

Joint Subcommittee Studying Staffing Standards & Employment Conditions at the Department of Corrections (SR 34)

Senate Committee on Rehabilitation and Social
Services and the Senate Committee on Rules

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Joint Subcommittee Studying Staffing Standards & Employment Conditions at the Department of Corrections held its final meeting of the 2014 interim on December 8, 2014. Following two presentations and testimony, the Joint Subcommittee members voted to (i) introduce a resolution to be carried by Chairman Marsden continuing the study for an additional year, (ii) request that the Department of Corrections (VADOC) create a five-year planning document setting forth long-term staffing and training requirements and strategies for meeting those requirements, and (iii) adopt the following recommendations:

1. Increase Funding to Allow for Adequate Staffing Levels.

- Insufficient funding is resulting in inadequate staffing levels throughout the Commonwealth's prisons. Testimony was presented that such inadequate staffing:
 - Presents safety concerns because there are not enough correctional officers to properly staff all posts with a sufficient number of officers;
 - Causes health problems because inadequate staffing results in severe stress on correctional officers in an already-stressful environment (PTSD rate of 31 percent versus 12-20 percent for Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans);
 - Requires the use of substantial funds towards overtime wages;
 - Causes a shortage of support for inmate programs, including those tailored toward reentry;
 - Results in insufficient oversight regarding inmate possession of contraband; and
 - Is compounded by transportation requirements set forth in the Institutional Post-Audit System.
- Note: Each VADOC fiscal year begins with a budget shortfall of approximately \$32 million, which is equivalent to approximately 600 correctional officer positions.

2. Increase Salaries.

- Paul Broughton, Director of Human Resources at VADOC, made the following recommendations for salary increases at the Joint Subcommittee's October 21, 2014, meeting:

- 1) Three percent increase in minimum security staff salaries;
 - 2) Additional 1 percent salary increase for all security staff with more than five years of experience;
 - 3) Three to four percent increase in the salaries of correctional officers, correctional officer seniors, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, and majors, based on length of service (estimated cost \$11.35 million); and
 - 4) Create a new "Master Corrections Officer" level (estimated cost \$11.8 million over a three-year implementation period: \$2.6 million in year one, \$3.9 million in year two, and \$5.3 million in year three).
- Testimony presented in support of salary recommendations (1) through (4) included the following:
 - The average starting salary for correctional officers is \$28,035, and only \$3,000 separates the 25th and 75th percentile;
 - The starting salary for VADOC correctional officers is 13.1 percent lower than the average starting salary for officers in regional jails, 29 percent lower than the minimum starting salary for officers with the Virginia State Police, and 30 percent lower than the average starting salary for other Richmond-area law-enforcement officers;
 - Salaries should increase, but have not increased, to keep pace with inflation and cost-of-living increases;
 - Salary increases will help lower the turnover rate for correctional officers (currently 16.98 percent per year, many of whom leave VADOC for higher-paying jobs) and promote the retention of seasoned staff, which will lead to safer and more efficient operations and save the Commonwealth funds currently depleted by hiring, training, and overtime wages;
 - Salary increases will also yield better recruitment and increase occupational prestige; and
 - Current salary levels require many correctional officers to work second jobs and, in some instances, collect supplemental assistance from the government.

3. Training.

- Testimony was presented that substantial funds are being wasted to train correctional officers who leave VADOC within one year.
- Testimony was presented that in the past, certain Virginia prisons required correctional officer hopefuls to work in the prisons for approximately three months before the start of training, which provided them an opportunity to experience the prison environment and determine whether they were a suitable fit. It was suggested that reimplementing of this pre-training practice may allow the Commonwealth to diminish the amount of funds squandered on training correctional officers who soon leave VADOC.

4. Conduct & Fairness.

- Numerous correctional officers testified that prison leadership is prohibiting them from issuing charges for inmate misconduct and, instead, requiring that officers

ask inmates to "write a paragraph" about such misconduct as punishment. Correctional officers testified that this practice is ineffective because many inmates simply employ other inmates to fulfill the writing requirement for them. Correctional officers further testified that the prohibition against the issuance of formal charges has resulted in an increased level of inmate misconduct and a lack of respect from inmates for correctional officers and is merely used as a means of artificially lowering reported incident numbers.

- Several correctional officers also requested a forum to voice concerns to prison leadership and administration on a regular, ongoing basis. Correctional officers testified that they are being penalized for speaking up for themselves, that raises are being given on the basis of favoritism, that supervisors often undermine correctional officers' decisions, and that supervisors are in many instances unhelpful, often responding to questions posed by correctional officers with statements such as "It is what it is" or "Because I said so."