

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Ron Johnson
“Corruption, Abuse, and Misconduct at U.S. Penitentiary Atlanta”
July 26, 2022

As submitted for the record:

Over the last 10 months, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (“PSI”) has conducted oversight of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons (“BOP”), specifically examining the conditions at the prison in Atlanta, Georgia known as “U.S. Penitentiary Atlanta” or “USPA.” This bipartisan investigation uncovered a history of corruption at USPA that jeopardized the safety and security of staff and inmates at the prison.

The Subcommittee interviewed dozens of former USPA staff who spoke about the widespread dysfunction at the prison and described the culture of corruption that plagued USPA for years. Throughout these interviews, the Subcommittee heard how inept leadership at the prison ignored security failures and allowed corrupt staff to avoid accountability for misconduct. PSI learned that USPA and BOP staff even used a specific phrase to describe this pervasive culture of corruption at the prison. They called it: “the Atlanta Way.”

Based on PSI’s reviews of BOP’s audits of USPA from 2013-2021, it was clear that “the Atlanta Way” led to years of unacceptable conditions at the prison. These audits identified a series of security failures, also known as “deficiencies,” at the prison, many of which were repeatedly left unaddressed. Although USPA leadership vowed to correct the problems identified in each audit, the failures persisted. Some of the most egregious failures included: staff intentionally damaging drug-detecting equipment, staff not knowing proper loading and unloading procedures for their weapons, and more than half of the security cameras at the prison were not working. By the summer of 2020, a BOP review team was left to conclude, “USP Atlanta presents significant security concern” and “Both national and local polices are being violated on a regular basis.” Repeated audits revealed that USPA was inundated with weapons, cellphones, drugs, and other contraband.

One of today’s witnesses, Dr. Erika Ramirez, a current BOP employee who served as USPA’s chief psychologist from 2018 through 2021, provided the Subcommittee with even more evidence showing the prevalence of narcotics at the prison. Dr. Ramirez came to PSI as whistleblower and disclosed rampant drug use, including synthetic marijuana, which documents showed was linked to inmate suicides. I want to thank Dr. Ramirez for coming forward to testify and say unequivocally that any retaliation against you or other whistleblowers will not be tolerated.

Your decision to come forward with records about the inadequate conditions at USPA provided this Subcommittee with a greater understanding of the consequences of the security failures at the prison. The same cannot be said about the Department of Justice (“DOJ”). Over the course of PSI’s investigation, the DOJ consistently stood in the way of the Subcommittee’s examination of these security failures and the culture of corruption at USPA.

As PSI attempted to get more information about USPA and interview key witnesses with knowledge of the corruption and safety concerns at the prison, DOJ obstructed the Subcommittee's investigation. For many months, DOJ failed to provide complete and unredacted records that were responsive to PSI's requests, jeopardizing the integrity of the Subcommittee's investigation. DOJ refused to make BOP Director Carvajal available for testimony which ultimately culminated in PSI issuing a subpoena to the director for his appearance at today's hearing.

During my chairmanship of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, I examined the challenges in the federal prison system and, in December 2018, instructed the DOJ Office of Inspector General ("OIG") to review BOP's policies, procedures, and responses to allegations of sexual harassment, abuse, and misconduct at a number of BOP institutions. The OIG recently informed my staff that this work is still ongoing.

Hopefully, through this Subcommittee's investigative work and the OIG's findings, BOP will make necessary changes to end the culture of corruption at USPA and correct other potential failures throughout the federal prison system. Meaningful change can only begin to occur when all BOP officials who committed wrongdoing are held accountable. I thank the witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee today and I look forward to your testimony.