



Executive director's update

By Bryan Collier



Recruiting qualified applicants and retaining experienced staff for all positions is vital to the success of the agency; every employee helps the TDCJ fulfill our vital mission of providing public safety, promoting positive change in offender behavior, reintegrating offenders into society and assisting victims of crime. However, in this update I want to focus specifically on the recruitment and retention of correctional officers (COs), which is one of our top priorities and biggest challenges.

Historically, the challenge has been greatest when the Texas economy is growing and unemployment is low. With the state's unemployment rate falling to its lowest level in four decades, 2017 was no exception; from March through November, vacant correctional officer positions increased from 2,156 to 3,688. In FY 2017, the overall correctional officer turnover rate was 28.2 percent, the highest in recent memory.

Operating safe and secure correctional facilities despite the increasing number of CO vacancies requires a combination of overtime and prioritization based upon basic security requirements. As the number of correctional employees decreases at a facility, critical posts are filled using overtime and, if necessary, reducing other operational programs like community service projects, agriculture field force squads, volunteer programs, craft

shops and offender recreation. Currently, FY 2018 overtime expenditures are projected to exceed \$75 million.

While the use of overtime provides many staff with additional income, it also imposes additional demands and burdens upon those employees. Consequently, overtime alone should not be relied upon as a long term strategy and the agency employs a number of other strategies to address CO staffing shortages, to include:

- recruitment bonuses for newly hired correctional officers on units that have been critically understaffed. Effective June 16, 2017 the correctional officer recruitment bonus was increased from \$2,000 to \$4,000. As of October 1, 2017 there are 25 units providing the recruitment bonus.
- aggressive statewide recruiting efforts through hiring seminars, job fairs, newspapers, magazines, mass mail outs and websites, to include the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, focused on geographic areas with the greatest staffing needs.
- pre-service training academy schedules that begin every two weeks, at every training location, and special training academies in areas with staffing shortages.
- management training programs that enhance how supervisors relate, lead and develop their employees, as well as Core Values and diversity training programs to help promote positive interactions between supervisors and their staff.

Most recently, the agency increased the salary for newly hired correctional officers by 12 percent, to \$36,238. Historically, the highest loss of correctional officers has occurred within the first year of service, and this remains true. The overall correctional officer turnover rate was 28.2 percent in FY 2017, but the turnover rate for correctional officers in their first year was approximately 42 percent. Reducing turnover in the first year of service could have a very significant impact on correctional officer vacancies.

Reducing the number of correctional officer vacancies remains one of the TDCJ's highest priorities during 2018. We will continue to explore additional means by which to recruit additional men and women into the correctional officer ranks, and more importantly, to increase retention of trained and experienced officers.

As always, I appreciate the hard work, dedication and public service of all TDCJ employees. Thank you. ▲