

Utah Corrections director Rollin Cook stepping down to spend more time with family, take advantage of professional opportunities

Salt Lake Tribune

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April 18, 2018

Link: <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2018/04/18/corrections-director-rollin-cook-stepping-down-to-spend-more-time-with-family/comments/>

Rollin Cook, the executive director of the Utah Department of Corrections, is stepping down next month after five years in the position.

On Wednesday, Cook — who has spent 29 years of overall service to the state — told *The Tribune* he believes the department “is in a really good place” and he wants to take advantage of new professional opportunities and spend more time with his family.

His departure will be effective May 15, according to a news release from Gov. Gary Herbert’s office. The governor will appoint an interim director soon.



“I am grateful for Rollin’s years of dedicated service to the state of Utah and for his leadership in the Department of Corrections,” Herbert said in a news release. “Rollin leaves behind a legacy of hard work and accomplishment, and while we will miss him, we wish him all the best in his future endeavors.”

Cook, who declined to specify what opportunities he is pursuing, said the accomplishments he is most proud of involve making people “No. 1,” including employees and inmates and their families.

“We’ve improved pay and improved work environment,” Cook added.

He also cited changes designed to help prisoners, including providing improved programs and opening up restrictive housing so inmates spend less time in their cells.

Cook said he is confident that these projects will continue under the new leadership.

ACLU of Utah representatives on Wednesday praised Cook for his willingness to listen to their concerns.

ACLU staff attorney Leah Farrell said that early in Cook’s tenure, the department took quick action to resolve complaints about prison visitation policies. And Brittney Nystrom, ACLU of Utah executive director, said the organization valued its strong working relationship with Cook. “He was always responsive to our concerns about the health, safety, and housing of inmates, as well as favoring increased transparency of prison policies and conditions,” Nystrom said. “We hope to continue these same shared goals with his successor.”

The announcement comes as plans are going forward to build a new prison in northwest Salt Lake City, where ground was broken in August.

The new prison — estimated to cost between \$650 million and \$860 million — will have up to 4,000 beds. Construction is expected to be finished in the winter of 2020. Inmates from the current prison in Draper will move about a year later.

Cook's announcement also comes less than a month after a Utah judge presiding over a death penalty case learned the Corrections Department had withheld nearly 1,600 pages of medical records, which the judge had ordered turned over to attorneys.

Sixth District Judge Wallace Lee said he would write a letter to the governor asking for an investigation into what Lee called the department's "sneaky" and "deceitful" actions.

The absence of the documents prompted prosecutors to withdraw their intent to seek the death penalty for Steven Douglas Crutcher, 36, who admitted last May that he killed 62-year-old Roland Cardona-Gueton inside their shared cell at the Gunnison prison in 2013.

Crutcher, instead, was sentenced last month to spend the rest of his life in prison.

"I'm about as angry about this as I have been about anything in my career," Lee said in court last month. "I am beyond angry about this. I am angry with the Department of Corrections. This was totally wrong and makes me doubt the credibility of everything I hear about the Department of Corrections."

The judge added: "I've worried that if it's happened in this case, it's happening in other cases out there."

On Wednesday, Cook told The Tribune that the Crutcher matter had nothing to do with his decision to move on, adding that corrections officials across the nation face challenges every day.

An earlier controversy stemmed from walk-aways from halfway homes by parolees.

Parolee Cory Lee Henderson, who had been arrested on drug and weapons charges, left a low-security drug treatment program and on Jan. 17, 2016, shot and killed Unified Police Department Officer Doug Barney.

Then, on Jan. 31, 2016, parolee Palm Samiuela Lautaimi was shot and wounded by Salt Lake City police after pointing a gun at two officers. Lautaimi had been arrested two weeks earlier for allegedly possessing a firearm and drugs — which would have put him back in state prison almost immediately on an alleged parole violation but no one from the Division of Adult Probation and Parole picked him up from the Salt Lake County jail.

After an investigation found numerous errors and missteps in communication, two top parole officials resigned and the Department of Corrections implemented corrective measures.

Cook previously worked for the Salt Lake County corrections system. He joined the county in 1989 and worked his way through the jail's ranks from officer to, ultimately, chief deputy. Cook also led the reopening of a closed jail as a therapeutic-style facility with expanded programming, the governor's news release said.

The release said that during his tenure at the Department of Corrections, Cook advocated for and received pay increases for the department's certified officers including a career ladder; opened dialogue with community partners; and directed key policy reforms related to such areas as visiting, mental health and restricted housing.