



State of Vermont
Department of Corrections
280 State Drive
Waterbury, VT 05671-1000

Agency of Human Services

TO: Representative Alice Emmons, Vice Chair
CC: Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee
Steve Howard, VSEA, Inc.
Kristin Calver, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Corrections
Al Cormier, Chief of Operations, Department of Corrections
Isaac Dayno, Policy Director, Department of Corrections
FROM: Nicholas Deml, Commissioner, Department of Corrections
DATE: December 17, 2024
SUBJECT: Staffing at the Vermont Department of Corrections

Introduction

States and the Federal Government increasingly struggle to staff jails and prisons in recent years, a challenge that will grow more acute as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [predicts a 7% decline](#) in the correctional officer workforce over the next decade.

The same is true for Vermont's correctional system, which reached a 32% facility staff vacancy rate in the summer of 2022. Staffing vacancies at the Vermont Department of Corrections (DOC) began in 2015 and accelerated during the pandemic.

Recognizing staff vacancies place undue burden on staff, impede time off and work/life balance, and affect mental and physical health, DOC implemented a suite of aggressive recruitment and retention initiatives to support DOC employees, who provide a critical human service to the state. These initiatives reduced vacancies by 50% over the last two years, supported in part by investments of more than \$30M in state taxpayer dollars.

Despite these successes, the correctional system in Vermont – and across the nation – struggles to continue to meet staffing levels designed decades ago.

Acknowledging the shared constituency of DOC and the Vermont State Employees Association, Inc. (VSEA), the Vermont Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee instructed both entities to present solutions to combat Vermont's correctional workforce crisis. This document provides contextual information on the national correctional workforce crisis, outlines DOC's ongoing staffing initiatives, and recommends areas for future VSEA support that may further reduce correctional staffing vacancies.

National Correctional Workforce Crisis

Research shows the role of the correctional officer is among the most difficult in the American workforce: correctional officers face the [highest rate of nonfatal workplace violence](#) of any U.S. occupation according to the U.S. Departments of Justice, Labor, and Health and Human Services – a rate nearly twice that of law enforcement and more than 11 times that of healthcare workers. [According to the National Institutes of Health](#), more than half (53.4%) of jail officers screened positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a rate [more than double that of military veterans](#). And a [national study](#) showed corrections officers' suicide rate to be 39% higher than the average worker, with an average life expectancy for corrections officers of [59 years](#), 16 years below the national average.

These sobering statistics reveal the difficulties state correctional staff face, which ultimately impact recruitment and retention. In New Hampshire, Governor Chris Sununu [activated the National Guard](#) in 2023 to staff the men's state prison, which was then experiencing a 51% vacancy rate. Currently, the Federal Bureau of Prisons faces a 24% facility vacancy rate.

Vermont Demographics

doc.vermont.gov



Today, Vermont faces extraordinary demographic shifts: no state has a [smaller share of residents](#) in their prime working years. A disproportionate share of Vermonters are at or near retirement age: more than a fifth are 65 or older, and more than 35% are 54 or older, the age at which Americans typically begin to exit the workforce.

The age of Vermont's correctional facilities – some which date from the 1960s – also has a profound impact on correctional system staffing; no new correctional facility has been designed in the state for the last quarter century. The physical layout of the state's current correctional facilities and the staffing matrices for each facility reflect a twentieth century workforce – not the demographics of Vermont at the turn of 2025.

DOC Initiatives and Recommendations for VSEA Involvement

Mental Health and Wellness

- DOC Initiatives
 - Created mental health clinician position for staff mental health support.
 - Created staff wellness spaces within facilities to allow decompression from correctional environment and use of personal devices.
 - Updated Department Vision, Mission, and Values for first time since 1980s with a focus on staff wellness and support.
 - Expanded communication efforts to staff and their family about wellness opportunities and resources, including wellness challenge calendar for all staff which provides tips, resources, activities, daily challenges in six areas of wellness.
 - Created free Community College of Vermont (CCV) course program via \$4.5M Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS) package from Senator Bernie Sanders. Included a CCV course in the basic correctional officer academy.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Collaborate with the Department on events that reduce stress, such as wellness challenges, meditation sessions, or department-sponsored social events.
 - Sponsor team-building activities and opportunities for staff to learn about self-care.
 - Discontinue public communications frequently citing poor workplace conditions and staffing shortages.
 - Begin communications regarding recent improvements and highlight positive changes to DOC culture that will attract workers, not push them away.
 - Assist the Department in providing wellness benefits, such as access to gyms, health checkups, and wellness days.
 - Collaborate with the Department in deploying a K9 support officer for staff wellness.

Staffing Pressures

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Created Office of Professional Standards & Compliance dedicated to all elements of the staff experience, including the Correctional Academy, staff professional development, staff mental health and wellness, and recruitment and retention.
 - Created a Central Operations Specialist team to assume hospital coverage shifts and relieve field and facility staff from growing hospital coverage pressures.
 - Absorbed 70% of hospital shifts (12,240 hours) from November 2023 to November 2024 compared to 15% (2,628 hours) for Field staff.
 - Instituted *Stability & Sustainability Plan* that reduced vacancy ratings from over 30% in July 2022 to 17.6% today.
 - Redesigned staff schedules to create more opportunity for work/life balance (2-2-3 staffing model).
- Areas for VSEA Support
 - Sponsor streamlined process with education and accountability for call outs, doctors' notes, and FMLA. Help the Department hold staff accountable for patterns of abuse of leave and call outs.

Staff recognition and appreciation

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Initiated “Spotlight on Staff” recognitions shared at monthly town hall meetings.
 - Deployed Guardian recognition software to provide real-time feedback to staff and share positive accomplishments.
 - Enhanced Annual Rewards and Recognition ceremony to recognize staff accomplishments, acts of valor, and lifesaving actions. More than 50 staff members were celebrated in the 2024 ceremony for distinguished years of service ranging from 20 to 40 years.
 - Distributed approximately 175 Merit Bonuses awarded to staff members in 2024 in recognition of their performance.
 - Created memorial coin in recognition of active staff who pass away to provide to family members.
 - Streamlined retirement recognition procedure for consistency and efficacy.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Recognize excellent staff performance, years of service, and community service.
 - Share DOC Spotlight on Staff and other departmental accolades with membership and on social media.
 - List all DOC monthly promotions and staff accomplishments in a bulletin to show trajectory of advancement and professional growth within the Department.
 - Create a 'thank a buddy' program where a VSEA member can recognize another member for positive contributions to the workplace and community.
 - Survey staff on how they would like to be recognized and appreciated for their work.
 - Create potential for staff to be involved in trainings, local events, and offsite development opportunities.
 - Consider approaching local businesses to support and recognize staff and offer discounts.

Marketing and public education

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Contracted with Grey Media to create statewide marketing campaign focused on staff recruitment and updated Department Vision, Mission, and Values.
 - Increased social media presence using facility Facebook profiles highlighting staff promotions and accomplishments, and facility initiatives.
 - Created OPSC and facility monthly newsletters to better communicate with staff.
 - Partnered with media outlets to garner positive news coverage that boosts staff morale and increases public understanding of corrections.
 - Conducted cross trainings with both public and private agencies (AHS, DCF, VHA, Lyndon Institute, Tri-valley transit, VCCI, VPTA, etc.) to spread positive messaging about corrections and opportunities available.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Participate in DOC-branded marketing campaigns, including WCAX initiatives.
 - Distribute DOC communications and newsletters to members.
 - Highlight the professionalism, skill, and dedication of staff and the importance of DOC mission.
 - Highlight DOC employees who are involved in their communities, including coaches, Scout leaders, volunteers.
 - Increase VSEA visibility at worksites – including throughout facilities, not just break rooms – and establish regular meetings with management to discuss local issues as they arise.
 - Attend Vermont Correctional Academy more than once during the six-week session.
 - Help push back on local organizations, such as Ben & Jerry’s and FreeHer, that attack staff by accusing them of abuse.
 - Discontinue public rhetoric in media interviews and legislative testimony disparaging DOC as a workplace.

Recruitment

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Created Facility Staff Experience Supervisors (SES) at all six facilities to engage in local culture and retention efforts.
 - Boosted presence on employment websites such as Indeed to make job openings more visible for potential applicants.
 - Piloting a remote Correctional Academy to attract applicants that are unable to leave family for the six-week Academy and attract recruits from additional areas around the state.
 - Participated in job fairs and grew partnerships with local colleges and high schools to boost recruitment.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Accompany DOC to recruitment fairs and assist with statewide outreach.
 - Help potential and new staff relocating for employment identify housing, childcare, transportation and other resources.
 - Advocate for discounts or cost coverage for staff who take the ferry across Lake Champlain as part of their commute.
 - Assist DOC with facility open houses for potential recruits.

Retention and staff experience

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Initiated Facility Staff Experience Supervisor (SES) standard check-ins with new correctional officers for continued support during the first several months in the role.
 - Created stay, transfer, and exit interview process to better understand how and why employees leave the Department and encourage them to stay.
 - Delayed mandatory overtime for new officers to increase retention during the first six months of employment. DOC data shows this is a critical time for retaining new staff.
 - Created OPSC Lending Library as a free resource for professional development.
 - Collaborated with other states in the Northeast to combine resources for training and learning opportunities such as the establishment of the Northeast Regional Training Institute (NRTI), Traumatic Stress initiatives, and special team's operations.
 - Developed policy equity tool to improve processes and policies and identify deficiencies.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Attend Vermont Correctional Academy graduations to celebrate and support new staff joining the Department and show a shared commitment to their success.
 - Support staff experiencing Relief from Duty when DOC cannot communicate with them as per DHR policy.
 - Assist the Department in advocating for new facilities and HVAC funding in the Capital Bill.
 - Advocate to Vermont Community Broadband Board and USDA for WiFi installation across facilities.
 - Collaborate with the Department to redesign staffing schedules for more efficient staffing patterns across the facility.
 - Work with DOC to advocate for streamlined and less bureaucratic disciplinary practices to ensure staff can return to work – or face accountability – faster than current operations. Would reduce the length of time staff experience stress and, for cases where RFD is involved, result in a reduction in overtime relating to backfill.
 - The current CBA lacks effective process for demotion, which can be a fair way to return an employee to a level where they were successful if struggling and not meeting expectations in new role.
 - Establish joint committees or feedback loops where the VSEA and DOC regularly review and assess the success of retention and wellness programs.
 - Collaborate with OPSC and the Department's DEI committee to examine promotions and disciplinary processes for more objectivity.

Crisis support

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Established Peer Support Team to enhance available peer resources available on-call, including deploying to a facility immediately following a critical incident.
 - Created statutory confidentiality protections for the team.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Deploy to worksites following a critical incident to provide support. Collaborate with Peer Support at the site.
 - Publicize fund for support for staff during critical events.
 - Advocate for payroll deduction option to support Correctional Peace Officers' Foundation crisis fund

Family support

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Advocated to Senator Bernie Sanders to extend free CCV credits to family members of staff.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Convene family support groups outside the workplace.
 - Create a family appreciation day series for all facilities and district offices.
 - Create a family mentorship program with mentors who reach out and check in with families during and after the Academy.

Mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship

- DOC Initiatives:
 - Created Professional Development Training Series for supervisor development.
 - Established a mentoring program for new recruits to connect with experienced staff members around the state for ongoing support and guidance.
 - Created Supporting Women in Corrections initiative, which hosts an event for recent academy female graduates to network with female leadership from the department and establish a mentorship if desired.
 - Invested in supervisory training focused on emotional intelligence and core strengths to increase resources for supervisors and mentorship to their direct reports.
- Areas for VSEA Support:
 - Collaborate with national labor organizations and workforce development groups to develop key trainings and mechanisms for staff development.
 - Invest in frontline supervisor training and development. These individuals have an outsized impact on whether employees remain with the Department.
 - Collaborate with the Department to create a mentorship program for staff in their probationary periods as well as staff of color, LGBTQ+ staff, and others who may find outsized benefit in specific outreach and support.
 - Mimic VAHSLA development programming through use of professional coach.
 - Provide financial counseling for staff and promote economic wellbeing initiatives.
 - Publicize availability of scholarship fund.
 - Create job shadowing program both within DOC and across state government to expose staff to full array of possible career paths and development opportunities.

Conclusion

The DOC-led initiatives outlined above reduced facility staff vacancies from the highwater mark of over 32% in July 2022 to 17.6% today. However, Vermont's shrinking workforce, DOC's aging infrastructure, and the national correctional workforce crisis will continue to challenge the successful recruitment and retention of correctional staff.

Given this landscape, DOC is committed to identifying additional areas for innovation and modernization as outlined in DOC's [strategic plan](#). We welcome VSEA's partnership in these efforts to support the dedicated public servants within Vermont's correctional system.