

One-On-One With the Commissioner



Newly appointed Department of Juvenile Justice Commissioner Gale Buckner sat down for a one-on-one interview with WSB TV's Richard Belcher



Commissioner L. Gale Buckner comes to the Department of Juvenile Justice as a 24-year veteran GBI agent, more recently experienced in corrections as former Chair of Georgia's Board of Pardons and Paroles. Commissioner Buckner wants to make certain all DJJ facilities everywhere in the state are as successful and safe as they can be -- for both the youth we serve and the staff who safeguard them. Her message as Commissioner to all DJJ employees and to the general public is that violations of policy and procedures -- particularly violations affecting the safety and security of operations and facilities will not be tolerated.

"ONE-ON-ONE WITH THE COMMISSIONER"



Earlier this year, newly appointed DJJ Commissioner L. Gale Buckner sat down for a one-on-one interview with WSB TV's Investigative Reporter Richard Belcher. In recent years, WSB has uncovered stories about officer misconduct, policy violations, and security problems at DJJ secure facilities from Milledgeville to DeKalb County for their Action News Whistle-Blower series.

Portions of WSB's exclusive interview with Commissioner Buckner were broadcast in a story on Channel 2 in Atlanta in mid-January. That interview provided new insight into DJJ's latest efforts to enhance safety and security awareness in Georgia's juvenile justice facilities.

COMMISSIONER BUCKNER QUESTION AND ANSWER



Reporter Question: You're about the fourth commissioner for the agency in three or four years. Can you stabilize the leadership?

Commissioner Buckner: *I believe that we can stabilize the leadership. There are a lot of good people here in these agencies who are dedicated to ensuring the mission of the agency is carried out. There will always be turnover in any agency. There are some specialists I have brought in to be a part of this team. It is invigorating to see the enthusiasm that the men and women of this agency have to do a good job, not just for the youth we serve, but for the taxpayers of this state and to protect the citizens of this state.*

Reporter Question: Do you think the public cares about these youths or is it lock them-up and throw away the key?

Commissioner Buckner: *I definitely think they are very concerned about the youth they serve, not just in the facilities, but in the community. I've heard from a lot of advocacy groups -- I've heard from a lot of legislators -- I've heard from a lot of people in the community -- A lot of these children have not had good opportunities to excel in life, and that has damaged them and allowed them to end up in our custody. A lot of them, though are salvageable.*

There are success stories that come out of our agency and other youth centers across the nation. We just want to make sure that we can excel and accelerate the number of those who do become success stories.



DJJ Commissioner Gale Buckner with Georgia First Lady Sandra Deal

Reporter Question: Looking in as a taxpayer or a loved one who has somebody in one of these institutions, is the high assault-rate a measure of tougher guys in there than you've had before -- Poor management? What is it?

Commissioner Buckner: *I think it's a combination of all of those, and that's what we're assessing with our safety and security policies, to make sure we have the right people in place to take care of the youth who are in our custody -- But also that we're providing them the proper support and training for that. Since January of 2000, the percentage of youth in our facilities who are 18-or-older went from 7.3-percent to 37.8-percent.*

Right now designated felons are over 95-percent of the population in our YDCs. Even in our RYDCS almost 29percent of the population is 'designated felons'. So, what we have seen is over time, the number of youth we're serving in our facilities has increased. They're 18-and-older and they're serving time for more serious crimes. We have to make sure we have provided our staff with the proper training and techniques to be able to manage these youths, and to help them identify what they need to do to make a better life for themselves and to help them on that path.

“PUBLIC SAFETY IS OUR PRIMARY ISSUE.”

DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE COMMISSIONER L. GALE BUCKNER



“There are a lot of good people in this agency. There are a lot of good stories that come out of this agency. It is invigorating to see the enthusiasm.”

DJJ Commissioner
L. Gale Buckner

Reporter Question: What's your message to your staff?

Commissioner Buckner: *My message to our staff regarding the facilities where we serve our youth is that public safety is our primary issue. But also to ensure that the youth we serve are treated with respect and we will assist them in making choices while in our custody that will help them be successful when they go back out into the free world.*

But also I want staff to know we're going to give them the tools to ensure the behavior modifications that are given to those youth through education, mental health, behavioral classes -- that those youth are going to be held accountable, and there are consequences to all of their actions.

Reporter Question: Is that something the staff wants to hear?

Commissioner Buckner: *I hope so. They should want to hear that. If those youth have bad actions, there's going to be serious consequences. On the other hand, youth who have good actions, who are cooperative, who want to do well and they want to succeed -- and we do have some of those -- they will receive some good behavior incentives.*

Reporter Question: Got enough money to do the job you need to do?

Commissioner Buckner: *Right now we do. As you know, in these lean budget years this agency had to take some cuts, closing some bed space. That has been a problem.*

We have a backlog in our regional youth development centers awaiting placement in our YDC beds. This morning our YDC beds are totally at capacity. What I think is interesting to note is that in 2000 we had 94 awaiting placement from RYDCs into YDCs. Today, January 12, 2012, we have approximately 271, a jump of 188-percent that are awaiting that bed placement.

So not only has the population changed with the cuts we had to take in our bed space, that also limited the way we were able to manage that group. We believe we are getting a better handle on that as we are re-evaluating our classification systems to ensure the right offenders are in the right facilities to receive the care and treatment they need.

We feel comfortable with the Atlanta Center going online, if the budget process proceeds as we hope it will, that it's going to take a big load off of some of our facilities.



Reporter Question: Can you square the old cop in you with the social worker-part that goes along with this job? They're two different mentalities aren't they?

Commissioner Buckner: *Yes, they are -- and yes I can. The most important thing is going to be the safety and security of the youth in those facilities. The staff that we have working in those facilities, not just the juvenile correctional officers, but all the staff, I want them to know safety and security is mandatory as far as this administration is concerned.*

I want them to understand that adhering to the policies and procedures in place, or are currently being revised and revamped, will help us maintain safety and security as they go through their daily process of doing their job.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Commissioner Buckner says security and policy violations at DJJ facilities are especially disturbing because they compromise the safety of the agency and the ability of staff and officers to effectively supervise and protect the youth entrusted to their care.

That is why the Commissioner assembled a handpicked taskforce to undertake a thorough and exhaustive review of all DJJ secure facilities. The taskforce examined everything from fence lines and lighting fixtures -- to surveillance cameras and contraband -- to identify safety deficiencies as quickly as possible, and then fix whatever was found.

Since her appointment by Governor Deal, Commissioner Buckner also initiated a complete review and rewrite of all DJJ policies. The Commissioner says under her watch, policy violations affecting the safety and security of DJJ operations and facilities will not be tolerated.