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Concerns over staffing continue at Montana State Prison

Despite a 2 dollar pay raise for employees at the Montana State prison Located in Deer Lodge Montana, legislators are worried about the prison's ability to retain staff.

With a crisis on their hands, the Department of Corrections and the Federation of Montana State Prison Employees agreed to up the starting wage from about \$16.50 to \$18.50. While the actions taken seemed to help with recruitment, the retention numbers still seemed to drop.

The Warden of the prison, Jim Salmonsens noted that “the prison has a 20% staff vacancy rate at any given time of the year”.

Aaron Meaders, head of the Prison Union, testified that since July of 2021, the prison had hired 106 new staff members, yet despite these hires, 166 employees had left for a variety of different reasons.

Meaders also insists that the pay raise is doing very little to help retain the workers. He claims that since the 2-dollar pay raise 25 employees have quit, while only one is in the process of becoming a licensed guard.

Despite the raise in pay, there may be other factors as to why the prison has such a hard time retaining current staff.

The Contract agreed upon between the Union and the DOC had other agreements besides the raise in pay. Failure to adhere to these rules and regulations could be another indicator as to why staff members are fed up with their current position.

As stated in the new contract, staff members are allowed to refuse mandatory overtime, marking a significant win for the Union workers. Instead of following up on these promises, the DOC changed the terms of what overtime meant in order to circumvent the agreed-upon contract.

Staffing issues are commonplace for the prison and legislators have been forced to think outside the box when it comes to the means of keeping order inside the walls.

In 2020 the National Guard was deployed to the prison to help staff during Covid-19. Thankfully they had limited interactions with inmates and kept busy by doing menial tasks such as cooking and laundry.

It is clear that these staffing shortages don't just affect the other workers, but the inmates themselves have felt the repercussions as well.

To combat the staff shortage, the prison was forced to close the F-Wing section of the prison which housed the prison's sex offender program. Alexandria Klapmeier, a spokesperson for the prison, stated that the inmates in F-Wing were placed into "appropriate housing".

This issue has reached the desks of Montana lawmakers. Senator Tom McGillvray said "We've been there, we've been addressing this for several months. I am at the point where I have very grave concerns about what's happening at the prison, particularly with moral, continued loss of correctional officers".

With the current concerns about the staffing, and the prison's overall operation, legislators called for a meeting with the governor and the state prisons warden last Friday to try and find a permanent solution for this rapidly growing problem.