

Overtime in Wisconsin prisons tops \$42 million as state wrestles with worker shortage

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MADISON - Taxpayers spent more than \$42 million on overtime for prison workers last year largely because of a long-standing shortage of correctional officers that has worsened in recent years. The situation shows no sign of improvement, despite recent pay raises and attempts by the Department of Corrections to recruit and retain more workers.

As of last month, 920 jobs at state prisons — 12.5% — were vacant, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

The problem was most acute at Waupun Correctional Institution and Redgranite Correctional Institution, where more than 20% of the jobs were open. At four other prisons more than 17% of the jobs were open.

The worker shortage has prompted officials to hand out bonuses in the hope of retaining workers and led at least one prison to limit when its visiting room is open. It has also resulted in more instances of workers being told they have to keep working just as they are supposed to be wrapping up their shifts. "It's very stressful, is what it is," said Paul Mertz, an officer at the Redgranite prison. "You never know if you're going home at the end of the day."

Last year, the Department of Corrections paid its workers \$42.4 million in overtime, state payroll data show. That's up 1.3% from the year before — a much smaller increase than other recent years. Other recent years have seen double-digit increases. During Gov. Scott Walker's time leading the state, the cost of overtime at the Department of Corrections has gone up 31%, more than twice the rate of inflation. Overtime at the department cost \$32.2 million in 2010, the year before Walker took office.

Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Middleton, said the problem was caused by Act 10, the 2011 law championed by Walker that all but eliminated collective bargaining for correctional officers — and most other employees — and required them to pay more for their benefits.

Workers have not wanted to take or stay in prison jobs when the pay is low and they can't negotiate over safety conditions, he said. "The whole idea of Act 10 worked as far as Walker was concerned because it busted unions, but it's costing taxpayers more in the long run because you can't hire workers," Erpenbach said.

Department of Corrections spokesman Tristan Cook noted prisons around the country are having trouble filling jobs, including in Arkansas, where two prisons were temporarily shut down in March because of staffing shortages. Cook said Wisconsin's record-low unemployment rate is making it difficult to fill prison jobs and said the state faced a similar challenge from 2001 to 2004 for the same reason. "With the improving economy after 2011, leading to historically low unemployment rates today, we are experiencing many of the same issues as private-sector employers in recruiting workers," Cook said in a statement.

The Department of Corrections is trying to combat the problem with raises and incentives. New officers are getting \$2,000 bonuses at Lincoln Hills School for Boys and the Waupun prison, with half paid soon after they take the job and half paid after a year. In addition, officers and sergeants at those two facilities and Green Bay Correctional Institution are getting an extra \$1 per hour in pay until June 2019. Officers at all prisons got an 80-cent-per-hour pay bump in 2016 and their starting wages, now \$16 an hour, are set to increase to \$16.65 an hour by January. In all, that will amount to a 9.5% increase in starting wages since 2016.

After two years on the job, officers will make \$18.70 an hour under the Department of Corrections' plans. Officers make one-and-a-half times their regular pay when they work more than 40 hours a week. Jodi Grenko, an officer at Dodge Correctional Institution, said the pay raises aren't enough after workers saw a big drop in their total compensation with Act 10. More troubling, she said, is that employees can no longer negotiate with their bosses about safety conditions. "When you feel you don't have any say in your own safety in your job, it's disheartening to say the least," she said.

The worker shortage is most severe at the Redgranite prison, where 64 of 293 jobs — 21.8% — were vacant in April. Twenty-nine of those jobs, or nearly 10%, had been open for more than six months, according to the fiscal bureau. The library and visiting room at that prison are closed on some days and the inmates lost their access to the weight room more than a month ago. Some fear those actions will rile up frustrated inmates, making the prison more dangerous for workers. Mertz, the officer at Redgranite, said he is so concerned about the worker shortage that he believes the state should develop a plan to bring in the National Guard if necessary. "The newer workers are burning out so fast they start to quit," Mertz said.

Department of Corrections officials do not believe the National Guard would be needed at the prison, said Cook, the agency spokesman. The Redgranite prison will be training a new class of recruits in July to help fill jobs there, he said. The worker shortage was nearly as bad last month at the Waupun prison, where 92 of 441 jobs, or nearly 21%, were open. More than 17% of the jobs were also open at Lincoln Hills and Columbia, Dodge and Green Bay correctional institutions. Those figures account for jobs that are open, but they do not account for positions that are effectively vacant because of workers who are on medical leave.