



Vermont State Employees' Association

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As the result of policy decisions made by the State and the management of the Department of Corrections, our correctional facilities have become dysfunctional and chaotic in ways that neither serve the interests of the public nor the men and women that do the grueling work of keeping the facilities secure and our communities safe.

We have collectively served the Department of Corrections for decades, and in all those years, we have never experienced a time when the reality of a day on the job for our correctional officers (COs) has been as troubling as it is today.

The introduction of a slew of new programmatic requirements in the facilities have not been met with an increase in the number of correctional officers, so COs find themselves stretched to the limit. This trend has become so severe that colleagues of ours have been unable to get temporary relief from their post to so much as use the restroom. Supervisors and correctional services specialists have had to put aside their own duties to help address the huge staffing shortfalls.

At a time when the population incarcerated in Vermont is the most dangerous we have housed, assaults on corrections officers by offenders have, disturbingly, become a routine occurrence in our facilities. Attacks range from the degrading and disgusting (including being attacked with feces, blood, and vomit) to the life-threatening.

At the end of a difficult shift in conditions like these, correctional officers are routinely told that they're not able to go home after all. So-called "mandatory overtime" means that exhausted COs are required to stay on for up to an additional eight hours, without regard to their child care and other family needs. These Vermonters are working under extreme fatigue in a setting where even a minor error may have life-or-death consequences.

The Medically Assisted Treatment program (MAT), in particular, has had horrendous consequences for the day-to-day conditions in the facilities. The Commissioner himself has testified before the Legislature that there are not enough staff members to effectively monitor the number of people receiving MAT, that the amount of contraband in the facilities has spiked since the program began, that the drugs are being stockpiled, and at times sold, and that more vulnerable inmates may have been strong-armed for their doses. Inmates who divert medication again and again may *continue* to receive the drugs if the physician in charge of the program says so. Inmates who were no longer using opiates were *reintroduced* to them by the Vermont Department of Corrections. The treatment is provided to inmates *without*

the counseling that is supposed to be a key part of the therapy. MAT has been a disaster for daily operations in the facilities, and for our members.

How have things gotten so dire? A common, correct, but incomplete answer is that the Department of Corrections is undergoing a staffing crisis. There were fifty unfilled Correctional Officer I positions at the end of the Legislative Session. If these problems are to be properly addressed we have to ask ourselves *why* the State of Vermont can't recruit people to fill— or retain staff for— what have always been considered good, if demanding, jobs. In fact, in the past fiscal year, the Department experienced over a 30% turnover rate among Correctional Officer 1s.

A key answer is that the current culture in our correctional facilities is one where there is an almost complete lack of accountability for violent, disrespectful, and disobedient actions on the part of convicted offenders. Current protocols often don't allow for even the most basic discipline to be imposed in response to bad and destructive behavior. At the same time, Corrections staff are being aggressively disciplined, and threatened with termination over minor alleged infractions. This leaves our dedicated COs with the impression that the management cares more about the convicted offenders than they do about their own staff. Who wants to work in a dangerous environment when you are not sure the leadership of your department cares, or will back you up?

These well-intentioned policies were introduced with the goal of making our facilities more restorative, therapeutic places; just the opposite has happened. Too much emphasis has been placed on academic research and not on the real, lived, daily experience of corrections staff on the ground in Vermont. *We* are the experts the State of Vermont should be listening to.

Addressing these serious issues requires asking some tough questions:

- Are we preparing people to be successful members of society when we teach them that there are no consequences for their violent actions or destructive behavior?
- Are the lives and rights of convicted criminals worth *more* than those of public servants? Should those public servants have to accept routine assault and disrespect as just the cost of doing business, with their employer unwilling or unable to intervene to protect them?
- Are we satisfied with a status quo where disrespectful, chaotic, and sometimes violent behavior has become a regular part of life in our facilities? Does that provide the backdrop we need for the restorative criminal justice system Vermonters say they want?

And if we think the answer to these questions is a resounding "no," then we have to ask another question:

- If, as the Department of Corrections says, the increased accountability for bad behavior that my colleagues and I are calling for *isn't* the answer to keeping the Vermonters who work in the facilities and field safe, what *is* the solution? How does the Department of Corrections plan to make working for them tolerable?

The Department of Corrections, the Governor, and the Legislature owe us an answer.

Respectfully,

The VSEA Corrections Unit Bargaining Team