

Prisons adjust to increase in inmates

By Zach Lowe
Staff Writer

January 20, 2008

The state Department of Correction has taken prison officers off nonessential posts to guard the increased number of inmates without increasing overtime spending, according to officials and department records.

The adjustments came after the number of inmates in state prisons and jails jumped by nearly 1,000 after the summer crackdown on parole. The number of inmates rose to more than 19,800, prompting correction workers and advocates for inmate safety to complain about overcrowding.

The union complained that the overtime figures show the department has not responded to the crowding aggressively, but state officials said the prisons remain safe.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell ordered a halt on paroles for violent offenders after a July triple murder in Cheshire allegedly committed by two parolees.

The Department of Correction has dealt with the inmate increase without forcing more correction officers to work overtime, state records show.

Overtime spending ranged from \$2 million to \$2.7 million every two weeks in the four months after the Cheshire killings - the same range as in 2006, state figures show.

The department spent \$54.9 million in overtime in 2006 and \$55.1 million in 2007, records show.

Many state correction departments spend more on overtime when the inmate population surges, experts said. But state officials said they can adjust the assignments of prison guards to deal with an increase in prisoners.

"We do it all the time," department spokesman Brian Garnett said.

It has added 53 new posts in the state's 18 facilities since the Cheshire killings. The new posts are in dormitories, cell blocks and other priority areas crowded with prisoners, Garnett said.

To staff those posts, the department leaves less essential ones vacant on a day-to-day basis, he said. Those might include posts in a laundry room or school classrooms. Those programs, including educational lessons, are shut down for the day if no is guard present, Garnett said.

"Our facilities are adequately staffed to ensure they are safe," he said.

Luke Leone, president of Local 1565 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said all posts should be staffed regularly. He said the department also has pulled guards off so-called roving posts, which involve walking the facilities and being prepared to respond to any emergency.

"They are on a wing and a prayer hoping nothing serious happens," Leone said. "We are way understaffed."

"It just doesn't add up that inmate numbers go up and overtime goes down," he added.

Leone and Larry Dorman, a union spokesman, said the department should spend more on overtime when prisons are overcrowded.

"They are keeping the overtime figures low at the expense of proper staffing," Dorman said.

But Garnett said the department prefers not to force officers to work overtime, a practice common when local police departments find themselves short-staffed.

Forced overtime is not good for morale or safety, since officers get tired if they work 16 hours in a row, Garnett said.

Mandated overtime accounts for about 16 percent of the department's overtime spending, Garnett said. That figure has decreased in recent months, he said.

Leone said the department will assign officers to work only part of the night shift on overtime and send them home while inmates are sleeping.

Garnett would not comment on specific shift-by-shift staffing patterns.

Leone and Dorman said the state needs more officers.

The union pointed to a 2003 state report that recommended hiring 700 additional correction officers to staff state prisons. The state had 4,136 officers at the end of 2007, a tick up from the 4,115 working at the end of 2003 but about 200 more than the number of full-time officers in 2006, statistics show.

"We are very adept at handling the increase and decreases in our population," Garnett said.

Copyright © 2008, Southern Connecticut Newspapers, Inc.