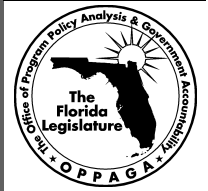




Office of Program Policy Analysis And Government Accountability



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Follow-Up Report on the Department of Corrections' Correctional Officer Staffing

Abstract

- To address issues raised in our prior report, the Legislature has increased the number of authorized correctional officer positions and the pay of correctional officers.
- The department has addressed most of the issues raised in our report related to the working conditions that contribute to officer turnover.
- The department stated that it is not practical to establish written criteria for use in determining the appropriate number of staff needed at each prison.
- Turnover among correctional officers decreased from over 38% in 1995 to 21.6% in 1998 according to the department.

Purpose

In accordance with state law, this follow-up report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Corrections in response to our 1996 report.^{1,2} This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

Background

The department's mission includes the protection of public safety and the provision of a safe and humane environment for staff and inmates. The department uses certified correctional officers to maintain the security of the prisons and the safety of its staff and inmates. Officers are responsible for the supervision, custody, care, control, and, when necessary, physical restraint of inmates. Duties range from supervising inmate work squads to counseling inmates regarding institutional adjustment problems.

Prior Findings

Florida's prisons were frequently staffed with no more than the minimum number of correctional officers needed to ensure public safety. The department often relied upon inexperienced or fatigued staff to maintain the minimum level of staff needed at each prison. The primary cause of the low staff levels was the department's inability to retain correctional officers. We identified four recommendations that should result in the improved retention of correctional officers.

- Provide enough relief correctional officer positions to cover all posts when some officers are absent from work due to leave or training.
- Revise policies to discourage newly certified officers from leaving the department for other jobs.
- Address working conditions that contribute to officer turnover.
- Provide funds for the step pay plan for correctional officers.

In addition, the department had not developed written criteria specifying the factors used in determining staffing needs. We recommended that the department develop written criteria to determine the number of

¹ Section 11.45(7)(f), F.S.

² Policy Review of the Department of Corrections' Correctional Officers Staffing. [Report No. 95-28](#), January 10, 1996.

staff needed at each prison and to conduct assessments of its staffing needs on a routine basis to ensure that these needs are accurately identified.

Current Status

The Legislature and the department have taken actions to address concerns identified in our report. The Legislature increased the number of authorized correctional officer positions and the pay of correctional officers. The department has addressed most of the issues we raised in our report related to the working conditions that contribute to officer turnover. However, the department disagreed with our recommendation to establish written criteria to use in determining the number of staff needed at each prison.

According to the Department of Corrections, correctional officer turnover has decreased from 38.4% in 1995 to 21.6% in 1998. The correctional officer class was no longer listed as one of the classes with the highest turnover in the Department of Management Services Annual Workforce Report for Calendar Year 1997.

Actions Taken

The 1996 Legislature addressed staffing and security issues raised in our report through additional appropriations as follows:

- \$5,698,239 to enhance security in major institutions pursuant to the statewide security assessment done by the department;
- \$5,729,161 for 444 additional correctional officer positions to adequately fund the department's relief factor, the term used by the department to describe how many authorized positions are needed to fill each correctional officer post; and
- a step pay increase for correctional officers for the 1996-97 fiscal year that improved salaries by 7.5%.

With funds provided by the Legislature in subsequent years, the department has initiated several efforts to address staff working conditions. For example, the

department reports that it is addressing institution communications problems with the installation of 800 MHz radio systems; 12 of 55 institutions were fully operational as of June 3, 1998.

The department also has plans to equip officers with personal body alarms, a device that provides an automatic alert when an inmate assaults an officer. The department has also begun to use cellular telephones for medical/transport officers and work squad officers who are out of range of normal low-band radio transmissions.

The department has taken steps to address officer turnover and the problems caused by officer turnover, such as conducting exit surveys of departing officers and training officers to be available to fill vacant positions.

The department disagreed with our recommendation that it set written criteria for determining the number of officers needed at its prisons. The department stated that it is difficult to fully and completely explain the issue of institutional staffing patterns to those outside of corrections. The department states that it considers the overall mission of the institution, the bedspace, the physical layout, the design characteristics and a variety of other factors when it determines the staffing needs of a new prison.

Although we acknowledge the complexities and variations in institution design, mission, and programs, it is important that the department clearly explain its officer staffing needs to assist the Legislature and other decision-makers who review staffing requests. If the development of detailed written criteria for determining staffing needs is not feasible at this time then the department should develop an alternative approach to explaining staffing needs. For example, the department provided OPPAGA with a list of typical officer posts, including written explanations of some of the factors that affect the number of officer posts needed. We believe that a list such as this can be used to communicate correctional officer staffing needs to the legislature and other decision-makers. The list should include statements as to the nature and general duties of each category of posts.

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