

09-18-2024

Good Morning, Everyone,

My name is Shawanda L. Hill, and I am a longtime resident of Springfield, Vermont, having moved here in 1992.

After spending some time living in New Hampshire following high school, I returned to Vermont, where I currently reside.

I have been employed at the Southern State Correctional Facility (SSCF) in Springfield, Vermont, as a Correctional Officer I since 2013, marking 11 years and two months of service.

I was invited to this meeting to advocate for critical issues facing Vermont Corrections, specifically the ongoing crisis that affects both staff and the system at large.

Despite having just completed a 12-hour shift that ended at 6 AM this morning, I didn't hesitate to participate in this meeting via conference call. It is my duty to be a voice for the many staff members who are often unseen and unheard but are in desperate need of support and change. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone for including me in this important conversation.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my insights, and I am happy to clarify any points or answer any questions as we move forward.

Key Issues:

The primary concern I wish to address is the severe staffing crisis within Vermont Corrections, particularly the challenges in recruiting and retaining frontline staff, which has resulted in excessive mandatory overtime.

Some of you may remember me from a previous meeting where I shared my testimony on similar issues.

Unfortunately, despite the passage of time, these challenges remain unresolved, which has made preparing for today's meeting quite straightforward.

The persistence of these issues allows me to refer back to my previous testimony, as the problems have only intensified.

In recent months alone, SSCF has lost nearly four dozen correctional officers.

This mirrors the staff exodus that occurred in 2021 and 2022 when many experienced employees with decades of service left the department.

Many of them resigned due to the implementation of the 2-2-3 work schedule, which the majority of staff had opposed.

These individuals loved their jobs and had every intention of staying until retirement.

However, like many current employees, they were driven out by poor working conditions, relentless overtime, insufficient compensation, a lack of support, and an inability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. These same issues continue to plague Vermont Corrections today.

I've seen group photos of recent academy classes intended to replace the staff we've lost, and it's disheartening to note that, in many cases, only one or two members from each class remain.

The core issue lies in the 12-hour shifts, which, due to chronic staff shortages, force many officers to regularly work 16-hour shifts—12 hours plus 4 hours of mandatory overtime.

Although twelve-hour schedules can offer staff more time off when facilities are adequately staffed, this is currently not the case. Instead of being beneficial, these shifts are causing complete exhaustion among staff, and many are leaving at an alarming rate. At, SSCF, 16-hour shifts have become the norm.

Many staff members do not live nearby, so when you factor in late relief coverage and commute times, their workdays often stretch to 18 hours or more.

Given that there are only 24 hours in a day, this leaves employees with little to no personal time, as 18 to 19 hours are spent working at the facility four days a week.

Additionally, we are often placed on standby during our days off and face penalties, such as being denied promotions due to incomplete core competencies, even when there is rarely an opportunity to complete the required training.

I personally attended my last training session during my vacation days, alongside two other colleagues who also gave up their personal time to fulfill their training requirements.

This is the unfortunate reality we face while trying to meet the demands placed upon us.

It's important to highlight that nearby grocery stores are offering wages of \$22 per hour, which begs the question: Why is it so difficult to recruit staff to join Vermont Corrections?

The Impact of the 2-2-3 Schedule: The 2-2-3 schedule is not working—it is contributing to the burnout and departure of staff.

Many employees have left without notice, and this reflects a stark difference between the previous workforce and the current one.

Unlike the more experienced staff who had much to lose, newer employees often don't have the same long-term commitment to the department.

This isn't to single out new staff, but rather to state the facts as we've observed them.

The working conditions are unbearable. Air conditioning, for instance, has been a topic of discussion for the past three years.

I personally advocated for and helped initiate a petition to have air conditioning installed, and although we were promised improvements, nothing has been done to date.

Both staff and incarcerated individuals have been fainting due to the heat, resulting in unnecessary hospital visits, further exacerbating staff shortages.

This has also contributed to long-term health issues for many individuals.

In fact, we recently requested an evaluation from VOSHA (Vermont Occupational Safety and Health Administration), and a few months later, VSEA shared the results with me, which included many recommendations for improvement.

However, SSCF never shared their response to that report with staff members, rendering the entire evaluation process a waste of time for all involved.

Staff and Inmate Well-Being:

The staffing shortage is severely impacting both staff and the incarcerated population. Inmates are frequently kept in their cells due to a lack of staff, and supervisors are left struggling to run shifts with minimal help.

The overwhelming feedback from my colleagues is disheartening: "I don't know how much longer I can do this job" and "They are killing us."

Staff are working out of pure exhaustion, and it's taking a toll on their personal lives, their families, and their well-being.

This crisis has been ongoing for years, and we are all asking the same question: When will it end? Enough is enough.

When you're working under these conditions, you're lucky if you even get a bathroom break due to the severe staff shortages. These working conditions are unbearable.

I ask you, how many of you would report to a job where you work 16-hour shifts consistently and can't even take a bathroom break?

Despite submitting reports detailing the extreme overtime that staff are working, we continue to wonder when will this end? There is no other departments within Vermont that requires its staff to work under these conditions. We are being treated like we are not valued as staff, and the number of staff who have left—and continue to leave—proves it.

Our workforce has dropped into nearly the 30s, and we are left questioning how we will continue to operate like this.

I would also like to share my personal story with you all.

Thank you for listening, and I appreciate your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shawanda L. Hill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S' and a distinct 'H'.

COI Shawanda L. Hill