

NC Prison Safety and Employee Wellness Plan

FY 2019 – 2020



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BACKGROUND

North Carolina prisons face critical staffing challenges including recruitment, retention and absenteeism. As of Aug. 27, 2019, the vacancy rate for correctional officers is an estimated 19.88% across the state's 55 prisons and two Confinement in Response to Violation (CRV) centers. The vacancy rate for correctional officers (CO) has steadily risen in recent years. While vacancies exist across the spectrum of positions needed to run and manage facilities, they are most prevalent for correctional officers and nurses. As a result, staff are forced to work mandatory overtime shifts to support and maintain basic security and safety operations.

This has led to significant increases in overtime costs, as well as employee burn-out and morale and wellness issues. Some facility leaders report that burn-out combined with the high-vacancy rates at some facilities has increased the safety and security concerns.

Improvements to staff recruitment as well as a streamlined hiring and interview process, have been successful in bringing on new staff. But attrition has resulted in a slow progression toward providing immediate and necessary staff relief.

This crisis has prompted Prisons Administration to carefully study the situation and take immediate measures to counteract this alarming trend. First, as a precautionary measure to ensure safety and security at some facilities, 1279 facility beds have been taken offline to reduce the capacity of offenders held in specified prison locations. However, limiting the number of beds has created a jail backlog of convicted offenders awaiting processing into the state's prisons. Currently, the Department of Public Safety pays a per diem rate of \$40 per day for offenders to be housed at jails throughout the state. As of September 9, 2019, there were 903 offenders on the jail backlog.

To counteract the growing vacancy rate and relieve staffing issues at some facilities, Prisons Administration researched a number of options for reducing the officer-to-offender ratio at high-vacancy facilities in the most impacted regions and managing the offender population. After carefully considering those options, the Department of Public Safety has adopted this Prison Safety and Employee Wellness Plan to be executed in several phases. The Plan involves 1) re-missioning some facilities to better utilize facility space and manage certain offender populations, and 2) suspending operations at several facilities. Suspending operations at prisons is intended to identify staff for reassignment to short-handed facilities within reasonable driving distances. Regions with several prisons in close proximity and high vacancy rates were examined. Criteria for suspending operations at a prison included proximity to high-need facilities, operational budgets, the estimated cost of maintenance and repair work needed, and the employees' residential locations in relation to nearby prisons.

Throughout this process, DPS has, and will continue to communicate at each phase with employees, key legislators, stakeholders and others regarding our plans.

PROPOSAL

As noted, this Plan includes several phases, some of which are already underway or complete.

Phase I

Step 1-- Robeson CRV

On June 24, 2019, operations at the Robeson Confinement in Response to Violation (CRV) Center were temporarily suspended. As a result, 127 offenders were relocated to Morrison Correctional Institution and the CRV staff were reassigned to several nearby facilities suffering staff shortages. Reassignments were made with the intention of limiting staff commute time and minimizing disruption to employees' personal lives. Several facilities were immediately positively impacted by the addition of CRV staff. Notably, Columbus Correctional Institution, which was experiencing a 24% correctional officer vacancy rate at the time, received 24 officers from Robeson CRV. This redistribution of manpower immediately reduced the

correctional officer vacancy rate at Columbus CI from 24% (154 total CO positions and 37 vacancies) to 8% (154 total CO positions, 13 vacancies). Twelve employees were transferred to Morrison CI, reducing its CO vacancy rate from 26% to 21%. Finally, five Robeson CRV staff transferred to Harnett CI and one officer was reassigned to Tabor CI.

This suspension is intended to be temporary as the offenders should be returned to a CRV setting as soon as practicable. Therefore, Robeson CRV is the focus of further action under Phase V of this Safety Plan.

Step 2—Lanesboro/Anson Correctional

After months of preparation, on July 31, 2019, Lanesboro Correctional Institution in Anson County, formerly a close custody male facility, was officially converted to a female facility for medium and close custody offenders and was renamed Anson Correctional Institution.¹ As a close custody facility for men, Lanesboro had a high Security Risk Group (SRG) population and a high level of gang violence including assaults on staff. Re-missioning Lanesboro achieved the goal of breaking up a more violent, close custody male population and putting them in smaller facilities with higher staff-to-offender ratios. Specifically, in the spring of 2019, Southern Correctional Institution in Montgomery County and Eastern Correctional Institution in Greene County, both of which housed female offenders, were re-missioned to become male, close custody facilities. These facilities absorbed most of the male close custody offenders from Lanesboro. The women from Southern and Eastern primarily shifted to the newly re-missioned, Anson Correctional. The Southern CI minimum unit continues to house male offenders on property outside the primary facility.

The remaining female offenders at Neuse CI (located outside of Goldsboro in Wayne County) were recently transferred, to Anson CI to complete the re-missioning project of converting Lanesboro CI from a male facility to a female facility as described in Phase I.

Operating the 1000 bed Anson Correctional as a female facility will also allow DPS to reduce the number of female offenders at N.C. Correctional Institution for Women (NCCIW) in Raleigh, which has consistently operated above capacity. Once some offenders are moved from NCCIW to Anson, this will alleviate some safety issues for staff and offenders, and will reduce the additional stress on NCCIW's infrastructure.

Prisons is currently working to reduce the vacancy rates for staff at several facilities in the south central and eastern regions of North Carolina. The target is to improve staffing rates at facilities currently suffering from correctional officer vacancy rates in excess of 20%. Staff availability will be generated by suspending operations at Hoke CI, (Hoke County), Odom CI (Northampton County) and Tyrrell Prison Work Farm (PWF), (Tyrrell County). In addition, Prisons will re-mission Hyde CI from a male medium/minimum custody facility to a male minimum only custody facility to reduce the number of correctional staff needed to operate the coastal facility. The plan is further explained in the steps below.

Phase II

- Suspend operations at Hoke CI, a minimum custody facility. Reassign approximately 70 Hoke CI staff to the following facilities based on commuting distance within 50 miles (maximum range) of an employee's current residence: Southern CI, Anson CI, Sampson CI, Morrison CI, Columbus CI, Harnett CI and Tabor CI. Designate Anson CI's minimum custody unit as the South Central region's reentry facility. Transfer minimum custody offenders to custody facilities throughout the state. See attached map.
- Complete the necessary modifications to remission Neuse CI from a female custody facility to a male custody facility.

¹ The Anson minimum unit (formerly the Brown Creek unit), located adjacent to the main facility, continues to house male inmates.

Phase III

- Suspend operations at Tyrrell PWF. Redistribute staff to Pasquotank CI, Bertie CI and Hyde CI. Additional staff will then be used to bring 193 close custody beds online at Pasquotank CI and 252 medium custody beds at Bertie CI. Transfer offenders to minimum custody facilities with vacant minimum custody beds throughout the state.
- Re-mission Hyde CI from a male medium/minimum custody prison to house only male minimum custody offenders. Reduce its standard operating capacity to approximately 600 offenders. Transfer all medium custody offenders from Hyde CI to Neuse CI and Bertie CI's newly-opened 252 medium custody beds. Hyde CI then receives approximately 600 minimum custody offenders from around the state.

Phase IV

- Suspend operations at Odom CI. Reassign Odom CI staff to the following facilities based on commute distance within 50 miles of an employee's current residence: Pasquotank CI, Warren CI, Caledonia CI, Nash CI.

Phase V

- Initiate research and enter into contract negotiations regarding a public-private partnership to restart operations at Robeson CRV.

PROJECTED COMMUNITY IMPACT

The transfer of staff and offenders from prisons is expected to have a minimal impact on the local economies. Prior to suspending operations at individual facilities, Prisons' officials will communicate with community stakeholders about the plans for their respective facilities and the loss of any offenders' labor services or work release employees where applicable. Facility staff will assist in finding possible alternative sources of offender labor -- where available -- to plan for the continuity of services and prevent any loss of revenue to the community.

BENEFITS

Going beyond the obvious benefits of staff safety and cutting down on correctional officer vacancies, this plan's other potential benefits to Prisons and the community include:

- Lowering overtime costs. In the 2018-2019 fiscal year, DPS spent \$61,496,102.47 in CO overtime costs due to staff shortages. The potential overtime funds could be diverted to other Prisons areas in need of funds such as health services.
- No employees who are transferred will see a reduction in salaries. In all cases, correctional officers who move to a higher custody level will see a raise in salary to a higher custody level pay scale.
- Employee morale will improve due to more staff in the prisons.
- More programming could be provided to offenders with an increase in staffing.
- Employees will be able to attend much needed annual training and supervisory training.

The suspension of operations and redistribution of staff from Hoke CI, Odom CI and Tyrrell CI, along with the re-missioning of Hyde CI, is projected to increase the safety and security of several prisons. Additionally, these gains will also contribute to improvements in the health and well-being of Prisons' employees. Future objectives will review facilities' needs and the assets available to ensure the secure operations of our facilities, the wellness of our staff and offenders, and safe communities.