

Inadequate prison staffing causes unsafe conditions for staff,  
inmates and community

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To the Editor:

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees Union Local 3020 at the Federal Correctional Institution-Schuylkill, located in Mount Pleasant, we wish Correctional Officer Duffy of State Correctional Institution-Mahanoy a speedy recovery from the injuries he incurred after being brutally attacked by an inmate who is housed at that facility. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends and co-workers during this difficult time. At FCI-Schuylkill, we are currently experiencing similar concerns and issues, insofar as staff shortages, overcrowding and budget cuts. The list goes on, but we do not feel a need to address these issues at present.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons is currently overcrowded with inmates by 39 percent nationwide. Presently, our prison is staffed at approximately 82 percent, which is nearly 7 percent below the number that our management wants us at. If you look at these numbers, one can only imagine the struggles we face on a day to day basis to maintain the safety of our staff and the citizens of our communities. Unfortunately, the staffing statistics are clear that we are understaffed and over-managed. For example, no staffing cuts have been made to our executive staff; however, management has decided to enforce a new schedule for our Correctional Services Department that reflects a loss of 27 positions. When you take into consideration the staff-to-inmate ratio, it is obvious that staff safety, as well as the safety of the community, is not a high priority on the list of items to be corrected in the immediate future. Keep in mind that we also have an obligation to maintain a safe prison environment for inmates, which we currently cannot do safely and according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons policy.

To staff a prison, any prison, at 89 percent is just plain ridiculous and most importantly, it is not safe to everyone involved. This includes the staff, the inmates and our surrounding communities. When staffing levels are reduced below acceptable levels, unfavorable incidents are going to occur in your backyard. Take for example the string of assaults that took place in recent months in the state facilities and include the recent escape from the Schuylkill County Prison. I am sorry to say, but unless something changes fast, things will only escalate. In a prison

environment, it is impossible to “do more with less.”

Unfortunately, the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Mr. Harley Lappin, cites budgetary concerns for our shortage of staff. Well, I will tell you about the many comforts that our inmates have at FCI-Schuylkill and some of the associated costs involved.

First and foremost, let’s discuss medical coverage. Did you know that inmates confined in our facility do not pay a penny for insurance premiums, any co-pays or deductibles? The sad part of this truth is that they have better coverage than most Americans do! They get their medication for free and the supplies are unlimited, depending on their condition. Did you know that while our local communities were struggling to find flu shots to protect our elderly from a potentially deadly virus, we had enough flu shots for every inmate incarcerated at our facility?

Interestingly enough, the politicians created a program called the “cost of incarceration fee,” which was supposed to make inmates pay for their prison stay. This program received plenty of publicity, but what they inadvertently forgot to tell the public is that they made the criteria so strict, not many inmates would qualify for this program. Consequently, there isn’t much money, if any, collected from this program. Should you doubt this, please contact your local congressman and ask him/her how many inmates paid into this program recently. Did you also know that while you are incarcerated, you can learn how to become a better parent? Although this would be an admirable goal, it costs the taxpayers approximately \$725 to \$1,200 per month at our facility. This program allows inmates to sit with parenting experts during visits with their children. Plus, we also buy games and videos for the children to watch so everyone can be pleasantly entertained.

If you’ve never had the opportunity to tour a federal prison, I’d like for you to know that we build state of the art buildings with all the comforts of home made readily available to these offenders. Are there other options? Sure! Take the sheriff in Maricopa County, Arizona, as an example. He has inmates living in tent cities, which are simply large tents in a field with a fence surrounding them and they are fed bologna and cheese sandwiches. Additionally, I served my country in the Armed Forces and I can tell you that our inmates have a better quality of housing and meals than our soldiers do. Yet, inmates seem to publicly complain about the quality of food. And speaking of food, we spare no expense to ensure that our inmates are fed well. You have heard the old saying, “three hots and a cot.” That is no joke! Inmates can choose from an array of soda and fruit juice machines, coffee, chocolate milk, white milk and fresh doughnuts! I know it is safe to say we have gone above and beyond

the basic necessities.

Since money appears to be a deciding factor in decision making, we should be getting something productive from the inmates in terms of labor. It is through labor that this task can be accomplished. Yes, we pay our inmates \$0.12 per hour. And since they all have jobs to do, all 1,600 of them receive a paycheck each month. Keep in mind that this wage does not include cash bonuses they receive for doing a good job. Despite our shrinking budget, I find it hard to believe that cash bonuses managed to survive, considering our staff no longer receive bonuses based on our work performance.

In closing, I wish to respond to a comment that was published in a local newspaper recently. A caller said that kindergarten teachers are staffed at a ratio of 25-to-1 in Schuylkill County and they "don't think the prisoners are any harder than kindergarten students." This is a completely absurd comment by an uninformed individual. While I don't doubt that 25 kindergarten students is indeed a handful, can you imagine a ratio of 312 convicted felons to one staff member? I am also certain that kindergarten students aren't looking for ways to physically harm you or another individual. On weekends and off-shifts, we have 17 staff members to supervise 1,600 inmates.

We are making a plea to the citizens of Schuylkill and surrounding counties to get involved and support not only our issues and concerns, but the issues and concerns of fellow correctional employees at all prisons located within this county. We encourage you to write to your congressional, state and local elected officials to pressure them for a change. This change can't wait much longer or someone will be seriously injured again.

Jim Seidel, acting president  
AFGE Union Local 3020