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**Capitol View
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**Prison Staffing Disaster Has All the Makings of a Bad Movie**

We’ve all seen the movie. The jailer falls asleep and the bad guys get his keys and escape, usually in black and white and on horseback.

But this really happened recently, according to a report from the Legislature’s Inspector General for Corrections. There was no escape, but the inmates did have the employee’s keys when he woke up. He fell asleep after working back-to-back shifts at one of Nebraska’s short-staffed but overcrowded prison facilities.

That, says IG Doug Koebernick, is but one of many anecdotes about the dire staffing situations at the prisons. He said it’s been bad for years, but it’s gotten worse. His recent report on the situation was released a day before staff met with members of the Nebraska Legislature to put some meat on the bones of the stories.

“Staffing has overtaken overcrowding and any other issue as it relates to the Department of Corrections,” Judiciary Committee Chairman State Sen. Steve Lathrop of Omaha said. “It affects the safety of not just the inmates, but the staff.”

Here’s the problem. Staff shortages are often met with lockdowns, which keep inmates in their cells where they are easier to manage. That means they don’t get the programs they need, if staff is even available to provide them. Some of those are required for parole eligibility.

On top of it all, Corrections Director Scott Frakes has announced a new staffing schedule at two Lincoln facilities with more than 900 inmates. Under the schedule, visits, programming, volunteer activities, routine medical clinics, library access and recreation for inmates will be limited to Monday through Thursday, with limited movement on weekends.

“These are unprecedented times,” Frakes wrote in a memo on the schedule change. “Turnover has reached historic levels, and the applicant pool is less than 50% of what it was at the beginning of the year.” The previous record for staff vacancies was 391 in March. Three

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months later, it was 527 vacancies out of 2,300 total jobs. By comparison, there were 252 vacancies in 2016.

Security staff are putting in much more overtime than previous years, according to the report. At the same time, the department is seeing higher turnover and a lull in recruitment compared to previous years. The three largest prison complexes are under staffing emergencies. Two, the 1,027-inmate Tecumseh prison and 1,314-inmate penitentiary in Lincoln, are approaching two years under emergencies. Staffing emergencies for the Lincoln Correctional Center and connected Diagnostic and Evaluation Center were announced this summer. There’s no sign those will end anytime soon.

The staffing challenges also apply to health services in the system, where vacancies doubled from June 2019 to June 2020, according to the report, and stayed that high through June 2021. Corrections relied on contract nurses to fill positions that would normally belong to state workers.

Mike Chipman, president of the union that represents corrections officers and other security staff, said the staffing shortages in state prisons are at the most dangerous level ever. “If you had a major crisis happen on any of these (short) shifts, we don’t have the staff to handle it. So, what’s the plan?”

Earlier this year, the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 88 called on the Ricketts’ administration to raise salaries so state prison jobs could keep pace with higher pay at county jails in the Omaha and Lincoln areas, but the request went unheeded. Chipman said he now wonders if the National Guard may have to be called in to help, especially at the Lincoln Correctional Center/Diagnostic and Evaluation Center where more than 50% of posts are vacant.

The Inspector General has recommended calling upon the National Guard or other outside entities to help relieve some of the pressure. But Ricketts’ press secretary, Taylor Gage, says the governor “does not have plans to utilize the National Guard.”

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In October 2019, the department introduced $10,000 hiring bonuses. Chipman said employees know those are temporary and can be withdrawn if a new hire makes a serious mistake. Higher and more competitive salaries are the answer, he said.

Nearly 60% of the people who were hired as part of the $10,000 bonus program left within two years — dozens didn’t even stay for four months, so they never even got their first bonus payment, the report said. Ricketts and Frakes announced new plans that included upping the bonus to $15,000 for new corporals at the combined Lincoln facility, State Penitentiary in Lincoln, and Tecumseh prison. But the Inspector General isn’t aware of plans for the state to assess the “efficacy, longevity and expansion” of such bonuses.

Bottom line, it’s a bad situation that needs to be fixed. Here’s hoping that the administration is listening to the workers and their representatives and will sit down with lawmakers to find a solution.

The watched pot IS boiling.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*