
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

MAY 29, 2014

FIRST FEMALE WARDEN OF MAXIMUM SECURITY MENARD PRISON WORKED WAY UP IN SYSTEM

»



Menard Correctional Center warden Kim Butler talks with an inmate as she gives members of the media a tour of the prison in Chester, Ill., on Tuesday, May 20, 2014. She is the first woman to serve as warden of the maximum-security prison. Butler has 21 years of experience with the Illinois Department of Corrections. Photo By David Carson.

By Valerie Schremp Hahn

CHESTER, ILL. -- Kim Butler sees herself as the mayor of a small town, one with medical facilities, employees, food services, industries — but her residents and workers sit inside fences topped with razor wire and towers staffed with armed guards.

More than half of the 3,700 or so residents, all men, are convicted murderers. About a quarter more are there for violent felonies such as rape, armed robbery and kidnapping. About 65 percent of the total are here for the rest of their lives.

(Continued next page)

Last month, Butler, 46, was appointed warden of the Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Ill. She's the first woman to head the prison and only the second to be appointed warden of an all-male, maximum security prison in Illinois. The prison, a compound of massive stone and brick buildings sandwiched between the Mississippi River and tall limestone bluffs, was established in 1878.

Outside Butler's office, photos of all the prison's past wardens line the walls of a meeting room. Most of them are stern-faced white men. Butler points out that a warden's picture doesn't go up until he or she leaves, and hers won't either.

Butler says the fact she is a woman is a small part of what she's about, though it's an honor to have the distinction as the prison's first female warden. When she started the job, she called in her department heads and pointed out the pictures. "All these wardens that came before me, none of them did this job by themselves," she told them. "I have to trust your judgment."

She oversees nearly 900 staffers, about 20 percent of whom are women. Maj. Chad Hasemeyer, the chief of security at the prison, said staffers were thrilled to learn she was chosen as warden, replacing a retiring Rick Harrington.

They knew her as the prison's director of programs, a job she had held for the previous two years. She started out in the state prison system 20 years ago as a correctional officer and worked her way up.

"The biggest thing is her open mind and her listening skills," Hasemeyer said. "She'll say, 'Bring me a plan, let's look at it.'"

"The transition's been perfect, really," said the prison's assistant warden of programs, Jackie Lashbrook. Staffers and many prisoners already knew Butler, she pointed out. "They know she's approachable and personable."



Inmates leave the exercise yard to go back to their cells at the Menard Correctional Center during a media visit to of the prison in Chester, Ill., on Tuesday, May 20, 2014. The prison houses 3,733 inmates in its maximum and medium-security units. Photo By David Carson, dcarson@post-dispatch.com

(Continued next page)

But as a warden, Butler has to deal with the prison's harsh realities. In early 2013, Menard grappled with a string of three inmate murders. The John Howard Association of Illinois, a prison watchdog group, noted that the prison spent more than two-thirds of 2012 on some type of lockdown. But in 2013, lockdown time was cut in half, the group reported. Prisoners have more behavioral incentives and more access to the law library and grievance system.

"Given Menard's absorption of inmates with reputations of facilities for being especially violent, problematic, or litigious, Menard's accomplishments over the past year are even more impressive," says its 2013 report.

There were 15 serious assaults on staffers last year; this year's figure is projected to be 33 percent less. Prison officials think that's partly because they're cracking down on less severe assaults, such as spitting on a guard's pant leg or an inmate flicking his identification card at an officer.

When Butler started her job, she sent a message out on the prison's television system, which has played in a continuous loop since. "We each have very important roles to play to ensure this facility remains as safe as possible," says the message in part. "There is absolutely no reason we cannot be successful."

When Butler gets out of her office to talk to inmates, they're constantly coming up to her to ask questions, voice complaints, make suggestions — and it's almost always with an attitude of respect, she insists. She constantly fields calls from the community and family members asking questions and addressing concerns, and she takes those calls personally, "just to put a voice on this big monster called Menard," she says.

She grapples with two extreme schools of thought: those who think she should feed prisoners bread and water and throw away the cell keys, and those who think prisons shouldn't exist. But part of running a smooth, safe facility means keeping prisoners occupied, she says. Some prisoners work as peer counselors to ease the transition of new inmates. Others work as assisted-living aides to help the prison's growing elderly population.

"These are human beings," she said. "You can't just put them in their cells and lock them up all day long." Even though prisoners spend about 21 hours a day in their cells, there's still time for them to find a purpose.



(Continued next page)

She wants to start a hospice worker program, to help the prison's elderly and infirm inmates. She's looking into bringing in a dog rescue program. She's a beekeeper in her spare time, and recently brought a swarm to the prison. She wants to bring in volunteers to train prisoners on bee upkeep. She wants to use prisoner help to maintain a prison cemetery on top of the bluffs. Several hundred tombstones were toppled long ago to make mowing easier, but she wants them righted. "It's the right thing to do," she said.

Still, she knows things can turn very bad very quickly at her workplace. "You have to have a certain amount of fear," she said. "As far as it leading to the point of inaction — no. You have to remember where you work.

"At the end of the day, when we all go home and nobody gets hurt," she said, "it's a good day."



Menard Correctional Center warden Kim Butler sits at her desk in the warden's office in Chester, Ill., on Tuesday, May 20, 2014. She is the first woman to serve as warden of the maximum-security prison. Butler has 21 years of experience with the Illinois Department of Corrections. Photo By David Carson, dcarson@post-dispatch.com