

*f r o m   t h e*

# INSIDE

A SEANC Examination of N.C. Correctional Issues



State Employees Association of North Carolina  
2019

Every day thousands of brave men and women go to work in our prisons to protect us all from dangerous criminals. They don't deal with suspects. They deal with convicted criminals so the rest of us don't have to. **It's past time for the state to give these heroes the resources, training and manpower** to ensure that they return home safely."

- Stanley Drewery,  
Immediate Past SEANC President, speaking on the death  
of four state employees at Pasquotank Correctional  
Institution on Oct. 12, 2017.



# INTRODUCTION

On April 26, 2017, Sgt. Meggan Callahan, a correctional officer at Bertie Correctional Institution, was brutally murdered by an inmate wielding a fire extinguisher. Less than six months later, on Oct. 12, 2017, four correctional personnel — Veronica Darden, Justin Smith, Wendy Shannon and Geoffrey Howe — were murdered at Pasquotank Correctional Institution following a failed escape attempt originating in the facility's sewing plant. Eight additional personnel were injured in the attack.

At the time of Sgt. Callahan's death, Bertie Correctional was 20 percent understaffed. At the time of the escape attempt, Pasquotank Correctional was understaffed by 28 percent.

Following these horrific acts of violence, the State Employees Association of North Carolina (SEANC) met with correctional personnel from around the state. We heard repeatedly that the individuals who face these dangers on a daily basis were not being consulted on solutions.

Then-President Stanley Drewery launched the SEANC Select Committee on Prison Reform to study the issues and suggest real solutions to improve the situation. SEANC issued a call for correctional personnel to anonymously share their concerns and ideas for reform. We received hundreds of messages online and spoke with many others face-to-face at forums in every region of the state. We also conducted an online survey that received 621 responses from correctional employees.

The key issue for employees is safety. Correctional personnel want to work in a safe environment. They want to go home after their shift. They do not care who gets the blame, or the credit.

With this report, based on feedback from correctional personnel, we aim to develop commonsense reforms to mitigate potential violence. We cannot undo the tragedies that have occurred, but we can take meaningful steps to allow our correctional personnel to work in safe, supportive environments, and provide a space to make their concerns known, heard, and ultimately, addressed.

We are offering real solutions as our members see them — the truth about the state of our prisons. We have broken down our suggestions into three categories — what the legislature must do this session, what the administration must do in the next few months, and what we as employees can do to help our own situation.

Our prisons are unsafe, and our prison personnel and taxpayers deserve much better. We must tackle these problems head-on, so correctional personnel families like the Callahans, the Dardens, the Smiths, the Shannons and the Howes do not continue to suffer and live in fear.



Jimmy Davis  
President  
State Employees Association of North Carolina



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Legislature



### Employee Voices

*"Inmates are in control. Officers are not safe. They are stressed out, overworked, underpaid, and have never been appreciated enough for what they have to endure inside these prisons."*

*"How can we possibly feel secure when our back up is stuck in a control room or block because the unit only has two officers?"*

### Address understaffing

Understaffing is the major contributing factor to the five prison deaths in 2017 as well as ongoing violence in our prisons.. There are not enough boots on the ground to keep the peace in our facilities. An average vacancy rate of 25 percent means that one-in-four correctional officer positions are unfilled. That rate is much higher at more dangerous facilities like Pasquotank, Lanesboro and Bertie.

This fact is not lost on the correctional personnel. In our survey, 85 percent of Department of Public Safety (DPS) employees said that understaffing is the top problem facing our prisons. We heard countless horror stories from officers about being in charge of hundreds of inmates all alone with only a can of pepper spray for self-defense. The devastating reality is that most of our facilities are ripe for violence. Inmates know they can overpower the staff at any time they choose.

Understaffed prisons lead to overworked staff. Officers work 16- or 20-hour shifts, only to turn around and be called in on their days off. Long shifts and overtime can result in officers neglecting personal wellness and family relationships.

"Officers come to work never knowing when they are going home 12 hours, 16 hours or 20 hours later. We never know," said one officer.

Understaffing can result in key tasks being rushed or missed. When corners are cut, safety is compromised. Inmates get away with violations that otherwise would not be tolerated. Officers patrol housing wings with 110 inmates by themselves. When they see a problem, they are vastly outnumbered and have more critical goals, like staying alive.

Officers are paid so little, many of them have to work a second job just to survive. The 2017 average correctional salary in North Carolina was \$36,990 while the national average was \$47,600. This means that N.C. correctional personnel make **22 percent less than the national average.**\*

# 97%

*Surveyed DPS employees who said understaffing has a direct impact on safety at their prison*

\*U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Legislature

The starting salary for an officer at a minimum-security prison is \$33,130. A medium-security officer starts at \$34,220, and a close-custody officer starts at \$36,598.

Even in rural areas, where many of our prisons are located, there are better-paying jobs that are far less dangerous. As one superintendent put it, "I lost a co-worker the other day who said he was offered more money to work as an assistant manager at his other job at Burger King," a position with a starting pay of more than \$42,000 annually.



**Recommendation:** The legislature must make a considerable investment in correctional officer salaries to recruit new officers and keep the ones we have. The state should increase wages for all custody levels to the national average at least, an increase of \$8,000 per position annually.

### Restore the Department of Corrections

As one of his first orders of business, Gov. Pat McCrory advocated for the creation of the Department of Public Safety by combining the Department of Corrections, Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety. This created a massive department with more than 35,000 employees. The tasks, responsibilities and goals of the entities combined under the DPS umbrella are broad and complex.

Many employees are concerned that the issues facing correctional personnel have taken a back seat to other priorities in DPS since the merger. Employees feel disconnected from department leaders in Raleigh. The responsibilities of the department are so diverse that leaders are asked to focus on topics as wide-ranging as school shootings, disaster management and highway safety. When the department's responsibilities are so varied, it is impossible to keep prison safety at forefront of their priorities.

**Recommendation:** Employees believe that separating Adult Correction into its own department once again would allow leadership to make corrections its main priority. Resources allocated by the General Assembly for corrections could then be used for corrections only.

### Employee Voices

*"The staff is coming in and required to work many hours a month of overtime for so little pay. They walk through the doors every day and don't know if they will be taken out in a body bag. Just think about that. Why would you want to risk your life for so little money when there are jobs that pay better and are nowhere near as dangerous? I have been here 20 years, and if I didn't have so much time invested, I would leave."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Legislature



### Employee Voices

*"We are losing officers to local sheriff's departments at an alarming rate, and now we are forced to do more overtime! Something has to give!"*

*"Give us law enforcement officer status and benefits. Raise the pay in order to recruit more staff and more staff equals more coverage."*

*"Officers get no respect from their bosses or law enforcement. The state doesn't even issue us a badge."*

### Provide law enforcement benefits for certified correctional personnel

Correctional personnel have the most dangerous law enforcement jobs in North Carolina. Police officers in our most dangerous cities only spend a short amount of time with a suspect, and are armed with guns, body armor, TASERs and, most importantly, backup. Correctional personnel work every day for their entire 12-hour shift with convicted criminals — not just suspects — often with little more than a can of pepper spray to defend themselves.

And yet, North Carolina does not recognize these brave men and women as law enforcement officers, meaning they are not eligible for certain benefits police officers and troopers receive.

Legislators are to be commended for doubling the death benefit paid to families of correctional officers killed in the line of duty to \$100,000 as part of the 2018 state budget. That provision was made retroactive to 2017 to double the benefit paid to the five officers and staff killed that year. More needs to be done.

Recognizing correctional officers as law enforcement would help in recruiting new officers and retaining quality personnel.

**Recommendation:** The legislature should give correctional personnel the same benefits as law enforcement officers:

- Retirement eligibility at age 55 (instead of 65) with five years of service, or early retirement eligibility at 50 with 15 years of service (instead of 20).
- An amount paid by the agency to bridge an employee to age 62, if they retire before that age. State Highway Patrol receives a percent of their salary for this purpose.

# 80%

*DPS employees who say they are not respected and recognized as an important branch of law enforcement*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Legislature

### Increased penalties for assault on personnel

Four of the five inmates involved in the five deaths of prison personnel last year were serving long-term sentences. They had little to lose by attacking an officer.

The legislature addressed parts of this concern in the 2018 session when it passed a law stiffening the punishments for inmates who expose themselves and/or throw bodily fluids at an officer. More can be done, though.

Some officers suggested that murdering an officer should come with a mandatory death penalty sentence.

**Recommendation:** The legislature should implement mandatory minimum sentencing for assaults on corrections staff.

### Insist that district attorneys prosecute inmates who attack officers

Personnel consistently complained that district attorneys in their area are reluctant to prosecute inmates for attacks on personnel. District attorneys contend that the inmates are already behind bars, and their offenses will only clog the court calendar.

**Recommendation:** The legislature, the governor and the attorney general should pressure district attorneys to prosecute inmates who do wrong, regardless of their current sentence.

# 98%

*DPS employees who stated that the courts must do a better job of holding inmates accountable*



### Employee Voices

*"As a female officer, I am constantly harassed, disrespected, and placed in dangerous situations, such as being on the yard, with little back up and a can of OC spray. I am not encouraged to carry the baton, because it displays aggression."*

*"Many write-ups get trashed and inmates now call our bluff. It is the secret society of don't let the powers that be know how bad it is."*

### A Deadly Profession

- A correctional officer (CO) will be assaulted **at least twice** in a 20-year career.<sup>1</sup>
- On average, a CO **will live 18 months** after retirement.<sup>2</sup>
- A CO's **58th birthday**, on average, is their last.<sup>3</sup>
- COs have a **39% higher suicide rate** than any other occupation.<sup>4</sup>
- COs have the **second highest mortality rate** of any occupation.<sup>5</sup>

1 Corrections Yearbook 2000, 2002 Criminal Justice Institute; U.S. Department of Justice

2 Maine Department of Public Safety 3 New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report. (2009)

4 U.S. Department of Justice. (2013)

5 Maine Department of Public Safety

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Department/Administration



### Employee Voices

*"Firm, fair and consistent is a real thing. It is a must. Structure and routine are necessary."*

*"Make rules that to move up the ladder, you have to have working experience, not just a college degree. To be a unit manager, you need to have been a sergeant, then lieutenant, then captain. To be an administrator, you need to have started at the bottom and worked your way to the top."*

### Revise the formula for staffing needs

The department can play a pivotal role in combatting the understaffing problem. Officers emphasized the need for the department to change the way it sets the number of officers needed at each prisons.

There should be no cookie-cutter approach to staffing a prison. Rather than focusing on the size of the facility, a multitude of factors should be considered. Two prisons may hold the same amount of inmates at the same custody level, but their staffing needs could be much different. For example, if a prison is not equipped to handle medical emergencies, the department should add extra officers to its allotment to account for when officers transport inmates to other facilities or to court dates.

**Recommendation:** The department should take into account the unique needs at each prison when requesting and setting positions.

# 91%

*DPS employees who believe there should be higher mandatory staffing levels at their facility*

### Implement streamlined, consistent policies

This topic is wide-ranging. Several employees aired concerns over leave policies. While overtime is not ideal, we recognize that it is necessary. Still, it is crucial for workers to be able to schedule time off to prevent burnout.

Other suggestions include the implementation of video visits to cut down on contraband, re-examining the Drug/Alcohol Recovery Treatment (DART) and NCVIP (employee evaluation process) programs and completing exit interviews with personnel to find needs that must be addressed.

Making Prison Emergency Response Team (PERT) positions permanent was also a popular idea. Others suggested that officers in PERT teams not be assigned to one prison.

**Recommendation:** The department must rethink everything from employee evaluations to disciplinary policies for inmates.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Department/Administration

### Inform officers of mental health resources

Ninety percent of respondents on our survey said that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a serious issue with staff.

DPS should educate all employees on how to access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and encourage its usage. The department should provide email and written correspondence to employees on a frequent basis so all employees are aware of services they can access for mental health support.

Critical Incident Response teams provide mental health services to an individual shortly after a traumatic experience. These teams must be available to any correctional facility when a critical incident occurs to support the immediate needs of all staff involved, directly and indirectly. Services must be available to staff, both immediately following a critical incident, but also for follow-up services for staff requesting support.

**Recommendation:** The department should do a better job of informing employees of the resources available to them to deal with stress.

### Re-evaluate the hiring process

Officers argue that the current regional hiring practices do not work. Often, new hires are sent to prisons that are in their "region" but far from their home, while a prison near where they live has vacancies. The officer is told to put in for a transfer, only to find out that the transfer will take up to two years. Rather than commuting four hours a day, the new hire will quit.

**Recommendation:** The department would be better served by hiring at each facility, or making a concerted effort to place new hires close to their homes. The hiring process needs to go back to the unit level to allow recruitment from local communities.

# 95%

*DPS employees who think that agency-wide mental health awareness and stress management training is needed*



#### Employee Voices

*"The hiring process is a joke. This process needs to be looked at very strongly. The process at times is just trying to put a body in a vacancy, which is not a good practice when the new employee is more than likely going to fail for one reason or another."*

*"Staff on every unit lacks the basic necessary equipment to properly and effectively perform our job."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Department/Administration



### Employee Voices

*"I feel that the mentor program should be brought back so that new hires will be trained by a skilled officer with much more experience. Allow them to work closely with the mentor before they go to basic training to be sure this is the job for them before the state wastes money sending them to training only for them to quit."*

*"We should spend more than four hours a year on learning to defend ourselves."*

### Invest in facilities and updated equipment

Personnel stress the need for better equipment — radios that actually work, for example — and proper training for its use and maintenance. Officers need radios with ear piece attachments to keep conversations private from inmates.

One officer said that inmates had figured out a way to listen to the officers' radio conversations through an FM radio. Another said the angle on security cameras do not clearly show places where inmates could assault officers.

Personnel also suggest gloves, stab-proof clothing, batons and body cameras as items that should be standard issue for each correctional officer regardless of custody level.

Many facilities are in need of general improvements. Some officers at older prisons report that dorms have not been updated since the 1930s, are filthy and have horrible lighting. This leads to poor visibility, making it difficult to properly supervise inmates.

### Offer comprehensive training

Before her death, Sgt. Meggan Callahan told to her mother that some of her co-workers had only recently been hired and had not received the proper training to back her up. This is a common fear that officers have throughout the prison system.

With prisons woefully understaffed, the department needs to put new officers on the floor as soon as possible. Without adequate training, the new hires are a danger to themselves and other personnel.

Veterans doubted that they can learn enough to survive in the limited amount of allotted training hours per year. Some suggest the reinstatement of mentorship and career readiness programs. Mandatory diversity, leadership, emergency and de-escalating conflict trainings were also recommended.

**Recommendation:** There should be basic policies that prohibit new hires from work until they are sufficiently trained.

# 92%

*DPS employees who agree that working conditions are a contributing factor to low retention rates*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Employees

### Take pride in the profession

Although they also put their lives on the line daily, correctional officers are not given the same respect as other law enforcement officers. Correctional officers are often cast in a bad light due to stories of corruption, even though those few bad apples are not indicative of the majority of DPS employees.

Rank-and-file personnel are just as dismayed as management by the high absentee rate at prisons. We heard tales of officers who were left alone with more than a hundred inmates on more than one occasion because others called in sick.

As one officer said, "If a person isn't going to show up, fire them. We'd rather try to fill that position than have someone who is unreliable in it."

Officers get burned out from too much mandatory overtime because their co-workers call in sick or otherwise miss work. This is something that should be addressed both at the time of hiring and with disciplinary measures.

**Recommendation:** Officers should commit to rooting out corruption and report those coworkers who are up to no good and who don't show up for work.

### Be loyal to each other

Working in dangerous, high-stress conditions can sometimes bring out the worst in people. There is a natural tendency to protect yourself and that does not help build morale. Officers must have each other's backs when danger arises.

**Recommendation:** The department and the employees need to work together to improve morale and teamwork at the prisons through team building exercises, retreats and rewards.

### Take care of equipment

If the department invests in better equipment, the burden will be on the employees to make sure that equipment is maintained. Radios and other technology require special care, for which employees should receive proper training.

**Recommendation:** Employees must responsibly care for new equipment and upgrades at facilities.



#### Employee Voices

*"It bothers me when staff fail to do their jobs in a professional and effective manner. There has yet to be a sound structure DPS can use as a foundation. When an officer commits a serious breach of security and is still allowed to retain employment, it means they don't have to worry about being accountable."*

*"Staff has been abusing leave, causing excessive overtime. This makes morale drop even more because good officers are having to cover bad officers."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for the Employees



### Employee Voices

*"We do not have enough staff to properly operate our unit any more. Officers are stressed out. Twelve hours is too long to have to deal with inmates. Families of staff are stressed. Inmates are taking control. Officers have to get relief. Inmates do not abide by rules anymore and there's not enough staff to effectively get rules enforced."*

### Engage in positive self-care

Working in our prisons is one of the most stressful jobs you can have in this state. Officers are exposed to violence on a constant basis, and are under direct threat during most of their shifts. Nine out of ten DPS employees we surveyed said that PTSD is a major problem among officers and staff.

We heard heartbreaking stories of addiction, domestic violence and even suicide from employees. Correctional officers have one of the highest instance of suicide of any profession in the country.

Here are some techniques officers can practice to cope effectively with the stresses of the job:

- **Develop support from colleagues.** The people you work with daily experience many of the same things you do, and they may be dealing with the same feelings.
- **Develop quality relationships with friends and family outside of work.** Find healthy hobbies, so you are better able to leave work at work. It is important to not talk and think about work all the time. Having supportive friends will help relieve stress.
- **Live a balanced life.** Get enough sleep. Eat healthy. Drink lots of water. Exercise when you can, even if it's just taking a walk. These make a critical difference in the way we feel, both physically and mentally.
- **Get tune-ups as needed.** Visit doctor, dentist and other medical providers.
- **Avoid addictions.** Get confidential support for addictive behavior such as over-eating, tobacco use, narcotics, alcohol, gambling, over-spending, and many others.
- **Seek professional therapy if work and life issues are "piling up."** Call the number for mental health services on the back of the State Health Plan card, or call the Employee Assistance Program at 888-298-3907 or 704-717-5295.

# 90%

*DPS employees who stated that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a serious issue facing correctional staff*

# SUMMARY

## LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Address understaffing**

Invest in correctional officer salaries to recruit new officers and retain veteran officers.

### **Restore the Department of Corrections**

Enable leadership to prioritize Adult Correction.

### **Provide law enforcement benefits for certified correctional personnel**

### **Increase penalties for assault on personnel**

Implement mandatory minimum sentencing for assaults on corrections staff.

### **Insist that district attorneys prosecute inmates who attack officers**

The legislature, the governor and the attorney general should pressure district attorneys to prosecute inmates who attack officers.

## DEPARTMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Revise the formula for staffing needs**

Consider the unique needs at each prison.

### **Implement streamlined, consistent policies**

Rethink everything from employee evaluations to disciplinary policies.

### **Inform officers of mental health resources**

Better inform employees of the resources available to them to deal with stress.

### **Re-evaluate the hiring process**

Return hiring to each facility or make an effort to place new hires closer to home.

### **Invest in facilities and updated equipment**

### **Offer comprehensive training**

Prohibit new hires from work until they are sufficiently trained. Establish mentoring and ongoing training programs for veterans.

## EMPLOYEE RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Take pride in the profession**

Commit to rooting out corruption.

### **Be loyal to each other**

Work with department to improve morale and teamwork at the prisons.

### **Take care of equipment**

Maintain equipment and ensure it works properly.

### **Engage in positive self-care**

Practice techniques to alleviate stress.

# WHO ARE WE?

## SEANC Select Committee on Prison Reform

*More than 350 years of collective experience working in North Carolina corrections*

**Deborah Harney,  
Chairwoman**

**District 22, Cameron**

A 20-year veteran who works at Harnett Correctional Institution.

**Joe Brown**

**District 4, Kings Mountain**

Retired from Avery/Mitchell Correctional Institution with 31 years of service.

**Jacquelyn Chatman**

**District 20, Red Springs**

A 30-year veteran who works at Southern Coastal Training Center.

**George Currie**

**District 26, Raleigh**

Retired as DPS Central Regional Director with 40 years of service.

**Cynthia Hester**

**District 61, Elizabethtown**

Retired from Bladen Correctional Institution with 39.5 years of service.

**James Langston**

**District 44, Raleigh**

Retired from Wake Correctional Institution with 31 years of service.

**Patricia Moore**

**District 67, New Bern**

Retired from Pamlico Correctional Institution with 10 years of service.

**Wendell Powell**

**District 41, Fayetteville**

A 15-year veteran who works at Polk Correctional Institution.

**James Pursley**

**District 5, Forest City**

An 8-year veteran who works at Rutherford Correctional Institution.

**Hubert Ray**

**District 22, Fayetteville**

Retired from Harnett Correctional Institution with 22 years of service.

**Rita Woods**

**District 68, Creswell**

Retired from Tyrell Prison Work Farm with 27.5 years of service.

**Jimmy Davis,**

**President**

**District 4, Forest City**

Retired from DPS Probation and Parole with 29.75 years of service.

**Stanley Drewery,**

**Immediate Past President**

**District 67, Grifton**

Retired from the OSDT Training Center with 30 years of service.

**Wayne Fish,**

**Past President**

**District 2, Maggie Valley**

A 20.5-year veteran who works at Craggy Correctional Institution.

*SEANC would like to extend our appreciation to the North Carolina Department of Public Safety and to its leadership team for supporting and encouraging staff members to participate in our study.*





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