

Parole notices flood the state

No rush to release, officials say, only a bureaucratic mix-up

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Judges, prosecutors and police across Texas got a shock just after Thanksgiving, when their mailboxes filled with notices that tens of thousands of convicts were coming up for parole.

All at once, there were 29,000 letters statewide, a torrent when normally just a few thousand are mailed each week.

"I got probably 40 or 50 in one day, where I might usually get two or three," Williamson County District Attorney John Bradley said. "I thought they were doing a flood of releases."

Not so, red-faced corrections officials explained. The cause, they said Wednesday, was a lack of envelopes.

"This is beyond ridiculous. It never should have happened," said state parole director Bryan Collier, whose employees were responsible for the goof.

Michelle Lyons, spokeswoman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in Huntsville, said a chain of mistakes began when a parole division office in Austin ordered envelopes in August, just before the end of the fiscal year.

Because money from one fiscal year cannot be spent in another, the order was cancelled.

"Someone was supposed to put in a new order," Collier said. "They didn't."

By mid-October, the envelopes ran out.

And the required notices to trial-court officials of inmates' impending parole began piling up.

"Someone should have been screaming that they needed envelopes," Collier said. "They didn't."

Late in the week before Thanksgiving, top parole officials found out. They scoured stores in Austin and Houston, and rushed in truckloads of envelopes, he said.

"We bought them on the spot market: wherever we could find them," Collier said.

Parole employees were marshaled to work overtime to get the backlogged notices into the mail.

"We estimated there were about 29,000," Collier said, noting that the agency mails as many as 400,000 of the notices to trial officials each year to allow them to protest a pending parole.

Then, to answer recipients' calls about the paperwork flood, Collier said, an explanation was quickly sent out.

For Bradley and others, the loaded mailboxes came two days after legislative leaders suggested that thousands of prisoners might be released early to solve an overcrowding crisis.

"It had the appearance initially of undue political pressure on the parole board," Bradley said. "It looked like a flood of early release."

Collier said an investigation is under way that could result in disciplinary action, even terminations. It is expected to be completed within a few days.

The office in which the glitch occurred, he confirmed, is the same one that was criticized this year for not properly processing parole-attorney fee affidavits, after the disclosure of problems by the Austin American-Statesman.

"There's no excuse, in my opinion, for this," Collier said Tuesday. "I've asked for an audit of that whole section, wall to wall."

"Obviously, I was far from happy."

Neither is Bradley.

"We have to pull and review files and respond to the notices," he said. "Now, I have a backlog I have to work through."

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<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/12/07/7parole.html>