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**Plan to boost prison guard pay creates spike in transfer requests**

More than 8% of the state’s prison guards sought transfers to get a $5-an-hour pay boost in the first eight days after the Evers administration proposed a plan to address critical staff shortages at maximum-security facilities.

Documents obtained by WisPolitics.com through the state’s open records law show that was an 8,000% increase from the typical transfer request in a given week.

Republican lawmakers slammed Corrections Secretary Kevin Carr and Gov. Tony Evers for the program, which they say is “fundamentally unfair” and “arbitrarily picks winners and losers.”

The Critical Vacancy Add-On Pilot Program provides a $5-per-hour boost for correctional staff at five maximum-security adult facilities: Columbia Correctional Institution, Dodge, Green Bay, Taycheedah and Waupun plus the juvenile institutions at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake.

Assembly Corrections Chair Michael Schraa, R-Oshkosh, recently told WisPolitics.com that while he understands the impetus behind the move, he fundamentally disagrees with Carr’s actions.

“I wouldn’t want to be in his position, because, you know, new person coming in and you’ve got a crisis at your maximums,” he said. “I get it, but I think it could have been done differently.”

Carr fired back that in order to address the impending crisis, he had to make a drastic move. He said in the past, similar hiring initiatives that added $1 per hour to wages at targeted institutions had been “totally ineffective” and “didn’t result materially in an increase in hiring or retention.”

“We felt that we had to do something really significant in order to move the needle,” he said.

But while lawmakers and the administration go back and forth, guards on the front line say even that $5 add-on might not be enough.

A correctional officer at the maximum-security facility in Waupun, who requested anonymity for fear of blowback at work, told WisPolitics.com that even with the add-on, he still plans to transfer out of WCI because security at the facility is “rapidly deteriorating.” He described a “vicious cycle” wherein the lack of staff at maxes leads to reduced programming that in turn leads to more agitated inmates who become more prone to violence, creating more dangerous working conditions and making recruiting even harder.

DOC documents show that 71 out of the 403 transfer requests came from guards seeking to transfer to WCI, but the correctional officer said even that influx of bodies wasn’t enough to keep him at the facility where he worked his entire career. He said he didn’t want to leave, but “it was not safe or healthy to stay at WCI any longer.”

“This $5 add-on is the only hope that we have right now to save WCI, but it’s still not enough to keep me to stay,” he said.

The adult max facilities face what Carr labeled as “historically high” vacancy rates. A Legislative Audit Bureau report on adult corrections expenditures published earlier this month shows that the five facilities made eligible for the program have vacancy rates that average around 21%, roughly double the rates at medium- and minimum-security prisons.

That has led to a workplace culture where, on average, 15 out of 16 correctional officers and sergeants are forced to work overtime every week. The number of extra hours can vary. And the audit found a plurality of correctional security staff work between 1 to 6.9 hours of overtime each week. But 9% of correctional security staff reported averaging 16 hours or more in overtime on a weekly basis.

The LAB audit also found that the five adult facilities eligible for the program operate with a population that ranges from between 142% and 154% of their original design capacity. Packaging overworked and exhausted guards together with overstuffed maximum-security facilities, the health and safety of both correctional security staff and inmates are already in jeopardy, according to the guard at Waupun.

Then, Carr said, senior Department of Adult Institutions officials notified him that with summer rapidly approaching, a number of correctional staff planned to use their vacation time to unwind and get away from the rigors of the job. Combined with pending retirements as well as the routine nature of staffing requests that come in during the summer, DOC officials worried these factors could worsen an already combustible situation.

“Once I was put on notice that someone could be seriously hurt, I had to act,” Carr said. “I’m not going to sit there and not try to remedy that situation in order to ensure the safety and security of our staff.”

Carr said in developing the program, he asked his staff to put together a plan that accomplished three goals: increase the number of new people applying for jobs at DOC; provide enough of an incentive to limit the number of people retiring; and increase interest among current corrections staff in transferring to institutions where help is desperately needed.

It’s difficult to judge at this point whether the program has resonated enough in the minds of the general public to drive recruitment. DOC has data on new recruits, but it isn’t designed to capture the effect of this program.

Recruits must first go through a seven-week training program before being assigned to an institution. While recruits do get to express a preference for certain facilities, the most recent batch of graduates finished their training on April 19 and listed their preferences before the add-on program was announced.

Similarly, DOC officials could only provide anecdotal evidence of correctional staff who said the program encouraged them to delay their retirement, but they couldn’t piece together the number of retirements the program had delayed. Schraa said he also had heard from correctional staff that are now considering putting their retirement on hold.

“People that were ready to put their retirement papers in, it maybe would have given them pause to say, ‘Yeah, maybe I’ll wait this out another six months or a year,'” he said.

But the transfer front is where the program has made the most impact so far. Only five correctional staff put in for a transfer to the six facilities eligible for the pay bump during an eight-day period preceding the program’s rollout. But between April 28 — when the program went into effect — and May 6, 403 correctional staff put in for transfers.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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