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Agency News

Improved CO recruiting, retention leaves fewer vacancies

At the February meeting of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice in Austin, TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston described the agency's correctional officer staffing challenge as "one of the most persistent operational challenges that we've dealt with during the course of the last several years." He went on to credit the employees of the agency's Correctional Institutions Division (CID), saying, "Staff on our units, our wardens and their teams onsite, as well as (CID Director) Bill Stephens and his team, have done a tremendous job working overtime as needed, as well as managing the workload and staff schedules to make certain our units are functioning effectively, even units that are substantially short staffed."

Livingston also informed the board of recent progress regarding correctional officer staffing. The number of CO vacancies as of April 2015 stood at 3,703. By the end of January 2016, vacancies had dropped to 2,748, which equates to slightly more than a 25 percent decrease.

Director Livingston attributed the improved numbers to several factors, including approval of a pay raise for front line correc-

tional and parole staff by state policymakers, legislative action to help ensure the stability of the state employee pension system, and the impact of falling prices on the oil industry. Livingston credited agency staff for their hard work, adding, "We have engaged in very extensive and far-reaching recruitment and retention activities, to include job fairs, a variety of new advertising media and seminars. I'm very proud of our Human Resources staff partnering with the Correctional Institutions Division to achieve the best possible results."

Subsequent to the board meeting, Human Resources Director Patty Garcia and Correctional Institutions Division Director Bill Stephens discussed correctional officer recruitment and retention. They cited the \$4,000 recruitment bonuses offered to qualified officers who report to one of the bonus-eligible units and sign a contract agreeing to work at the understaffed unit for a minimum of one year. The recruiting bonus program is available to full-time correctional officers who are newly hired and graduate from the academy;



CO training academy graduates recite the Correctional Professional's Oath during a graduation ceremony held at the Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville.

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TDCJ retirees who rehired as full-time correctional officers after 90 calendar days of retirement from TDCJ; or former TDCJ employees rehired as full-time correctional officers after one year of separation from TDCJ.

Staffing rates can also be affected by a lack of available correctional officer housing, and the agency has worked with several local communities to increase affordable housing options. The agency has made low cost travel trailer space rentals available, and additional dormitory style housing has been made available for correctional officers in the Beeville area.

In addition to the agency's six regional training academies there are 25 unit-based training sites, 13 of which offer a combination of both pre-service and in-service training, to help minimize CO travel demands. Special and accelerated pre-service classes have also contributed to the recruiting efforts.

To further improve officer performance and retention, the Correctional Institutions Division's Department of Correctional Training and Staff Development continues to enhance correctional officer training. Most recently, CID increased Phase I pre-service training from 216 to 240 hours to incorporate additional training regarding mentally ill offenders and crisis intervention. To ensure that the issues and concerns of new officers and newly promoted first line security supervisors are understood and addressed, interviews are conducted 90 days after they complete their on-the-job training. Questions cover the agency's hiring, training and mentoring process, and other work conditions. After review, the unit warden then meets individually with each new officer to answer their questions.

"TDCJ was already aggressively recruiting new correctional officers when the 84th Legislature approved a 10.5 percent pay raise for

all uniformed staff," said Patty Garcia, TDCJ's Human Resources Director. "With the assistance of the governor and the legislature, the agency's correctional officer staffing rate has steadily increased since last spring."

Correctional Institutions Division Director Bill Stephens added, "Few people have a more difficult job than the officers who work in correctional facilities. The emotional and physical demands of the prison work environment make recruitment and retention of the best criminal justice professionals a difficult, but critical step toward achieving the agency's mission. We have positive momentum going in regards to recruiting and retaining staff. It is anticipated that, as we continue to collaborate with all agency partners, the vacancies will continue to decrease. I appreciate the efforts of everyone involved." ●