

Rollin Cook, Lamont's choice for prison chief, faces confirmation hearing Thursday

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Rollin Cook, Gov. Ned Lamont's nominee for corrections chief, faces a confirmation hearing Thursday. (Handout) (Hartford Courant) Prison chief nominee Rollin Cook is prepared to answer questions from lawmakers at his confirmation hearing Thursday about the correction department's problems with preventable deaths, the agency's spokeswoman said Wednesday. The department has identified at least 25 medical cases, including eight inmate deaths, in which the agency has been sued or expects to be sued over lapses in medical care.



The union has called it a crisis behind bars and said at least 100 health care positions remain vacant. Cook is scheduled to have his first meeting with union delegates Thursday afternoon.

The correction department last year took over medical and mental health care in the prisons, ending its 17-year, no-bid agreement with UConn Health.

Cook, the former state prison chief in Utah, "certainly recognizes this as a priority for him," said correction department spokeswoman Karen Martucci, "and he's prepared to talk about his ideas for moving the system forward."

But leaders of Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union want to know why prison health care jobs aren't being filled.

"There seems to be a lack of urgency in the hiring process to fill these health care staff vacancies," union officials said in a statement Wednesday. "Our members are working long hours to comply with minimum ratios of caretakers to inmate population. Mandated overtime has been built into the system, instead of hiring the staff that is required to do the work."

"This staff shortage and bulk overtime expectations affect the quality of life and safety of our members in an institutional environment, and could compromise the quality of care provided to inmates to address their physical and mental health needs," the union officials said.

[Union describes health care crisis behind bars »](#)

In a news release, Lamont's office said Cook improved medical and mental health care in Utah's state prisons.

Martucci released a statement from Cook on Wednesday:

"I stand behind the work I accomplished during my five years as the executive director of the Utah Department of Correction. I strived to improve the conditions for employees and offenders alike," the statement said.

"The health, safety and improved living environment of offenders, as well as increased transparency of department policies and practices were among my top priorities," Cook said. "I was also able to expand education and treatment programs for offenders.

"Were there setbacks during my tenure? Of course there were. I am not aware of any system or person who is perfect."

John Mejia, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union in Utah, said by phone Wednesday that Cook was responsive to problems in the state system when they were pointed out to him by ACLU lawyers.

"Generally speaking, he was willing to partner with us," Mejia said.

Utah's county jails were plagued by a string of preventable deaths of inmates. Martucci clarified Wednesday that Cook, as the state prison chief, didn't have authority over Utah's more than 20 county jails, which are operated by sheriff departments.

Martucci said Cook wasn't available for an interview Wednesday.

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