



North Carolina Department of Public Safety

Adult Correction and Juvenile Justice

Roy Cooper, Governor
Erik A. Hooks, Secretary

Reuben F. Young, Interim Chief Deputy Secretary

February 1, 2019

Mr. Robert Broome
Executive Director
State Employees Association of North Carolina
rbroome@seanc.org

Dear Mr. Broome,

The Department of Public Safety would like to thank the State Employees Association of North Carolina (SEANC) for its report and recommendations to improve state prisons. We appreciate the work of your Select Committee on Prison Reform to gather comments and suggestions from Prisons' staff.

We agree in principle with the sentiments of the report. Given that we have already started, if not completed, most of the reports' Recommendations for the Department/Administration, it is clear we need to do a better job of communicating our hard work and successes on behalf of all Prisons staff. We welcome SEANC's continued partnership in those efforts.

In an effort to provide clarification and updates, attached is information regarding SEANC's recommendations for the Department and the DPS response. It is important you know what DPS is doing to improve working conditions for our dedicated correctional staff.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need further information.

Thank you for your service to the citizens of North Carolina.

Reuben F. Young
Interim Chief Deputy Secretary

MAILING ADDRESS:
4201 Mail Service Center
Raleigh NC 27699-4201

www.ncdps.gov



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512 N. Salisbury St.
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KEY POINTS REGARDING THE SEANC REPORT

- The Department of Public Safety is grateful for the SEANC “From the Inside,” report and recommendations.
- DPS has been working on prison reform since 2017 and has already accomplished many of the recommendations for the Department. Thus, DPS recognizes it can improve its communication regarding the progress and actions taken.
- Updated information regarding the Department’s prison reform efforts are on the Prison Reform webpage at www.ncdps.gov/prison-reform.
- There is more work to do and the Department continues to move forward with efforts to keep staff safe and facilities secure.

SEANC’s recommendations for the Department, with the Department’s corresponding action items are as follows:

Revise the formula for staffing needs

FROM THE REPORT: There should be no cookie-cutter approach to staffing a prison. Rather than focusing on the size of the facility, a multitude of factors should be considered. Two prisons may hold the same amount of inmates at the same custody level, but their staffing needs could be much different. For example, if a prison is not equipped to handle medical emergencies, the Department should add extra officers to its allotment to account for when officers transport inmates to other facilities or to court dates.

Recommendation: *The Department should take into account the unique needs at each prison when requesting and setting positions.*

DPS COMMENTS

- DPS utilizes the National Institute of Corrections model for establishing staffing levels at facilities.
- In utilizing that model, the Department does take into consideration the configuration of the facilities, inmate classification and multiple other factors that determine the appropriate level of staffing.

Implement streamlined, consistent policies

FROM THE REPORT: This topic is wide-ranging. Several employees aired concerns over leave policies. While overtime is not ideal, we recognize that it is necessary. Still, it is crucial for workers to be able to schedule time off to prevent burnout.

Other suggestions include the implementation of video visits to cut down on contraband, re-examining the Drug/Alcohol Recovery Treatment (DART) and NCVIP (employee evaluation process) programs and completing exit interviews with personnel to find needs that must be addressed.

Recommendation: *The Department must rethink everything from employee evaluations to disciplinary policies for inmates.*

DPS COMMENTS

- **DPS has been listening to employees.**
 - Exit surveys were implemented in July 2018 for all correctional officers who leave voluntarily.
 - DPS leadership held numerous “listening tours” at various prisons with employees to receive feedback, as well as individual meetings with staff.
 - With the assistance of Senior Executive Advisor for Prison Reform Gary Mohr, a nationally-recognized expert, DPS is currently implementing “Back to Basics,” which allows employees to give direct feedback and recommendations to improve safety for immediate implementation within their facility. Mohr is also president of the American Correctional Association.
- **Based upon feedback from employees, the Department requested statutory changes to strengthen penalties against inmates that assault staff. Session Law 2018-67 increases the sanctions for assaults on staff and several other offenses specifically identified by staff.**
- **Based upon feedback from employees, the Department strengthened its internal disciplinary policies for offenders.**
- **DPS follows statewide human resources policy and state law regarding NCVIP performance management and employee leave.**
- **DPS continues to examine and implement various forms of technology to assist in maintaining custody and security.**

Inform officers of mental health resources

FROM THE REPORT: Ninety percent of respondents on our survey said that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a serious issue with staff.

DPS should educate all employees on how to access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and encourage its usage. The Department should provide email and written correspondence to employees on a frequent basis so all employees are aware of services they can access for mental health support.

Critical Incident Response teams provide mental health services to an individual shortly after a traumatic experience. These teams must be available to any correctional facility when a critical incident occurs to support the immediate needs of all staff involved, directly and indirectly. Services must be available to staff, both immediately following a critical incident, but also for follow-up services for staff requesting support.

Recommendation: *The Department should do a better job of informing employees of the resources available to them to deal with stress.*

DPS COMMENTS

- DPS takes the mental health of its employees very seriously.
- The Department provides information received from DPS Human Resources and State Human Resources about the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through various means such as emails and posters.
- DPS deploys chaplaincy services, the SHIELD program (Staff Helping In Emergency Life-changing crises or Difficult situations), and other resources to provide support to all staff in need.
- The Department is partnering with the VERA Institute of Justice to examine the long-term effects on staff of working in the restrictive housing environment.
- DPS provides crisis intervention training (CIT) to Prisons employees.
- The Department is establishing a grant-funded behavioral health program to address the mental health needs of employees who suffer work-related victimization or stress arising out of critical incidents or their dangerous work environment.
- DPS partners with the Correctional Peace Officers Association to provide additional resources.
- The Department still needs to enhance its communication of the many resources available to our employees and continues to seek ways to improve in this area.
- DPS welcomes SEANC's partnership in providing better communication to their members who work in our facilities.

Re-evaluate the hiring process

FROM THE REPORT: Officers argue that the current regional hiring practices do not work. Often, new hires are sent to prisons that are in their "region" but far from their home, while a prison near where they live has vacancies. The officer is told to put in for a transfer, only to find out that the transfer will take up to two years. Rather than commuting four hours a day, the new hire will quit.

Recommendation: *The Department would be better served by hiring at each facility, or making a concerted effort to place new hires close to their homes. The hiring process needs to go back to the unit level to allow recruitment from local communities.*

DPS COMMENTS

- DPS continually re-evaluates and adjusts the hiring process for Prisons in an effort to streamline the hiring process.
- Beginning Jan. 1, 2019, all facilities interview prospective correctional officers at the facility and not the regional office. This move gives the facilities greater input and authority in hiring staff.

Invest in facilities and updated equipment

FROM THE REPORT: Personnel stress the need for better equipment — radios that actually work, for example — and proper training for its use and maintenance. Officers need radios with ear piece attachments to keep conversations private from inmates.

Personnel also suggest gloves, stab-proof clothing, batons and body cameras as items that should be standard issue for each correctional officer regardless of custody level.

Many facilities are in need of general improvements. Some officers at older prisons report that dorms have not been updated since the 1930s, are filthy and have horrible lighting. This leads to poor visibility, making it difficult to properly supervise inmates.

DPS COMMENTS

- Prisons has installed more than 1,150 cameras in its facilities since April 2017.
- Additional lighting has been installed or replaced in many facilities.
 - General Lighting - More than 12,000 interior and exterior lights installed in 2018.
 - Temporary Guard Towers – The Prisons currently is piloting nine mobile towers equipped with lighting. Each tower has LED lights located on each side of the tower.
 - Roving Patrol Spotlights – The Department is currently in the testing phase of a project to equip spotlight-type lighting on the back of Roving Patrol vehicles. At this time, one vehicle is equipped with the light for test purposes.
- More than 6,400 new radios have been deployed since Dec. 1, 2017.
- The standard “safety package” for certified correctional officers and case managers includes more than “a can of pepper spray” - radios, handcuffs and the highest concentration of OC pepper spray available are provided at all facilities.
 - Medium and close certified staff have batons.
 - NOTE: The minimum custody correctional officers are scheduled to also receive batons.
- The use of tasers by supervisors is currently in the pilot phase at four facilities.
- Stab-resistant vests have been distributed to 53 of the state’s 55 facilities.
 - More than 10,000 have been issued statewide. DPS is working to secure vests for the remaining two facilities.
- Gloves have always been available to any correctional officer who asks for them.
- DPS is constantly evaluating the condition of facilities.
 - It is part of the administrator’s daily duties.
 - The Department has closed facilities in the past due to conditions that cost more to maintain.
 - No facility should be “filthy.” Even an old facility can and should be clean.

Offer Comprehensive Training

FROM THE REPORT:

With prisons woefully understaffed, the department needs to put new officers on the floor as soon as possible. Without adequate training, the new hires are a danger to themselves and other personnel.

Veterans doubted that they can learn enough to survive in the limited amount of allotted training hours per year. Some suggest the reinstatement of mentorship and career readiness programs. Mandatory diversity, leadership, emergency and de-escalating conflict trainings were also recommended.

Recommendation: *There should be basic policies that prohibit new hires from work until they are sufficiently trained.*

DPS COMMENTS

- **Beginning in July 2017, Secretary Erik Hooks required that the backlog of correctional officers who had not completed Basic Correctional Officer (BCO) training be eliminated and that going forward, all newly hired officers complete BCO training prior to being assigned to a post.**
- **The backlog was eliminated by the end of 2017.**
- **Based on staff feedback, the Field Training Officer (FTO) training program began in April 2018.**
 - **With the implementation of that 3-week training program, officers are assigned to a seasoned officer immediately after completion of BCO training.**
 - **To date, nearly 1,000 correctional officers have completed FTO training.**
- **In January 2019, implementation of an enhanced BCO training program extended basic training from 4 to 6 weeks.**
 - **The curriculum has been revamped and includes more situational awareness training.**
 - **The Department now offers a total of 10 weeks of training for new correctional officers including one week of facility orientation, basic training, as well as the mentoring with an FTO.**
- **To improve communications and morale, Prisons provided Team building, Attitude, Conflict, Transformation (TACT) training in several facilities in 2018.**
 - **The focus is on interpersonal skills, self-awareness, conflict resolution, empathy and team building.**

Other Actions to Improve Employee Morale

Employee Rewards

- Prisons implemented an enhanced Employee Recognition Program in June 2018.
 - Formalizes the process of recognizing employees monthly at each facility.
 - Establishes recognition on a regional basis every quarter, and on a statewide basis annually.
 - Employees are also considered for the DPS Badge of Excellence and the Governor’s Award of Excellence.
- Implemented the Facility Enhancement Fund in partnership with Correction Enterprises on July 1, 2018.
 - An annual allocation is provided to each facility depending on its size (\$1,000 to \$3,000).
 - Funded by Correction Enterprises.
 - Provides facilities an opportunity to develop programs and activities to increase morale and enhance personal and professional development among correctional employees.

Address Understaffing

FROM THE REPORT: Understaffing is the major contributing factor to the five prison deaths in 2017 as well as ongoing violence in our prisons. There are not enough boots on the ground to keep the peace in our facilities. An average vacancy rate of 25 percent means that one-in-four correctional officer positions are unfilled. That rate is much higher at more dangerous facilities like Pasquotank, Lanesboro and Bertie.

DPS COMMENTS

- The average correctional vacancy rate is not 25 percent, as listed but is still too high. The average across facilities in 2018 was approximately 17 percent.

FROM THE REPORT: Understaffed prisons lead to overworked staff. Officers work 16- or 20-hour shifts, only to turn around and be called in on their days off. Long shifts and overtime can result in officers neglecting personal wellness and family relationships.

“Officers come to work never knowing when they are going home 12 hours, 16 hours or 20 hours later. We never know,” said one officer.

DPS COMMENTS

- Correctional officers do not work 16-to-20 hour shifts, unless there is an emergency situation such as a hurricane.

DPS Ongoing Efforts

In early 2018, DPS established five multi-disciplinary workgroups aligned with the five goals for Prison Reform:

- Enhance Security Policies and Practices;
- Reduce Contraband;
- Increase Hiring and Retention;
- Improve Training for New and Veteran Employees; and
- Improve Ability to Communicate Information to Stakeholders.

The workgroups are researching, developing and implementing the Strategy to Improve Prison Safety and Security. For more information on the Prison Reform efforts visit the Prison Reform webpage at www.ncdps.gov/prison-reform.