

Oklahoma's prison staffing levels at bottom of 49-state survey

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By BARBARA HOBEROCK World Capitol Bureau | Posted: Wednesday, December 18, 2013 7:16 pm

OKLAHOMA CITY — The state's ratio of correctional officers to offenders is the worst among at least 49 states and more than twice the national average, according to a survey released by the Oklahoma Corrections Professionals. Figures for Maryland correctional officer staffing ratios were not available, according to the survey.

Meanwhile, the average hourly starting pay for a correctional officer is nearly \$4 above what Oklahoma correctional officers earn, according to the survey results.

"The hiring rate for corrections officers in Oklahoma has got to be raised _____, and the agency needs \$12.2 million to do it," said Sean Wallace, executive director of Oklahoma Corrections Professionals. "We cannot afford to lose more officers, who can and do go almost anywhere and get paid more, work less hours and not work in as dangerous and stressful environment as a prison.

"They've gone eight years without a raise of any kind and, adding insult to injury, endured a year of furloughs, too." The average starting pay for a state corrections officer nationwide is \$15.63 an hour. Oklahoma pays \$11.83 an hour, the survey found.

Two states, Georgia and New Mexico, have lower starting wages than Oklahoma, according to the survey.

Oklahoma has one officer for every 11.7 inmates, the survey found. The national average is one officer for every 5.5 inmates, according to the survey.

The Department of Corrections' inmate population has increased by nearly 13 percent since 2003, but the number of correctional officers monitoring those inmates has dropped by 19 percent over the same time period, according to a recent Tulsa World analysis.

"We're so outnumbered. They (inmates) could take this place over anytime if they wanted to -- any time -- and there's nothing we can do about it," Lt. Jai Batson of Joseph Harp Correctional Center in Lexington told the Tulsa World this summer.

"You can go to a 7-Eleven and work there and make more money than starting off here," he said. "If you're in an environment with killers, rapists, molesters, ... if you subject yourself to this for \$11.83 an hour, you tell me how you're going to provide for your family. It's embarrassing. It's a slap in the face is what it is."

Justin Jones, who resigned as Department of Corrections director in August, said at the time that Joseph Harp and other medium-security facilities have not had full staffing for at least the past decade.

Units once monitored by four officers often have one officer working.

"The Department of Corrections has lost more than 500 corrections officers in the last five years because of budget cuts and the inability to recruit and retain officers," Wallace said. "And the prison population only grows bigger every year. It's shocking to see just how far we are from the rest of the country on staffing."

It would take about 2,000 more officers to bring the state to the national average on officer-to-inmate staffing ratios, according to the organization, which has a membership of about 1,500 members, including correctional officers and Pardon and Parole Board employees.

"It's so irresponsible and out of line for lawmakers to allow this to continue to get worse every year and every day," Wallace said.

Oregon has a larger state population but 11,000 fewer inmates and 800 more correctional officers, Wallace said.

Kansas has about a third of the population of Oklahoma but 400 more correctional officers, he said.

"State leaders are failing us," he said. "We are asking too much of our heroic corrections employees, many of whom are now working mandatory 60 hours a week, and it is going to get someone killed."

With fewer officers to watch them, inmates tend to cause more trouble, DOC employees say. Cpl. Troy Covey, who was working in Joseph Harp's segregated housing unit _____, said state leaders don't fully understand the potential for another riot.

Lawmakers and Gov. Mary Fallin gave the Oklahoma Department of Corrections a standstill budget for fiscal year 2014.

David Ramsey, a correctional training officer who is president of the Oklahoma Corrections Professionals, said the matter is a state of emergency.

No other pay classification in the state requires employees to work between 60 and 80 hours a week due to staffing shortages, Ramsey said.

A spokesman for Fallin said the governor is aware of the issues.

"We understand the Department of Corrections has salary and funding needs, as do other areas of state government,"

Alex Weintz said. "The Governor's Office has received over \$1 billion in requests from state agencies for new funding. "While we take those requests seriously, it's important for each agency to understand the state will not have the revenue for any major increases in spending. The No. 1 priority for agencies right now should be to find ways to operate more efficiently and effectively."

World Correspondent Samantha Vicent contributed to this story.