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**Fewer than 25% of guard transfers went to prisons most in need**

Of the 48 guards who accepted transfers to take advantage of pay increase for working in Wisconsin’s most understaffed prisons, fewer than 25% went to the two facilities with the highest vacancy rates.

Columbia Correctional Institution, which has the highest vacancy rate among Department of Corrections institutions, received only four transfers while Waupun Correctional Institution, the prison with the second-highest vacancy rate, got seven.

What’s more, data the DOC provided WisPolitics.com shows nearly 40% of transfers, 19 of the 48, went to the facilities at Green Bay and Taycheedah. Despite being made eligible for the add-on program, those two facilities have lower vacancy rates than at least three other DOC facilities that were not made eligible for the pay boost, according to a May Legislative Audit Bureau report.

DOC Secretary Kevin Carr conceded the pay add-on had not produced the results he hoped it would in terms of transfers, telling WisPolitics.com that increasing staffing levels at several institutions “certainly has been a challenge.” He added that the program was “going well” overall and highlighted a sizeable bump in enrollment in training academies.

But for a prison guard on the front lines at a critically understaffed institution, “it feels like they’re abandoning us.”

WisPolitics.com recently reported that in the first three months, only 48 of the 387 Division of Adult Institutions officers and sergeants that originally put in for transfers have followed through with the request to change facilities — just 12.4%.

The low follow-through rate is blamed by some on the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the union that represents a large swath of DOC employees. An AFSCME spokeswoman said the union encouraged its members to file so-called “protest transfer requests” in solidarity with the employees at the 30 other Division of Adult Institutions facilities that were not given raises.

The results didn’t surprise Rep. Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam. The former corrections supervisor told WisPolitics.com he doesn’t think “money alone” will solve the problem.

“I didn’t expect the add-on to be any sort of a magic wand, and it appears it’s not,” he said.

Most of those who did transfer did not choose the facilities in most desperate need of DOC veterans. In addition to the four transfers to Columbia, only seven prison guards chose to move to Waupun Correctional, the institution with the second-highest vacancy rate.

Prison guards at Waupun and Columbia, both of whom requested anonymity to speak freely about their work conditions, said they were disappointed by Carr’s comments and the number of new hires the add-on program brought to their institutions.

“They said this was a crisis, yet they get less than a dozen new guys in and call it job done,” said the Waupun guard, where the seven transfers joined four academy graduates.

“It’s clear that this is fading to the back of people’s minds in Madison.”

The guard at Columbia was similarly disheartened when presented his institution’s recruiting haul that saw only four new transfers and three new recruits.

“We raised hell just to get people to notice how bad it is here and don’t really have much to show for it,” he said. “It really sucks.”

Instead, the largest chunk of the transfers to facilities eligible for the pay boost went to Dodge Correctional — 18 of the 48. The institution is known within the DOC community to be highly desirable due to its status as an intake facility.

A former DOC official described the facility as a “revolving door” where new inmates learn about what life in prison is like before being shipped out to another max facility for the duration of their sentence. The relatively short stays for a majority of the population decreases the likelihood of gangs forming and long-simmering grudges boiling over into violence.

While Dodge’s vacancy rate ranks third highest among DOC institutions — less than a percentage point behind Waupun — guards tend to stay longer. It has by far the highest median tenure of security personnel of any maximum-security facility.

Veterans guards are considered to be prized assets when it comes to lowering vacancy rates. Those with experience in the system understand the rigors of the job and can be relied upon when work conditions get tough. Academy graduates, on the other hand, are seen by some DOC personnel as the driving force behind the high turnover rates.

Carr told WisPolitics.com that despite the program’s failure to significantly boost staff at the two most undermanned institutions, he was not considering using further financial incentives to drive recruitment.

“There won’t be any higher rates of pay or anything like that targeted for those two institutions. That’s not in the picture right now,” he said.

Instead, both he and Born focused on the across-the-board pay raise for prison guards approved by the Joint Finance Committee and signed into law as part of the budget by Gov. Tony Evers.

Carr said he hoped those raises, coupled with morale-boosting efforts to ensure DOC personnel feel their input is “valued and impactful” on day-to-day operations, could improve staffing levels long-term.

Those long-term goals match with what AFSCME spokeswoman Valerie Landowski said the union hoped to accomplish with the collective action. Landowski told WisPolitics.com that AFSCME was aiming to “restore employees’ voice in the workplace” and “have management invested and care about what the issues are within the workplace.”

But in the short term, neither Carr, Born or Landowski seemed to have the magic bullet to help those guards who feel that they’ve been left behind.

“This is something that built over time,” Born said. “The bottom line is that we need to be more competitive with other professions and jobs in the areas of these prisons.”

*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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