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Senator Joe Morrissey: 'Perhaps I was wrong' to allow private management of state prison. An unexpected call into the newsroom on Oct.14, led CBS 6 Problem Solver Investigator Melissa Hipolit to have a one-on-one conversation with an inmate inside the Lawrenceville Correctional Center.

BRUNSWICK COUNTY, Va. — An unexpected call into the newsroom on Oct.14, led CBS 6 Problem Solver Investigator Melissa Hipolit to have a one-on-one conversation with an inmate inside the Lawrenceville Correctional Center.

Lawrenceville is Virginia's only privately-run prison, and it was the subject of a recent CBS 6 investigation after the local sheriff, Brian Roberts, raised a number of concerns about the facility. Those concerns included inmates escaping their cells and getting on the roof, to drug overdose calls turning into hazmat situations. Roberts said he wanted the prison to stay open, but he wanted to see changes. "Most perfect world they would turn it back into a state-run facility," Roberts said. "Second most perfect world, the state hold GEO accountable, or they figure out their contract to do better, whether that is an accountability do better, or change companies do better, I don't know what that is." During our original story, CBS 6 reported that the company that runs the prison, The GEO Group, told the state on Aug. 23 that it was working to shore up security at the prison by increasing employee wages and restricting movement of inmates. According to the inmate who called us, that led to a lockdown and then a modified lockdown that lasted at least until we spoke with him on the Oct. 14. "We can come out in the POD, use the phone, take a shower, use the kiosk that is pretty much it," the inmate said. "We don't leave the building, there is just nothing else." "I haven't been outside and had any fresh air in six weeks, and they're not telling us anything," he added. He also said the prison stopped allowing inmates to take classes. "I'm normally in electric class over here," he said. And, he argued that management was punishing prisoners for the wrongdoing of staff, who he said were bringing cellphones and drugs into the prison. "We're not making this stuff in the kitchen, this ain't the inmates doing this. There was no visitation during COVID, and that's when the overdoses went crazy. The problem is with the staff here," the inmates said. To his point, CBS 6 filed a public records request with the Virginia Department of Corrections and found out Lawrenceville had the most cell phones or parts of cell phones found inside over the last three years in the entire prison system. In fact, the number increased 88% at Lawrenceville between 2020 and 2021. It also had the highest number of suspected and confirmed overdoses in 2022, accounting for 28% of suspected and confirmed overdoses in the state prison system this year. "And so they're instead punishing the inmates for the staff's issues?" Melissa Hipolit asked the inmate. "Absolutely, we pay for everything," he replied. "They have this idea of corporal punishment, that if one person on that entire compound does something wrong, we all have to pay for it." "Do you think that's fair?" Hipolit asked. "Absolutely not," he replied. We asked State Senator Joe Morrissey to listen to the recorded phone call after viewing our investigation. In 2021, he was one of the lawmakers who voted against a proposal that would have returned the management of Lawrenceville to the state. "I challenged at the time, will things get better if the prison is taken over by DOC? And, I was wrong, and perhaps things will get better," Morrissey said. "I can assure you if I made the mistake before and allowed it to continue operating as a private prison but the health of the inmates got worse or didn't improve, that I will correct that mistake going forward." Morrissey said it was counterproductive to the rehabilitation of the inmates to prevent them from getting exercise outside and taking classes, adding it may be time for the General Assembly to take action. "There is a growing feeling that we need to do something as a General Assembly to correct this problem," Morrissey said. "Based on the continued condition of Lawrenceville, I'm thinking the General Assembly should review this to determine if we need, as a policy matter, to decide we're no longer going to allow private management of prisons in Virginia." Three days after we spoke with the inmate, a spokesperson for GEO Group, Chris Ferreira, said they began to transition back to normal operations, including limited recreational time and visits to the dining hall. He said they are hopeful to resume educational and vocational programs as well as in person visitations soon. As part of his statement he said: "We value the enduring partnership we have with the Commonwealth of Virginia, and we share the same goal of providing a safe, secure, and humane environment for inmates, staff, and visitors at Lawrenceville. We will continue working with the Virginia DOC as we manage the contraband challenges that many correctional facilities across the country are also currently facing."