



NEWS:

Agreement Will Raise the Pay of State's Beleaguered Correctional Officers

June 23, 2017 – In what is being described as a "great first step" towards helping the men and women securing Delaware's prisons, an agreement was announced this week to increase correctional officers' wages.

Governor John Carney and the Correctional Officers Association of Delaware (COAD) on Tuesday announced the agreement to increase starting salaries and study additional changes to help recruit and retain officers, and decrease the use of mandatory overtime.

"This agreement represents a significant step forward in addressing our staffing challenges at the Department of Correction," Governor Carney said. "Making real improvements to our prison system won't happen overnight, but we are committed to working, over the long-term, to improving conditions for officers and inmates inside Delaware's correctional facilities."

COAD President Geoff Klopp said the pact was a "great first step in the right direction."

Delaware Department of Correction Commissioner Perry Phelps said state officials are committed to addressing the prison system's issues. "We will continue to work hand-in-

hand with COAD to consider additional changes that will improve the working environment inside our facilities," he said.

Problems plaguing Delaware's prison system have gone unaddressed for more than a decade. In February, a prison riot and hostage incident at the James T. Vaughn Correctional Center ended with the death of one correctional officer and injuries to others. A preliminary report released earlier this month by investigators reviewing that incident revealed that long-standing issues underpinned the crisis.

The independent review found that many of the issues that led to a hostage-taking and assault at the same prison 12 years earlier also led to this year's incident.

Among those problems were forced overtime for correctional officers; inexperienced correctional officers being assigned to high-risk areas; and chronic short-staffing.

"This agreement is welcome news," said State Rep. Steve Smyk, R-Milton-Lewes, the former president of the Delaware State Troopers Association and a long-time supporter of better pay and working conditions for correctional officers. "After ignoring the situation for years, the state has made a major down payment to improve conditions inside our state's prison system. We need to maintain this momentum and continue with other needed reforms."



State Rep. Steve Smyk

The two-year agreement announced will increase starting salaries for correctional officers to \$40,000 in Fiscal Year 2018, and to \$43,000 in Fiscal Year 2019 -- a 22 percent increase over current salary levels.

Salary negotiations were based, in part, on a study and comparison of correctional officer salaries in surrounding states.

The agreement also creates a new six-member Labor-Management committee to study ways to help recruit and retain officers, and decrease the use of mandatory overtime in Delaware's prisons. The Department of Correction and COAD will each appoint three members to the committee.

Areas of study will include:

- The establishment of a 12-hour shift;
- The establishment of physical fitness testing;
- The establishment of a career ladder; and
- The establishment of a freeze policy.

The agreement, while supported by many legislators, will create an additional challenge for them as they work to close a large budget gap for the new fiscal year that starts July 1st. The new deal will add \$23 million to the budget.