



# The Nation's Correctional Staffing Crisis: Assessing the Toll on Correctional Officers and Incarcerated Persons

Testimony By:  
John Wetzel

Founder and Board Chair, Keystone Restituere Justice Center ([www.keystonejustice.org](http://www.keystonejustice.org))  
Former Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 2011-2021

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## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Good afternoon Chairman Booker, Ranking Member Cotton, and members of the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism. My name is John Wetzel, the founder and Board Chair of the Keystone Restituere Justice Center (KRJC),<sup>1</sup> a new non-profit dedicated to working tirelessly to improve our communities from the ground up as we take on challenges facing our correctional and criminal justice systems. I am privileged to be Pennsylvania's longest serving Secretary of Corrections. I served in this position for 11 years from 2011-2021 under two different governors. Prior to becoming Secretary, I worked in county corrections for more than 20 years: I started as a county corrections officer, headed a training academy and treatment department, and eventually became warden of a county correctional system. In addition, I was a member of the congressionally established Chuck Colson Task Force for the Obama Administration and Independent Review Committee under the Trump Administration, which concluded during the Biden Administration. I have a broad perspective and specific knowledge about the issues we are discussing today.

The critical infrastructure resource of corrections is alarmingly close to failure. It has long failed staff and incarcerated people. You can see that failure in outcomes around their health and safety and what happens when both staff and the incarcerated leave the corrections system.

Dr. Nneka Jones-Tapia's holistic safety practice captures an important theme: the connectedness of corrections staff, the incarcerated, and the people both groups care about in the communities in which they live. Yet, we've seen fewer adequate resources made available to the corrections field in order to support Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the wellness of both staff and incarcerated.

The impact of these problems and challenges negatively affects our community at large and, ultimately, creates community safety issues.

In Pennsylvania, my home state, we had a period of more than a week in one area where people were locked in their homes in fear of a county jail escapee. The escape occurred because of inadequate staffing.

We also have facilities using the National Guard in place of correctional officers at a time when we are all concerned about national security. Indeed, we want these soldiers to be available for national safety, yet we are using them as correctional officers.

I believe these problems require urgent leadership from the federal government: attention and ideas certainly; investment in the potential of the human beings who both work and live in correctional facilities absolutely.

To be sure, we have made progress. We have seen some systems using the potential of the incarcerated to make their systems better and more humane, resulting in better results and outputs. But we need to invest in the potential of corrections staff, including coming up with research-based ideas, to invest in their potential. These kinds of focused investments have transformed and actually disrupted other fields.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.keystonejustice.org](http://www.keystonejustice.org)

You have invested in corrections before. Fifty years ago, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) was founded, and its first budget was three years later for \$5 million.<sup>2</sup> This was an investment in the intellectual capacity of the field. It was leadership — executive, legislative and judicial — that led to that critical moment in corrections history. We now need a rededication to that kind of critical investment. The NIC does not enjoy that scope of funding 50 years later, and unfortunately, some of the ideals and goals that helped establish the NIC have dissipated.

## **CREATING CORRECTIONAL SUCCESS**

Creating correctional success requires us to be deliberate about addressing and improving correctional culture. The physical and mental health and overall well-being of correctional officers and incarcerated people are often affected by the same factors. Safe and healthy correctional officers mean better jails and prisons, better conditions for incarcerated people, and ultimately better safety for the larger community in which the jail or prison is located.

I am happy to report that the Keystone Restituere Justice Center is fortunate to have been given the opportunity to address these issues through a multi-year grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Under this grant, we are partnering with the Correctional Leaders Association to invest in the health and safety of our correctional officers. We will be convening with, among others, the formerly incarcerated and labor to help us build, for example, that Venn diagram that shows our common interests and overlapping goals. The work we will be doing is predicated on building a safe and healthy culture within our correctional systems.

At the backdrop of all this is that while the specific mission statements of various correctional agencies sometimes differ, they typically include three common themes: protecting the community, taking care of its employees, and helping to ensure that the incarcerated make a safe and successful transition back to their communities. Elevating all of these individuals for success will result in enhanced community safety. But unless we can address the extraordinary staffing challenges, our correctional employees and their families, the incarcerated and their families, and our communities as a whole will suffer.

Let me describe for you the scope and depth of the problems related to staffing and some potential solutions.

## **THE SCOPE OF STAFFING SHORTAGES**

The most significant challenge our correctional systems face is insufficient staffing. Inadequate staffing presently affects our local, state and federal prisons and jails. And it is a problem that is not going to go away anytime soon. According to a recent article in USA Today:

Prisons across the country have long struggled to recruit and retain staff, but the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows the situation is particularly dire. In 2022, the number of people working for state prisons hit its lowest mark in over two decades.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/4td9arru>; <http://tinyurl.com/27b7ahu4>

<sup>3</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/yr78xktz>

Georgia had half of its correctional officer jobs empty last year.<sup>4</sup> It has been reported that West Virginia, Florida and New Hampshire have called in National Guard troops to provide correctional support.<sup>5</sup> Almost half the jobs for guards at New York’s maximum-security prisons were unfilled in mid-2023.<sup>6</sup> And the problem is only getting worse: the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other scholars forecast a 7% decline in the correctional officer workforce by 2032.<sup>7</sup>

On top of high rates of staff vacancies, we are also seeing increasingly higher rates of turnover during the last decade. The result is increased use of overtime to fill critical posts. Overtime is either voluntary or mandatory, but either way, staff are sometimes working an unhealthy number of hours, which can lead to less security and worse outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

While there may be different reasons for the waning staffing levels — e.g. people leaving the job during the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting perceptions of the work, enticing opportunities in other industries, new generations entering the workforce with different ideals, and low rates of compensation for the job — the impact is the same: correctional facilities are not functioning optimally. Indeed, some are not even functioning properly.

Let’s be clear: this problem is not going away. It will not dissipate with time or marginal solutions. We are at a tipping point. There are signs of failure that we must not ignore, signs which the Bureau of Prisons Inspector General has written about and which we cite to in this testimony.

## **THE NEXUS OF CORRECTIONAL SUCCESS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY**

Correctional success and community safety are inextricably intertwined. Take for instance the frequent requirement for incarcerated people to complete programs, either because they are court-mandated or because participating will improve one’s chances of earning release. And consider that programming helps to rehabilitate the incarcerated, such as through drug, alcohol, and behavioral health treatment, vocational training, and educational classes. In other words, we rely on programming to help rehabilitate people who are incarcerated to improve upon the version of themselves that brought them to the correctional facility initially, thus improving community safety when they are released. Yet programming is so often the first area of operations to collapse when staffing is too short to safely accommodate programs alongside other key daily activities. Indeed, the recent report from the Bureau of Prisons Inspector General on inmate deaths states that “BOP Staffing Shortages, Particularly in Health and Psychology Positions, Hinder the Provision of Treatment and Programs for Mental Health Needs and Substance Abuse Disorders.”<sup>9</sup>

Successful programming and reentry programs also promote hard work, personal accountability, and can help keep families together when incarcerated reintegrate back with their families. What is more,

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/txcapa8d>

<sup>7</sup> E.g., <http://tinyurl.com/3uawncd6>; <http://tinyurl.com/49w4vh8e>

<sup>8</sup> The recent report by the Bureau of Prisons Inspector General regarding inmate deaths notes that the BOP’s reliance on mandated overtime can negatively affect staff morale and performance, posing risks to institutional safety and security. See <http://tinyurl.com/mrdjzhyy>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/mrdjzhyy>. The report goes on to say that “understaffing in Health Services and Psychology Services positions can limit an institution’s ability to provide treatment and programs that may help mitigate the risk of inmate death, including mental health and substance abuse programming.” *Id.*

the majority of our states allow incarcerated individuals to earn some version of “earned time” — that is, they are eligible to receive time credited toward their sentence for completing certain rehabilitative programs.<sup>10</sup> In short, inadequate staffing levels have been shown to lead to reduced programming, which means reduced rehabilitation, increased recidivism, larger prison populations, less security within the prisons, and consequently less community safety.

As I just noted, staffing shortages also diminish security within our correctional institutions. According to criminologist Bryce Peterson, “[i]t is likely that the staffing shortage that’s happening right now across the country is going to have some impact on safety and security, including escapes.”<sup>11</sup> An inadequate number of correctional officers necessarily means fewer security checks and a diminished ability to find contraband like drugs, weapons, and cell phones, or to address any brewing or festering security issues between the incarcerated. This puts the well-being and ultimately the lives of correctional officers and incarcerated people at risk. To that end, the BOP Inspector General noted that the staffing shortage at two institutions the Inspector General staff visited resulted in an inadequate number of cell searches, leading to inmates possessing dangerous contraband which ultimately contributed to inmate homicides and suicides.<sup>12</sup>

Inadequate staffing also leads to escapes. One needs to look no further than my own state of Pennsylvania, which has seen at least six escapes in 2023. There is a direct connection between inadequate staffing levels and escapes.

## **DECISIONS BY THIRD PARTIES, INCLUDING LEGISLATORS, LAW ENFORCEMENT AND SERVICE PROVIDERS, AFFECT THE OPERATIONS OF JAILS AND PRISONS.**

Our correctional systems are affected by events that occur outside of the prison walls (such as new laws, police and prosecution strategies, current societal events, governmental fiscal appropriations, supply chain issues, and of course staffing issues). At the same time, the quality of operations at our correctional institutions affects the safety and well-being of the communities to which incarcerated people return.

Consider that community safety is enhanced by, among other things, a healthy criminal justice system, effective use of social services and treatment programs, strong and innovative educational institutions, effective policing and prosecution, strong neighborhoods, families, and mentors. Community safety, on the other hand, is diminished when the work of these systems, entities and individuals does not yield the results we would like.

So what happens when community safety has been diminished? There is often a reaction, which may include changes to laws, policies and budgets. Such decisions directly affect corrections. These decisions may affect the numbers of individuals entering the facility, the facility’s ability to offer important programs and to implement or sustain best-practices, and how many individuals may be paroled from the facility. In turn, decisions by and practices of correctional officials affect incarcerated people in their jails and prisons, which ultimately affects community safety because the vast majority of them are eventually released to their communities.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/y4f6x8dk>

<sup>11</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/5n7azk4s>

<sup>12</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/mrdjzhyy>

What does all of this mean? The work of legislators, prosecutors, public defenders, police, treatment providers, neighborhood and community groups, budget secretaries, principals and college presidents, and leaders of our faith-based institutions must be done in tandem with corrections officials. Our successes, our innovations, and our ability to inspire and change lives are enhanced when we accept that what each of the systems and groups do affects corrections, and that what corrections does affects each of these entities as well.

For example, were there more access to behavioral health treatments and were the stigma around behavioral health reduced, we would see lower prison admissions because more individuals would receive the treatment they need to reduce the likelihood of committing a crime and those with serious mental illness who were incarcerated could be the focus of behavioral health treatment within the jail or prison. Similarly, were at-risk youth better able to be linked to mentors who could help them navigate their challenging environments, fewer would ever see the inside of a jail or prison.

In my own state of Pennsylvania when I was Secretary of the Department of Corrections, we recognized a similar reality when we were able to significantly improve our criminal justice system through Justice Reinvestment Initiatives (JRI). The result of the work was a lower prison population, fewer technical parole violators returning to state prison, less crime, fewer disparities, and procedural justice for crime victims. In short, a more just system. Central to JRI was the convening of stakeholders. They engaged in honest conversations, analyzed data, asked for more data, looked carefully about proposed policy changes, and had the opportunity to make suggestions about new ideas. We recognized that all the stakeholders affected by the criminal justice system had to be present, that the proposals and solutions could not be pre-ordained, and that stakeholders needed to be able to discuss how proposals would specifically affect the operations of their agencies or entities.

## **ADDRESSING CORRECTIONS STAFFING MEANS BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS, INCARCERATED PEOPLE, AND COMMUNITIES AS A WHOLE.**

Successfully addressing challenges related to correctional staffing will not only improve the on-duty morale of the workforce, but ultimately, we will see it reflected in improved outcomes for the incarcerated population, for families of our staff, and for our communities.

Addressing the staffing problems must prioritize the health and safety of its correctional officers. Correctional officers whose physical or mental health is not good can burn out and leave their jobs, thus worsening the staffing challenges. And for those who do not change careers, their work suffers. This affects their ability to keep prisons safe and secure, to interact positively with those individuals who are incarcerated, and to manage effectively important institutional programming.

Ensuring the health and safety of correctional officers is also important to helping incarcerated people. One of the strongest motivational forces that can encourage a person to change is receiving genuine respect and support from another person. Anyone who has worked as a corrections officer knows that rapport and relationship building both keeps you safe and gets the job done. Safe institutions, good programming, reducing recidivism, and maximizing the potential for a law-abiding successful life to those individuals after release depends, therefore, on the health and safety of our correctional officers.

Sadly, correctional officers may bring home their emotional challenges from work, which means that addressing staffing challenges will necessarily also help their spouses, significant others, and children, among others.

## **A HOLISTIC FOCUS ON THE HEALTH OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF.**

Focusing on the physical and mental health of our correctional staff is vitally important. We have no other choice. Consider that whereas roughly 1 in 7 combat veterans reports experiencing symptoms of PTSD, approximately 1 in 3 correctional officers experiences these symptoms, making correctional officers more than twice as likely to suffer from PTSD than someone who literally went to war. Multiple studies have found they have higher rates of PTSD and suicide than both police and military veterans, including those who saw combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

Investing in improving the behavioral health of correctional officers requires us to first understand that many of them suffer trauma from their job. We have to find new ways of addressing their trauma and look to when government has made investments in similar circumstances even when resources were scarce. A holistic approach, indeed, involves addressing mindfulness and emotional intelligence.

After all, high vacancy rates mean correctional officers are challenged every day about how to optimize their physical and mental health and their ability to manage and cope in and out of work. Correctional officers are mothers and fathers, mentors, coaches, and caretakers. They are connected to their communities. Their communities suffer when they suffer, and ultimately benefit when we can identify ways of helping them heal and recover.

As a society, we have begun to better understand trauma—its causes and its effects and how it can be managed. We can utilize the research that has gone into addressing trauma in other circumstances and apply it to the corrections population.

I am reminded of a former Navy SEAL, Jason Henderson, whose hands-on training in combat-proven techniques through his non-profit, Four Pillars Collective, have been effective in the mental and physical management of a crisis.<sup>14</sup> This is the type of holistic healing we need in our corrections field.

## **THE CORRECTIONS FIELD NEEDS TO BE INNOVATIVE AND IMPROVE ITS TECHNOLOGICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CAPACITIES.**

Addressing the problems associated with staffing challenges also requires innovation.

As in any other area of community safety, investing in this field is critical. Governmental appropriations on the federal, state, and local level can help address wage disparities, outdated facilities, and antiquated equipment. But improvements require so much more.

The present technological and intellectual capacities of the field are not sufficient. For example, a data repository that captures and reports critical metrics on the workforce and operational characteristics

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720.html>; James, Lois, and Natalie Todak. "Prison employment and post-traumatic stress disorder: Risk and protective factors." *American journal of industrial medicine* 61, no. 9 (2018): 725-732; Spinaris, Caterina G., Michael D. Denhof, and Julie A. Kellaway. "Posttraumatic stress disorder in United States corrections professionals: Prevalence and impact on health and functioning." *Desert Waters Correctional Outreach* (2012): 1-32.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.fourpillarscollective.com/about>

of corrections would be helpful. While data about law enforcement agencies and activities are well-captured and published, corrections data is much harder to find. Publicly available data on prisons and jails improves transparency with the public but also increases the visibility of a sector of agencies allowing people to better recognize them as part of their communities. The field also needs more research and evaluation, and improving the collection of and maintenance of data could help foster this needed work.

Technology can also convert complex processes and decisions that require use of valuable time by corrections officers into simple and teachable rules-based work that can eventually become automated. Corrections is in need of innovation on a scale that we call “disruptive.” Disruptive innovation can help us reframe our approach, including replacing existing practices with those that are more efficient, effective, and productive.

Practices borne from disruptive innovation can particularly benefit local jails, which frequently experience budget shortfalls, struggle with understaffing (especially in rural areas), and manage a needy population.

The ability of state and local corrections directors to be innovative is challenging. The political environment does not necessarily allow them to take reasonable and informed risks, to think outside of the box. Having a space to identify and discuss new ideas, some of which may be novel but borne of a thoughtful and innovative approach, is central to improving the intellectual capacity of the profession.

## **THE WORK OF KRJC**

I would be remiss if I did not tell you how I am now trying to contribute to elevating community safety and the health and wellness of corrections professionals. I recently founded the Keystone Restituere Justice Center, which is a non-profit organization in Pennsylvania, to try to achieve many of the goals I have outlined. Our Executive Director is Greg Rowe, who is the former Director of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association and before that served as the criminal justice policy advisor in the Rendell Administration. We provide accessible and translatable, data-driven solutions to the field of corrections and community safety. By focusing on proactive, preventative work that provides support to institutions, agencies, and communities, our work will help them meaningfully improve outcomes.

In addition to the federal work I described earlier, we will also be working on correctional staffing challenges in Pennsylvania. And we will be networking “learning communities” of Pennsylvania’s counties, where we will work with stakeholders and others whose voices must be heard, including individuals directly affected by the systems and policies we are examining and the decisions we may make. We will employ a “pull strategy” to work out sustainable solutions, not overly simplistic solutions to wrongly defined problems, but rather responsive solutions we will shape from a clear understanding of the challenges our institutions and affected individuals face. To do this, we will be focusing on Pennsylvania’s counties whose leaders are most ready for and excited by innovation. Some of our work will involve quantifying information and analyzing data to determine the kinds of technology needed to make fundamental performance improvements. A component of the learning communities that we are very excited about is the potential to partner with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education to utilize the 10 universities across Pennsylvania as intellectual thought partners in our work with county community safety systems. Our work with the universities can help to keep bright young minds in Pennsylvania in order to work in these systems and to provide research and data support for the counties as well.

Another significant challenge is our behavioral health system. Utilizing a similar approach, we will subsequently partner with some of the same counties to help foster and enhance prosecutor led behavioral



diversion. Indeed, our prisons have become the largest behavioral health treatment facilities. And we need to work to change this unfortunate fact.

This is the opportunity to use technology and innovation to make positive and real change. Indeed, in exploring ways other sectors have a role, I spoke with Ann Christenson of the Christensen Institute, who observed that there are opportunities for using technology and innovation to make meaningful and quantifiable changes to the experiences correctional staff and incarcerated people actually feel, without overhauling infrastructure or significantly interrupting operations.

## **CONCLUSION**

I greatly appreciate your time and attention this afternoon. The need to work to address the incredible staffing challenges is great, and all systems and all players need to be involved. Our staffing challenges are not going away anytime soon, and we must be thoughtful, imaginative, inclusive, dynamic and thorough as we ensure that our correctional officers, prisons, jails, incarcerated people and communities as a whole are safe and healthy.