

Corrections officers, supervisors will keep jobs despite jailbreak

All 5 were on duty the night 2 men escaped

Wednesday, June 04, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS

Star-Ledger Staff

The five corrections officers and supervisors who were on duty in December when two inmates tunneled their way out of the Union County jail are returning to work after their bosses agreed to impose six-month suspensions instead of outright dismissals.

The five men -- two corrections officers and three sergeants -- worked out the deal that allowed them to keep their jobs and pensions.

Corrections officers David D'Amore and Patrick Kennedy returned to work on May 22, according to Jim Roche, spokesman for the Policemen's Benevolent Association Local 199. They opted to work off their suspensions by doing overtime work at the jail in Elizabeth.

Sgts. Richard Griswold, Christopher Sloan and Joseph Simpson will return Aug. 4.

All of the men were on duty during the overnight hours of Dec. 14, when Otis Blunt and Jose Espinosa escaped. The inmates had spent weeks chipping through cinder blocks between their cells and to an outside wall. Their disappearance was not detected until dinnertime Dec. 15.

The men remained at large for a month.

Another officer, Rudolph Zurick, was also on duty. In the tense days after the escape, Zurick, 40, shot himself to death in his home on Jan. 2, hours before he was to give a statement to authorities.

The escapes showcased deficiencies at the jail and prompted the county to make wholesale changes. Cameras were installed, inside and outside. Additional razor wire now rings the facility. A new jail director was hired after Frank Crose, who ran the jail, gave up active management of the facility and retired.

"Obviously we are satisfied that this matter has come to a conclusion," Roche said.

Attorneys are claiming victory for their clients.

Lawyer Timothy Smith, who represented Sloan, said he always believed the county's case against his client was weak.

"We felt that termination was extreme," Smith said. "It was an unfortunate situation, but it was a systematic breakdown and not due to one employee."

Lawyers for the Union County administration and lawyers for the officers negotiated for months. Finally, late last month they brokered a deal under which the administration dropped its demand for termination and the officers agreed to the six-month suspensions and forfeited their right to further hearings before an administrative law judge.

"Once the sensational aspects of this case died down, everyone started looking at it realistically," said lawyer Robert Norton, who represented Griswold. "There had to be a recognition from the county that you could not single out five individuals for the failures of the entire jail."

County Counsel Robert E. Barry said the administration was perfectly justified in disciplining the officers. The question was the penalty the courts would consider, he said.

"Considering the fact there were no criminal charges filed, there was the issue concerning the systemic problems at the jail and the employment history of the individuals involved, it is my opinion that the settlement reached is a favorable one for the county," Barry said.

Union County Manager George Devanney said it was a difficult decision to make.

"The harder decision was to settle this case and bring them back," Devanney said. "The easy decision was to fight this to the end."

At the jail, union leaders said they are relieved the men are returning to work.

"The jail is now moving in a positive direction under the new administration and, hopefully, incidents of this magnitude will not occur in the future," said Lt. James Rinaldo, the local PBA representative for the supervisors, Griswold, Sloan and Simpson.

The victory is tempered by the loss of Zurick, said Kenneth Burkert, another PBA union representative. "I spoke to him, and right from the beginning I told him that he was going to be OK. He did a head count and he thought he saw a body," Burkert said.

But Zurick, who had always inspired confidence in others, could not withstand the media scrutiny

that followed the jail breakout, Burkert said.

At the time, one of the inmates, believed to be Blunt, left behind a poem taunting the corrections officers and claimed he paid Zurick \$1,000 to help him escape.

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County jail staffers indicted in smuggling scheme

Officer, janitor and inmates allegedly formed tobacco-selling network

Friday, March 28, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS

Star-Ledger Staff

Union County Jail, beset with strife since the flagrant escape of two inmates in December, was the setting for a scheme in which a corrections officer and a janitor allegedly smuggled tobacco to four inmates, authorities said.

On Wednesday, the officer, Stephen Matthews, 48, of Union, and Joseph Pecoraro, 37, of Elizabeth, were indicted by a Union County grand jury on charges of official misconduct, bribery and conspiracy to commit bribery.

The 19-count indictment also charged convicted murderer Jeremy Watson, 22, of Plainfield, with being the lead distributor inside the facility. Watson in turn doled out the tobacco, for resale, to three other inmates: Abdul Griggs, 36, of Piscataway, Shariff Raymond, 27, of Elizabeth, and Jadon Russell, 29, of Linden, according to the indictment.

"The motivation for the charges listed in the indictment was simple greed," Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said. "It's another troubling chapter in the history of the Union County Jail as it existed prior to the changes that were put into effect as a result of the escapes in December 2007."

The jail gained notoriety three months ago for lax supervision that let two inmates escape through holes they bored into cinder-block walls. The escape was not uncovered for some 20 hours.

Now Matthews is accused of taking at least \$560 in bribes -- on at least three occasions -- in exchange for the loose tobacco and packs of cigarettes he allegedly smuggled into the jail. Pecoraro is accused of accepting \$200 bribes on "numerous" occasions in exchange for delivering tobacco and cigarettes and a cell phone.

Loose tobacco that would sell in stores for about \$1 an ounce fetched as much as \$75 inside the jail, according to Union County Assistant Prosecutor William Kolano.

The underground operation generated "a lot of money, well into the thousands of dollars," Romankow said. If the defendants are convicted of the charges, they face up to 10 years in prison.

Pecoraro, a county worker since June 1999, was a janitor and handyman assigned to the jail. He faces an additional charge of providing Watson with a cell phone.

Both county employees have been suspended without pay.

Matthews earned a base salary of \$74,000. Pecoraro earned \$48,671.

Kolano said the illicit operation began in April 2007.

"The investigation involved extensive surveillance and detailed monitoring of movements among the players," Kolano said.

After authorities were tipped to the scheme, it took less than two months for the investigators on the case -- Lt. Robert McGuire with the Union County police and Investigator Donald Johnson, with the county

corrections department's internal affairs unit -- to gather evidence and arrest the men last August, Kolano said.

Also facing charges is Watson's girlfriend, Kelly Spicer, 36, of Elizabeth. She allegedly was the link between the inmates and Matthews and Pecoraro. Spicer allegedly dropped payoff money meant for the county employees in Matthews' late model Lexus SUV in a Union County parking lot.

The investigators watched Matthews walk into the jail on Aug. 22, 2007, with Bugler tobacco and Marlboro cigarettes, according to the indictment. That same day, investigators allegedly found wrappings for the loose tobacco in Matthews' car, along with an envelope marked "\$100." The indictment also said DNA analysis determined Spicer's saliva was on the envelope found inside Matthews' car.

Attorney Timothy Smith, who represents Matthews, said he does not believe there is any merit to the charges against his client, who has worked at the jail for 17 years.

"He has the reputation of being one of the most honest, good-natured and humble corrections officers," Smith said. "When the charges came down, everybody was just shocked that he would be accused of something like this. His record is impeccable. He is devastated by these charges.

"I think in the end, the evidence is going to reveal there was no intentional scheme for him to benefit in any way," the attorney said. "He was being goodhearted."

Pecoraro's attorney could not be reached for comment.

Prosecutor rejects claim jail guard was paid off

Blunt says he bribed Zurick, who later killed himself, for tool

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS

Star-Ledger Staff

Otis Blunt brazenly claimed he paid a corrections officer \$1,000 to help him escape from the Union County Jail and left behind a poem that taunted the guards for their ignorance, authorities said yesterday.

Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said yesterday that Blunt -- who executed a daring escape with fellow inmate Jose Espinosa last month -- told authorities he paid guard Rudolph Zurick for a 1-by-5 inch piece of metal, which he used to scrape and dig through the concrete block of the jail walls.

But while Romankow offered a damning portrait of laxity on the part of the guards during a news conference yesterday, he dismissed any notion Zurick or the others were involved in the escape.

"Both officers were either too lazy or crazy to ignore all the bangin'," Blunt wrote in the poem he left tucked in a Bible. "All the metal scrapin' cement, only meant that (deleted) were escapin'."

The escape of Blunt, 32, and Es pinosa, 20, attracted national media attention.

Since the escape, two corrections officers and three supervisors have been told they will be fired. The warden was ousted and new security measures, from armed guards to cameras, have been instituted.

Romankow said the officers failed to do their jobs properly, but they did not deliberately help Blunt and Espinosa escape the lockup. He said the metal scrap ing tool was fashioned from a towel hook.

Espinosa, of Elizabeth, claimed that Zurick also provided them with a round iron wheel they wrapped with cloth to dull the noise as they hammered away at the cinder block.

Zurick, 40, killed himself on Jan. 2, the day he was to meet with Union County investigators.

Zurick's lawyer, Michael Mitzner, said the allegations by the inmates are not supported by facts.

"There is no proof of any criminality," Mitzner said.

Romankow also rejects any notion that Zurick helped the two escape, saying it was unsurprising hardened criminals would blame a dead man for their wrongdoing.

Instead, Romankow blamed a systemic breakdown for the escapes, with rules not followed and officers becoming lax.

Random cell searches were sporadic, when they were done at all. Inmates did not have to stand or even move for head counts conducted five times daily, and corrections officers came to work exhausted from 15-hour overtime shifts that grew to be the norm.

"The operation and supervision of the jail was dysfunctional," Romankow said. "These corrections officers are to prevent escapes. The escape occurred because people did not do their jobs."

Blunt and Espinosa spent 2 1/2 weeks banging and scraping at their cells' cinderblock walls without attracting the notice of any corrections officer.

Romankow said Espinosa and Blunt worked in concert to disguise the noise. The inmates were aided by background noise from fans and a radio in the third-floor special housing unit.

As Espinosa banged on the cinderblock, Blunt banged a mop into an object. Espinosa told authorities they would often do the banging when Zurick was not on duty.

Blunt and Espinosa stuffed their cots with bedding to make it look like they were asleep and hid their handiwork with posters of half-naked women.

Then they squeezed through the two small holes they had carved between their cells and to the outside. Espinosa disappeared first, around 9 p.m. on Dec. 14, leaping a fence ringed with razor wire but hurting his left leg.

Blunt followed Espinosa through the cinder block but sat on a rooftop ledge for more than seven hours. Eventually, he decided to shimmy down the side of the jail wall, before jumping a few feet to the ground.

Blunt, who had lost 10 pounds so he could squeeze through the holes, climbed onto a nearby shed, over razor wire and down to freedom. He made his way to the Elizabeth train station, took a cab and made a phone call. The call eventually led authorities to Blunt's hiding place, Romankow said.

Espinosa went to a motel and then a basement apartment in Elizabeth, where he was found Jan. 8 with a girlfriend.

Blunt was found a day later in a rundown hotel in Mexico City.

On Friday, Union County management notified two corrections officers and three supervisors on duty around the time of the escape they would be fired.

The men have hired lawyers and are fighting the administrative charges of neglect of duty and failure to supervise.

"The penalty is out of line and excessive," said attorney James Mets, who represents Corrections Officer David D'Amore. "Once all the evidence is in, it will show there was a systemic breakdown, rather than a human breakdown."

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Details of escape emerging

Blunt denies attempt to avoid recapture

Friday, January 11, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS AND MARIAM JUKAKU
Star-Ledger Staff

Otis Blunt was caught with his pants down.

Blunt, 32, had teamed up with inmate Jose Espinosa, 20, to make a dramatic escape from the Union County Jail on Dec. 14. Twenty-six days later, authorities tracked him to Mexico City and stormed a hotel room to find a perplexed Blunt sitting on a bed in his underwear, according to the U.S. Marshals Service.

Yesterday, as he was brought back to New Jersey, Blunt's demeanor seemed to change from surprise to defiance, as he claimed he was not really trying to elude authorities.

"Ain't nobody was trying to get away. I could have gotten away if I wanted to," Blunt said after arriving at Union County Police headquarters in Westfield yesterday afternoon.

Blunt and Espinosa had patiently tunneled through one cinder-block wall between their cells and a second to the outside using the handle to a fire sprinkler valve as a makeshift hammer. After wriggling through the small openings to a rooftop below their cells, they leaped 30 feet to freedom over a fence topped with razor wire.

Espinosa, an illegal immigrant from Mexico who had moved to Elizabeth as a 6-year-old, was caught Tuesday in a basement apartment in the city. He had been hiding out less than a mile from his jail cell.

Blunt had been in the jail awaiting trial on a charge of shooting a convenience store clerk in the head during a robbery in Hillside. Espinosa, a Bloods gang member, had pleaded guilty in a separate case of killing a rival in a drive-by shooting in 2005.

Since their brazen escape, authorities have been trying to determine how the pair eluded authorities for nearly a month.

It appears Espinosa never wandered far from the jail, due in part to the leg he injured during the escape.

Blunt was found shortly after he cut off communications with the Rev. Al Sharpton, who had been trying to negotiate his surrender since Sunday.

It is still unclear when Blunt got to Mexico, but he took a bus from New Jersey to Laredo, Texas, authorities said. He then rode another bus into Mexico City, where he took a room at the hotel that was "more or less a flophouse," said John Cuff, chief of the U.S. Marshals' Investigative Service Division. Authorities still are investigating what, if any, documents Blunt used to cross the border.

At a press conference at his Harlem headquarters yesterday, Sharpton said he traveled to Mexico City to help Blunt turn himself in. But Blunt broke off negotiations.

"I'm not in the bounty business," Sharpton said. "I'm in civil rights. I did this as a minister."

Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said Sharpton did nothing but get in the way of the police investigation, a criticism that Sharpton said he does not deserve.

"What is chilling to me is people attempting to politicize community people doing the right thing," Sharpton

said.

He said he shouldn't have to explain his actions, but that Romankow needed to explain how two people broke out of his jail, were missing for 20 hours before anyone noticed, and got all the way to Mexico.

"Obviously the Reverend Sharpton knows less about Union County than he knows about capturing dangerous escapees. If he had his facts straight, he would know that my office does not oversee the jail in any way," Romankow said. "In fact, we are the agency investigating the escapes."

Blunt, who is from Bayonne but was living in Toms River before his arrest, will not return to the Union County Jail, authorities said. He was being transferred to New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, where Espinosa has been taken.

The escape spurred a major investigation of Union County Jail operations. The jail's director and his deputy were removed, and an interim director was brought in.

Romankow is trying to determine how Blunt and Espinosa banged on cinder blocks in the high-security third-floor unit for more than two weeks without arousing suspicion. The men were able to hide their progress by covering the holes with posters of half-naked women -- posters they were not supposed to hang in their cells.

Blunt and Espinosa's escape was not discovered for 20 hours, partly because they stuffed their beds with sheets to make it appear they were asleep.

When corrections officer Rudolph Zurick checked their cells at 5:15 p.m. Dec. 15, he found a sarcastic note, written by Blunt, that thanked him for his help.

On Jan. 2, the day Zurick was to talk to investigators about the escape, he shot himself to death at this home in Middlesex County.

Gary Hilton, a former state corrections commissioner who is the interim jail director, said inmates now must move or show skin during cell checks. Armed guards are patrolling the perimeter; more razor wire was installed; and better surveillance equipment will be used inside and outside the jail.

During the arrests of both Espinosa and Blunt, neither man resisted when authorities burst into their hideouts. Also, both had female companionship at the time of their apprehension. When Espinosa was collared in a basement apartment on Summer Street in Elizabeth, his girlfriend, Odalys Cortes, 19, was with him. She was charged with obstruction of justice.

When Blunt was arrested Wednesday afternoon in Mexico City, an American woman was found in the hotel room's bathroom. She was not identified or charged.

Staff writer Jonathan Casiano contributed to this report.

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Union jail's 2nd escapee recaptured

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A day after 1st is found nearby, his pal is seized in Mexico City

Thursday, January 10, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS

Star-Ledger Staff

The two Union County inmates who engineered one of the most bizarre and daring jailbreaks the state has seen are back behind bars.

Otis Blunt, who had been awaiting trial for a 2005 shooting in Hillside, was snared by Mexican Federal Police in a "\$10-a-night hotel" yesterday afternoon without incident, although "he didn't surrender," Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said.

His fellow escapee, Jose Espinosa, a gang member awaiting sentencing for a drive-by shooting, was arrested Tuesday in a basement apartment in Elizabeth, less than a mile from the Union County Jail, where the pair busted out on Dec. 15, tunneling through a wall and jumping over a razor-wire fence.

Even as authorities in Mexico were preparing to transport Blunt back to the United States, startling new details were emerging about an escape that drew national attention and left Union County officials red-faced.

Romankow said yesterday that part of his investigation included a re-enactment of the escape that exposed security deficiencies at the jail. He also offered the following theories on how the inmates pulled off the escape:

Blunt and Espinosa worked feverishly for two weeks, tunneling their way out.

There is evidence that Blunt removed the escape tool -- a round, 10-pound piece of iron that was the handle to a fire sprinkler shutoff valve -- from an unlocked closet in the high-security unit of the jail.

The iron wheel, which became a makeshift hammer, was wrapped with cloth and the two took turns banging on the cinder-block walls in their adjacent cells. They stashed the large chunks of cinder block in a personal box that prisoners keep in their cells, and flushed the dust down the toilet.

The banging noise echoed in the jail, but no one raised any alarms. "The noises were extremely loud" when the re-enactment was done, Romankow said.

Blunt and Espinosa hid the ever-widening holes with posters of bikini-clad women.

When it came time to execute their escape, the men stuffed sheets under their blankets to make it appear they were sleeping. They then wriggled through the holes in the walls and clambered to a rooftop.

There, they covered their feet with bedsheets and jumped 30 feet over a razor-wire fence to freedom.

Espinosa jumped first, but landed awkwardly, injuring his left leg. Blunt jumped next, without injury.

Romankow said Blunt left behind a sarcastic note, thanking a corrections officer, Rudolph Zurick, "for the tools needed. You're a real Pal! Happy Holidays."

Though Romankow repeatedly said there is no indication that any corrections officer "knowingly helped" in the escape, Zurick, 40, shot himself to death Jan. 2, the day he was to give a statement to authorities.

Once outside, Espinosa and Blunt had planned to "stick together" and head "south," said Marc D'Arienzo, the attorney representing Espinosa. But with an injured leg, Espinosa was in no shape to travel, the attorney said.

Instead, Espinosa, still wearing his prison jumpsuit and flip-flops, made his way to the nearby Elizabeth Train

Station, where he flagged down a cab, Romankow said.

It took guards 20 hours to notice that the two men were missing.

Espinosa spent his first night on the lam in an unidentified motel, then ended up in an apartment on Summer Street, about a half-mile from the jail.

Acting on a tip, police on Tuesday evening located Espinosa and his 19-year-old girlfriend, Odalys Cortez, in the sparsely furnished apartment that had neither a bed nor a television. Cortez has been charged with obstruction, Romankow said.

Espinosa did not resist when more than a dozen federal and Union County investigators burst into the apartment and arrested him.

Romankow said he would not return Espinosa to the Elizabeth jail, "based on what we think is prudent penal practice. This removes any potential allegations of reprisals."

Instead, he was taken to the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton yesterday afternoon.

As for Blunt, little is known at this point about how he got to Mexico. But on Sunday, the Rev. Al Sharpton made it known that he had been in contact with the inmate.

Two days later, Sharpton said he had altered his Florida tour schedule to help arrange the surrender, but his efforts seemed to have stalled. He said he spoke briefly with Blunt Tuesday night but then did not hear from him for several hours. He then said he urged Blunt to surrender immediately.

In a statement, Sharpton said, "I wish I could have been on hand to assure Mr. Blunt's safety but clearly his calling me to where he was helped lead to the conclusion that it did, and I hope that justice for all parties will be served."

But Romankow criticized Sharpton for impeding rather than helping the investigation.

"He was unable to bring Blunt into custody," Romankow said. "Working with (New York Police) Commissioner Ray Kelly was the right thing to do, but to leave Union County (authorities) out of the loop is unconscionable."

Meanwhile, D'Arienzo said his client, Espinosa, has told him it was Blunt who suggested the escape scheme.

The men's cells were adjoining, but only Espinosa's had a wall that led to the outside.

"Mr. Blunt led the brigade," D'Arienzo said. "He developed the plan. Jose was more the follower. When this was put to him, he went with it."

Since the escape, significant changes were made at the jail. Director Frank Crose, who had overseen the facility since 2001, was reassigned and his top deputy, assistant director James Dougherty, was fired. An interim director, Gary Hilton, was appointed.

New security measures also have been instituted since the breakout, the first since the jail opened in 1986, and more will be added, Hilton said. Head counts, for instance, are now taken with inmates standing, he said. New security cameras and monitoring devices also are being installed, Hilton said. And for the first time, armed guards patrol outside.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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One of two jail escapees nabbed

Gang member found in Elizabeth as pal's talks with Sharpton stall

Wednesday, January 09, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS

Star-Ledger Staff

Authorities captured escaped prisoner Jose Espinosa at an apartment house in Elizabeth last night, just blocks from where he and another inmate made a dramatic jailbreak three weeks ago.

Otis Blunt, Espinosa's partner in the escape, remained at large last night.

Union County and federal authorities arrested Espinosa, a 20-year-old Bloods gang member, without incident at a Summer Street apartment house, Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said. The prosecutor could not say whose unit Espinosa was in, but the building is just a few blocks from the Union County Jail, where Espinosa and Blunt had been inmates.

"We got information earlier in the day that he was there," Romankow said moments after the 9:20 p.m. arrest. "We took him down without incident. I'm very pleased to have him in custody. We are happy we removed a dangerous escapee from the street."

The prosecutor said he did not observe any injury to Espinosa, who with Blunt burrowed through cement blocks in their cells and leapt to freedom, but would have a nurse examine him. Espinosa was still in Union County police custody late last night. Authorities are reviewing where to place him, and he might not be returned to the Union County Jail, Romankow said.

Romankow also said he had called Blunt's attorney, H. Rutherford Livengood of Newark, and suggested his client surrender today. Livengood thanked him but made no promises, the prosecutor said.

On Sunday, associates of Blunt's asked the Rev. Al Sharpton to help broker a peaceful surrender.

Sharpton said he had altered his Florida tour schedule to help arrange Blunt's surrender, but his efforts may have stalled.

"I finally spoke with Mr. Blunt briefly late this evening...," Sharpton said late last night in an e-mail statement. "I felt it was my moral obligation as a Minister to attempt to facilitate the quick and safe surrender and to work with law enforcement to bring this escape to a close. ... After waiting several hours after my conversation with Mr. Blunt I have not heard further from him. I strongly urge him to surrender to authorities immediately."

Upon learning of Sharpton's statement, Romankow said he wants to question him about what he and his associates know regarding Blunt's whereabouts.

Espinosa, a Mexican national living in Elizabeth, and Blunt made a spectacular escape from the Union County Jail on Dec. 15 after they meticulously chiseled their way out of their cells with an 8-inch piece of wire and a hunk of iron and then took a running leap from a roof over razor wire that topped a 30-foot fence.

Espinosa was awaiting sentencing for aggravated manslaughter in a 2005 drive-by shooting when he escaped from a high-security wing of the Elizabeth lockup.

A Toms River resident, Blunt was headed to trial in the October 2005 shooting of a Hillside convenience store manager.

The inmates left a sarcastic note for their captors, thanking them for the tools they used for their escape and going so far as to name corrections officer Rudolph Zurick specifically.

Zurick, 40, apparently bowed by the pressure of the investigation into the escape, shot himself at his home Jan. 2, the same day he was to give a statement to authorities.

The duo were profiled Saturday night on the Fox television show "America's Most Wanted."

The escape highlighted glaring deficiencies in security at the jail. Romankow insisted that armed guards begin patrolling the grounds. The jail director and his second-in-command were dismissed and a new director, Gary Hilton, was hired to improve security at the facility.

The investigation into the escape found that Espinosa and Blunt got a 10-pound handle to a fire sprinkler shutoff valve from a maintenance closet near their cells, Romankow said previously.

"They opened the door and took off the valve wheel," he said.

The handle broke up two blocks that the men removed from jail walls. One block was from a common wall between their cells, and the other wall led to the outside.

The two inmates, in adjoining cells in the high-security section of the jail, scraped away mortar around the two blocks, hiding the holes with magazine pages of half-naked women. Once out of their cells, they made a running jump over the razor wire and off the roof 30 feet off the ground. The route was the same one another inmate took in a 1993 escape.

Blunt and Espinosa had been gone for hours before corrections officers discovered they had stuffed their beds with sheets to give the appearance they were occupied.

The escape was not Blunt's first attempt at freedom from incarceration. Just three months before, he was caught trying to scrape away mortar from the wall while he was housed in a different cell at the Union County Jail. And on Dec. 16, 1999, he escaped from Talbot Hall in Kearny, an assessment and treatment center that helps inmates adjust to society after their release.

Nearing the end of a three-year prison term for an armed robbery in Jersey City at the time of that escape, Blunt was ordered to serve nearly three additional years.

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Jail guard named in escapees' note commits suicide

Thursday, January 03, 2008

BY JUDITH LUCAS AND TOM HAYDON

Star-Ledger Staff

The corrections officer named in a sarcastic thank you note left by two Union County Jail escapees last month committed suicide in the basement of his Sayreville home yesterday, authorities said.

The guard, Rudolph Zurick, 40, was scheduled to speak with Union County investigators at county police headquarters in Westfield yesterday morning as part of an ongoing probe into the brazen escape of the two violent inmates on Dec. 15.

But shortly before 9 a.m., Sayreville police found Zurick dead in the home he shared with his wife, Lisa, and 4-year-old daughter. He was shot in the head with his personal semi-automatic pistol, authorities said.

His death was ruled a suicide by the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office yesterday afternoon.

Zurick's attorney and a representative from his union said yesterday the escape investigation and media scrutiny had taken its toll on the 14-year corrections veteran.

"He was very depressed and distraught over the media attention. He was visibly upset," said Kenneth Burkett, a delegate for PBA Local 199, which represents officers at the jail. "He just couldn't believe what happened. He was a perfectionist."

Zurick's death comes as investigators continue to piece together how Otis Blunt, 32, of Toms River, and Jose Espinosa, 20, of Elizabeth, managed to burrow through the jail's exterior wall, leap over a razor wire fence and disappear without anyone noticing their escape.

Espinosa is a member of the Bloods street gang who was scheduled to be sentenced this month for his role in a fatal drive-by shooting in 2005. Blunt was awaiting trial in the shooting of a Hillside convenience store manager.

Authorities have yet to determine where the inmates got the tools -- a sharpened piece of wire and 10-pound hunk of iron -- used to break through the cinder block wall, and why no one noticed the hole in Espinosa's cell wall, which was covered by magazine pin-ups. It is also unclear exactly when the escape occurred because the men left stuffed dummies in their bunks as decoys.

Espinosa and Blunt remain on the lam and will be featured Saturday on the television show "America's Most Wanted" in the latest of several public appeals for help.

Zurick was the officer who first reported the inmates missing when he discovered their empty cells around 5 p.m. on Dec. 15, and was also mentioned by name in a mocking note the men left behind. Taunting Zurick and his fellow officers with a hand-drawn smiley face, the note read: "Thank You Officer (Zurick) for the tools needed. You're a real Pal! Happy Holidays."

The note also featured a drawing of a hand with an upraised middle finger.

Despite the note, Zurick said he did nothing wrong and cooperated fully with the investigation, his attorney, Michael Mitzner, said.

Immediately after the escape, Zurick and other jail personnel submitted written reports to county investigators. This week, Union County Police Chief Daniel Vaniska said investigators had scheduled interviews with a dozen officers, beginning yesterday with Zurick.

"We just wanted to talk to him about his version of what went on," Vaniska said. "We don't know what to think. It's strange."

Mitzner said the probe was strictly administrative, and Zurick had not been accused of anything criminal. Lawyers for two other officers involved in the probe also said the investigation has not risen above the

departmental level.

Penalties for administrative infractions range from suspension to termination, but no administrative charges have been filed against any of the officers, their attorneys said.

Mitzner said Zurick had been depressed about the situation, but sounded fine when they spoke over the phone on Monday.

"I don't know why he did it. ... Obviously he was unhappy that an escape occurred and that his name got mentioned," Mitzner said. "It's hard to figure out what goes through one's mind."

Cars lined both sides of the road in front of Zurick's home on Luke Street in Sayreville yesterday as people arrived and walked one or two at a time to the door and were quickly let inside.

Burkett, who worked out regularly with Zurick, said he was a champion power lifter and dedicated family man with a clean work record at the jail.

"He was a terrific man who never encountered any difficulties in the performance of his job. It's an utter, utter tragedy," Burkett said.

Staff writers Jonathan Casiano and Robert E. Misseck contributed to this report.

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At code red, Union lockup cracks down

Wednesday, December 19, 2007

BY JUDITH LUCAS AND BRAD PARKS

Star-Ledger Staff

Days after two prisoners leaped off a 30-foot roof to freedom, a sweep of the Union County Jail uncovered another escape attempt and a list of additional security deficiencies, according to the Union County prosecutor.

The jail was put on "high alert" Monday night, with prisoners locked in their cells as corrections officers conducted a cell-by-cell search for contraband.

"They discovered one prisoner who had bed sheets that he was going to braid together," Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said. "He was a copycat looking to get out from one of the upper floors. We are reviewing the security measures inside and outside the jail."

Romankow said "major changes" would be coming at the jail, including the establishment of patrols outside, the installation of more cameras to cover the jail's outer perimeter, and the addition of razor wire on the roof from which Jose Espinosa and Otis Blunt leaped to freedom.

Espinosa and Blunt were discovered missing Saturday night. The two inmates used a sharpened piece of wire to scrape mortar from around two cinder blocks, then jumped from a 30-foot-high roof over a 15-foot razor-wire fence to freedom.

They remained at large last night despite a 20-officer search team that includes federal marshals as well as detectives and sheriff's officers from Union County.

"We are checking on friends and relatives from here to California," said Sheriff Ralph Froehlich, who is aiding in the search. "They would be much better off giving themselves up. We will use every resource to get them apprehended."

This is not the first time the Union County Jail has come under scrutiny.

During the past three decades, there have been riots, escapes and suicides; clashes between the jail's management and its corrections officers' union; federal intervention over inhumane conditions; and a steady trickle of scandals involving corrections officers and their treatment of inmates.

Even before the two prisoners' escape over the weekend, the jail was beset by problems that, while not unique to Union County, have nevertheless become chronic there: Overcrowding, understaffing, changing management, poor morale among corrections officers, and a host of other issues identified by county officials and representatives of the corrections officers' union alike.

They are problems that have been known for years. In 1993, an inmate named Marco Crespo escaped by jumping off the same roof.

"There were concerns back then about the razor wire and height of the fence," said Jim Roche, president of PBA Local 199, which represents the corrections officers. "The union, back when the jail was built, was concerned about the construction of the building. This jail was not built for maximum-security inmates." Crespo, who broke his leg during the escape, surrendered two days later. Harold Gibson, who oversees the jail as the Union County director of public safety, said at that time there were discussions about what policy changes should be implemented, including a recommendation that more cameras be installed. But Gibson, who left Union County to work for the Essex County Prosecutor's Office during the mid-1990s, said he didn't know what became of the proposal. He just knows the camera system currently in place, which has limited views of the prison's perimeter, did not capture any footage of the escape. "That's one thing that would have assisted us at that time and would have assisted us this time, too," said Gibson, who has since returned to his job as public safety director. "I would be very accurate in saying some type of camera system will be put into the jail. How quickly? I'm not sure. But I'm sure this incident will expedite it."

Then again, change has often been slow in coming to the Union County Jail. The original jail was built in the 1920s to house 238 prisoners. By 1981, it was stuffed with nearly 900. And when an inmate smuggled a gun inside, it sparked a riot.

That episode, and the generally deplorable conditions, resulted in a 1982 federal lawsuit that forced Union County to build a new jail. The Sheriff Ralph Oriscello Correctional Facility was completed in 1989, but even before its ribbon-cutting, officials had to petition the state to double-bunk inmates because it was over capacity.

The National Institute of Corrections, a branch of the U.S. Justice Department, twice conducted reviews of the jail's operations during the 1990s. Its 1992 report called security procedures at the jail "inconsistent and rather sloppy." In 1995, a report warned of near-riot conditions "nothing short of disgusting."

Then came the infamous Esmor riot, when corrections officers beat and tortured a group of immigrants from the Esmor detention facility who were being temporarily housed in Union County. Nine guards eventually were convicted of or pleaded guilty to the crime.

In more recent times, the suicide of 17-year-old Edward Sinclair Jr. brought attention to appalling conditions at the county's juvenile detention facility and resulted in a \$780,000 lawsuit settlement paid to the boy's mother. And Sean Higgins, a guard accused of fondling up to 17 different women, pleaded guilty to a single charge of sexual contact.

Officials from PBA Local 199 said this latest incident likely will result in disciplinary charges against some of the officers on duty. Though an attorney for Rudolph Zurick -- a guard who was mentioned by name in a taunting note left by the escapees -- said his client was not involved and does not deserve punishment. "He was not there during the time of the escape," attorney Michael Mitzner said. "With all the publicity, it's not a fun time for him. He did not do anything wrong."