

Prison knew about school shooter T.J. Lane's prison escape plan ahead of time

Mark Gillispie & John Sewer

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LIMA, Ohio (AP) — Prison officials were warned about an escape the day before three inmates, including a school shooter who killed three students, scrambled over a fence for minutes or hours of freedom before being recaptured, the union representing Ohio guards said Friday.

One inmate was put in segregation when an escape plan was discovered on Wednesday, the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association said in a statement. That inmate was housed in the same unit as the three who escaped the following evening, and prison officials didn't take additional steps to secure the unit, the union said.

A message was left with the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

The three escaped prisoners, including convicted Chardon High School shooter T.J. Lane, were recaptured by early Friday morning.

Lane, 19, was caught only about 100 yards from the prison by two state troopers at 1:20 a.m. Friday. A second prisoner had been caught almost immediately, and troopers apprehended the third three hours after finding Lane.

Lane's brief taste of freedom frightened residents in Chardon, the community nearly 200 miles to the east where Lane fatally shot three students and wounded two others and then further angered people with defiant behavior in court. At his sentencing hearing last year, Lane unbuttoned a dress shirt to reveal a T-shirt scrawled with the word "killer," similar to a shirt he wore during the shootings on Feb. 27, 2012. He cursed and made an obscene gesture as the judge gave him three consecutive life sentences.

Police officers were sent late Thursday to guard the homes of the families of Lane's victims. School officials canceled classes Friday and made counseling available for students and the larger community.

"It's a trigger," district spokeswoman Ellen Ondrey said of the escape. "It takes everyone back to 2/27 and what was happening that day."

The escape occurred at Allen Oakwood Correctional Institution, a minimum- and medium-security prison in Lima about 80 miles south of Toledo.

Lane was housed on a "protective control" unit, a higher security setting than the main compound, according to a legislative prisons oversight committee statement Friday. The unit is designed to hold inmates with proven safety threats because of the notoriety of their crimes, testimony they have given or gang threats, the committee said.

An April inspection by the committee noted ongoing security concerns at the unit. Security management "remains a concern, both in terms of how the higher security inmates are handled, as well as discipline for misconduct," according to a May report by the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee. A message was left Friday with the state prisons agency.

The state had eliminated some security posts at the prison five years ago, the union said.

Warden Kevin Jones said he saw Lane after he was captured and that the teen did not say anything. An investigation is underway to determine how the men, who were outside for recreation, managed to climb over the perimeter fence, the warden said.



This Friday, Sept. 12, 2014 photo shows the Allen Oakwood Correctional Institution in Lima, Ohio. TJ Lane, a teenager convicted of killing three students at an Ohio high school, climbed over a fence Thursday to escape the state prison with two other prisoners. He was caught nearly six hours later early Friday as he hid by a nearby church, in Lima. (AP Photo/Rick Osentoski)

Authorities wouldn't say whether the three prisoners planned their escapes together. Lane was captured somewhere near a small church and cemetery that are separated from the prison by an overgrown field and a two-lane road.

Russ Hill, who has lived next to the church for two decades, said deputies alerted him about the escape and he spent the next six hours sitting in house in the dark with a gun at his side as dozens of officers searched the area with flashlights and spotlights.

"I've never felt safer any night I've been here because there were cops all over," he said. "But I wasn't about to go to sleep."

Authorities didn't release information about the prisoner who was caught almost immediately.

Authorities confirmed the third prisoner was taken into custody around 4:20 a.m. Friday but didn't immediately release how or where. That prisoner was identified as 45-year-old Clifford Opperud, who was serving time for robbery, burglary and kidnapping.

Lane pleaded guilty last year to aggravated murder charges in the shootings at Chardon High School. He said he didn't know why he shot the teens.

Prosecutors say Lane killed Daniel Parmertor and Demetrius Hewlin, both 16, and Russell King Jr., 17, while wounding two others. One of the wounded students is paralyzed.

Lane, who was 17 at the time, was waiting in the cafeteria for a bus to take him to an alternative school for students who don't fare well in traditional settings.

At his sentencing, Lane was defiant, smiling and smirking throughout.

Reached Thursday at her home in Chardon, Parmertor's mother, Dina, said she was disgusted that Lane had escaped.

"I'm extremely scared and panic stricken," she said. "I can't believe it."

Gillispie reported from Cleveland. Associated Press writers Kantele Franko, Andrew Welsh-Huggins and Jennifer Smola in Columbus, Ohio, contributed to this report.

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