with CCA to house the Hawaii inmates.

Tommy Johnson, deputy director of the Public Safety Department, also joined the tour and said the facility is running fine, except for some “growing pains” associated with opening a new facility.

With 300 inmates moving into Saguaro each month, some of the programs still had long waiting lists, he said.

Other programs, such as the plumbing course and college courses, still had not started.

Espero expects most of the inmates at Red Rock to be transferred to Saguaro by the end of this year.

Johnson said they are looking to expand the video conferencing available at four faith-based organizations on Oahu and one on Maui to include Kauai and the Big Island to allow Hawaii inmates to keep in touch with relatives at home.

Espero said the group talked with the warden and discussed an August incident in which several inmates escaped from their cells when the doors accidentally opened.

It was human error, he said: a mistakenly pushed button. Authorities corrected the problem by now opening doors manually.

“Safety wasn’t a big issue,” Espero said. “Generally these two facilities appear to be well-operated and don’t have major safety problems.”

Espero met with prisoners during lunch or in a large room and heard that some of the inmates expressed a desire for more jobs and vocational training. Gangs, he said, did not appear to be a problem.

Espero plans to return within a year to see whether the programs have been expanded to give an opportunity to prisoners who want to use them. He also is considering creating a position of a contract monitor to be on site and work as a prisoner advocate.

“What we saw had some great potential. We need to follow up with it,” he said. Some of the programs include Hawaiian culture and a program with the Humane Society in which inmates nurture abused or neglected animals back to health.

“If all of our inmates will be here in Arizona, we want this to be a prison where they are bettering themselves,” Espero said.