

## **Understaffing puts strain on jail work force**

SECURITY: With crowding compounding the problem, Alaska needs to recruit more officers.

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### **Staff**

In late September, correctional officer Gary Keller found marijuana while strip-searching an inmate at the Anchorage jail. Keller asked the man to hand it over. He refused. Soon Keller, another officer and the prisoner were wrestling on the floor. "It escalated to the point more officers were needed," Keller said. "I called on the radio, but it took a long time. ... For me, it seemed like for eternity."

In the end, the two officers subdued the man, but everyone ended up covered with pepper spray.

Had more correctional officers been on duty, Keller said, the situation might have been controlled sooner and would have been less dangerous for the officers and the prisoner.

Like many represented by Alaska Correctional Officers Association, Keller says Alaska prisons suffer from a dangerous combination of too many job vacancies and too many prisoners. Currently, there are about 70 unfilled positions in state institutions.

A new mega-prison with up to 2,250 beds, planned for the Mat-Su area, will escalate the need for new officers way beyond current needs, which are already not being met.

The majority of state jails and prisons routinely run over maximum recommended inmate capacity, according to the Department of Corrections.

The average number of prisoners, including those on electronic monitoring, in halfway houses and in facilities in Arizona, has more than doubled over the last 20 years, from just under 2,000 in 1984 to just under 5,000 in 2003, the last year official inmate counts are available.

Close to 1,000 Alaskans have been sent to rented cells in Arizona because of lack of prison space in-state.

Last week at the east complex of the Anchorage jail, which was built to hold 388, there were 499 people locked up.

There were 33 unfilled officer positions.

Officers are forced to work overtime to fill the holes in staffing. If they refuse, they can face discipline.

"There's a lot of us starting to look for other jobs," Keller said. And that is just going to make the situation worse.

ACOA, a union that represents roughly 700 corrections officers, recently took their complaints public with a television ad aimed at pressuring the Department of Corrections to fill the vacant positions.

In the ad, the wife of a corrections officer gets a phone call that her husband has been forced to work overtime again because of the staff shortage, and a little girl says to the camera, "Please, let my daddy come home."

The majority of officers work 12-hour shifts -- one week on, one week off.

"We had one guy work 30 straight days, 12-hour days. People are just exhausted," said Brad Wilson, union business manager. "Our goal is to have something provocative to get the public to realize we have a problem."

They aired the ad during election season to get politicians talking about prison problems as a campaign issue, Wilson said.

The department reacted quickly, suggesting in a press release that the ad makes the problem worse.

"I think (the ad) is counterproductive to the positive image we are trying to portray to attract good candidates," said state Corrections Commissioner Mark Antrim in an interview.

Antrim said he knows jails are crowded and understaffed. Some workers don't like the mandatory overtime, but others welcome it, he said. The department is targeting the staffing problem with a recruiting campaign.

"We are every bit as concerned as (the union)," he said. "We have been working to address it."

Antrim said he expects staffing ratios to improve because few people are slated to retire and because over the last two years, Corrections has spent \$300,000 on recruiting. Applications have increased, but the department needs more, he said.

"First of all, it's an economics issue. People are realizing they can make more money doing other things," he said. "Some of it is just that public service isn't as attractive as it used to be. Some of the romance has worn off of police work. No one has ever really wanted to grow up and be a corrections officer."

The union says the ad campaign isn't enough. The hiring process is cumbersome and confusing, Wilson said. Despite the 33 open positions at the Anchorage jail last week, no positions were being advertised as available on the state Corrections Web site, he said.

The department is processing a pool of applicants right now, said Richard Schmitz, a corrections spokesman. More jobs will be posted soon, and those interested can sign up to be notified, he said.

Dan Carothers, who retired last year after 19 years as superintendent of the Lemon Creek prison in Juneau, said the state needs to re-examine hiring.

"There now is an elaborate process. It takes a lot of staff and a lot of time," he said. "All this time happens, and if someone has a family or has other jobs they are applying for, their lives move on."

All involved say overcrowding compounds the stress on current employees, which can fuel turnover. Gyms are being turned into cell space, Antrim said. Without exercise to work off energy and stress, prisoner tempers are more likely to flare. Staff have to work diligently to keep a lid on things, he said.

"Officers ... feel they are being put in harm's way every day," Wilson wrote in an e-mail. "No one has been seriously hurt yet, (but that) doesn't mean management should continue pushing the envelope, continue saving money by not filling the positions."

The new Mat-Su prison, scheduled to open in 2010, might ease overcrowding, although the 950 prisoners housed in Arizona are poised to pour into it.

In the mean time, correctional officers like Greg Lippmann continue to work long hours in increasingly stressful conditions. On one shift last week, Lippmann directly supervised 95 inmates by himself, the highest

in his two years on the job, he said.

"Having one-to-95 is not a good number in any circumstances," he said. "It's not safe for us and not safe for them."

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SPEAK OUT: To share your thoughts on the state prison proposal, go to [www.adn.com/matsu](http://www.adn.com/matsu).

### Prisoner populations

Numbers include Alaskans incarcerated in state, Outside and in halfway houses:

\* 1995 3,532

\* 2000 4,279

\* 2001 4,432

\* 2002 4,599

\* 2003 4,832

Source: Dept. of Corrections

Illustration:

Photo 1: Weblink CMYK\_111006.jpg