



Communications Workers of America

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Corrections Day at Legislature: Time to Address Critical Pay, Safety Issues is Now

Dead last.

That's where West Virginia's Correctional Officers I rank in starting pay among the rest of the states, according to a report released in January by the West Virginia Legislative Auditor's office.

Massachusetts' correctional officers rank number one in the country with \$51,300 compared with West Virginia's starting salary of \$22,500.

According to CWA International Representative Elaine Harris, it's not just the uniformed officers whose pay is dangerously low. Many support staff in the state's correctional facilities also earn paychecks that qualify them for public assistance. Low pay translates into high turnover, training new hires, overtime and safety issues. CWA Local 2055 represents many of the workers in the Division of Corrections, Regional Jails and the Division of Juvenile Services.

"These problems aren't new," Harris said. "But now they are critical."

Harris has been working with administration officials to address the pay and safety problems. The ripple effect of low pay creates high turnover which generates a need for overtime pay and continual training for newly hired officers. In 2014 the Division of Corrections spent \$1 million to train the new hires. In addition, recent court-mandated changes in juvenile facilities have led to safety concerns for residents and staff.

"Overworking and underpaying correctional officers isn't a good combination for public safety," Harris said. "It's a recipe for disaster not just within these facilities but perhaps outside the walls."

"Administration officials acknowledge the need to pay these workers a living wage. Now it's time for the Legislature to answer this desperate call."

Harris maintains a raise in pay may not cost the state money because it would end the need to spend money spent on training and overtime.

"Because of the low wages, many of these people – uniformed and non-uniformed alike – have been forced to find employment elsewhere so they can provide for their families," Harris said. "These often overlooked public servants provide a valuable service to the public's safety. Yet their safety is often threatened on a daily basis. That doesn't keep them from doing their job."

The legislative auditor's report also concluded there had been a significant spike in "liability and safety issues at DOC correctional facilities as a result of overworked staff, inexperienced correctional officers and increased vacancies. "

"It's time to stop underpaying these workers," Harris said. "The administration agrees. The legislative auditor's report confirms the need. It's now the Legislature's turn to act."