

Outgoing Utah Corrections Boss Wants Prison To Make People Better Than They Arrived

By WHITTNEY EVANS

April 18, 2018

KUER

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Rollin Cook, head of the Utah Department of Corrections is stepping down next month. For the past five years, he's overseen the prison system, probation and parole, and other rehabilitation programs. Cook said the department became a different place for employees and inmates during his tenure. Many employees are paid better and have more opportunities for training and promotions. The department even started walking in the Draper Days Parade.

"People were like, what in the world is going on? You expect to see firemen and policeman," Cook said. "But there we were just letting people see what we do and the incredible people that we do here every day."

Cook looked to limit restrictive housing or solitary confinement in prison-in part due to Utah's notoriously high rate of inmate suicides.

"When you isolate people and when you lock them up and don't give them access to speak to other people or see light, that makes them worse," Cook said. "It doesn't make them better."

Cook expanded education and inmate work programs to help them prepare for life on the outside. And he recently vowed to shed more light on how prisons and jails in the state are run.

He's even had a good working relationship with the ACLU. The organization said in a statement, Cook was responsive to their concerns about inmate health and safety, as well as transparency.

Cook said he's proud of all the work he's done, but he's ready for a change.

“There’s a lot of great things that are happening. Is it perfect? No. But it’s a whole lot better than it ever was,” Cooks said. He says everyone is learning that incarceration alone doesn’t solve problems.

“We’ve got to program. We’ve got to rehabilitate. We’ve got to educate,” Cook said. “All those different types of things that make a difference in someone’s life.

Cook worked for Salt Lake County Jail for 23 years before Governor Gary Herbert appointed him to lead the corrections department in 2013.

Herbert will select an interim director in the coming weeks.