

LABOR VOICES | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Labor Voices: Corrections officer shortage needs attention

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“I have to live my work life around mandatory overtime. I’m tired. My health is declining from lack of sleep and I’m living off vending machines.”

“You can’t have a life outside of work. You have to plan to be mandated first, then home life is second. One pay period, I got mandated 15 working days in a row.”

“My husband has cancer. It’s being away or not knowing if I’m going to be home to care for him, the house or the animals. I am mentally exhausted.”

These voices represent not just a few, but thousands of corrections officers across Michigan in the midst of a severe staffing crisis. While the state grapples with short-term fixes, officers are resigning in droves due to burnout, unsafe working conditions, and a lack of retirement benefits.

For officers that stay in the job, they are forced to take mandatory overtime to staff correctional facilities and keep our communities safe. The stories of missed family events, damaged marriages and the anxiety of planning child or elder care on an ever-changing work schedule are too many to count.

Every year for the past six years, there has been a net loss of officers because we are unable to effectively recruit and retain them. As the union representing corrections officers in the state of Michigan, we’ve witnessed an unprecedented 2,069 officers leave the field over the years. We are currently facing more than 900 correction officer vacancies in the MDOC.

Meanwhile, the taxpayers are footing the cost of this crisis. In FY 2023 alone, MDOC paid \$112.6 million in overtime costs, with nearly all of that line item going to corrections officers’ overtime pay. The state spent a little over \$54 million in training to replace the 2,069 officers who resigned.

From COVID-19 to budget constraints, we’ve heard all the reasons our staffing levels reached a breaking point. But we know better: The lack of stable benefits are making it hard to stay in a physically and mentally demanding job with no relief in sight. Investments in training programs and temporary

bonuses have been stopgap solutions to address a much larger problem. We need lasting policy changes that bring new officers into our ranks — and keep the ones who are still with us.

The Michigan House and Senate each just passed a budget that funds the Public Safety Officer Pension Bill Package. This would give our members the option to participate in the Michigan State Police Pension Plus Retirement System, an important step to making our work a stable profession.

The bills that would bring us into the pension system are still hanging in the balance, and we need the Legislature's votes to deliver pension reform to the Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's desk. A secure pension allows our officers to retire with dignity.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Prisons are designed to keep our communities — and those behind the wall — safe. Without the proper staffing, we're creating the perfect storm of unsafe conditions for tragedy to unfold. When you're operating on the thinnest of staffing margins, it also leaves little room for the programming, support and reentry services that prisoners rely upon.

The staffing crisis in Michigan prisons needs immediate attention. As we wrap up the budget cycle this month, the Legislature has the ability to pass a long-term solution that will make a lasting difference. The health and safety of Michigan's officers, prisoners and citizens hangs in the balance.

Ray Sholtz is executive director of SEIU Local 526M - Michigan Corrections Organization (MCO).