



POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

# More than half of Kentucky's prison jobs are vacant. The overtime is costing millions.

BY JOHN CHEVES

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Eastern Kentucky Correctional Complex JOHN CHEVES [JCHEVES@HERALD-LEADER.COM](mailto:JCHEVES@HERALD-LEADER.COM)



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The Kentucky Department of Corrections has racked up nearly \$13.9 million in overtime pay expenses since the fiscal year began July 1, according to documents obtained by the Herald-Leader.

The agency that runs the state's 13 adult prisons housing about 9,700 inmates can't hire or keep anywhere close to enough corrections officers. Only 917 of its 1,955 positions are filled, Justice and Public Safety Secretary Kerry Harvey said Friday.

"We're not crying wolf here," Harvey said. "We have a statewide vacancy rate of 53 percent of our correctional officers, and in some of our facilities, we have an astounding vacancy rate of 70 percent or more. So you can see there are critical needs here."

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Stretching security so thin has brought greater risks behind bars, he added, including a "significant increase" in drug and gang activity.

"Our inmates are pretty keen observers of the environment that they're living in. They know when we're short-staffed in a severe way, as we are now. And of

course, some of them are going to try to take advantage of that in nefarious ways,” he said.

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All of those unfilled jobs means the officers who are available for duty must work “incredibly long hours,” Harvey said. The Corrections Department also relies on probation and parole officers and other department employees to help fill in at the prisons, and they, too, are collecting overtime, he said.



Justice Secretary Kerry Harvey

Staff have worked “60-hour weeks and 72-hour weeks, routinely,” Harvey said.

Some state agencies can shorten their operating hours or close some locations if they don’t have enough staff, but “obviously in a correctional facility, that is impossible,” Harvey said.

### CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only made the prisons a more difficult place to work, sickening and killing inmates and staff, but quarantines required for infections have depleted the ranks of who is available for any given shift. As of Feb. 1, there were 177 infected staff and 1,523 infected inmates.

However, the long-term problem is that working in a Kentucky state prison doesn't look like an attractive job to many people.

Job postings identify the starting salaries for corrections officers as \$33,000. That's not much better than the \$15 hourly wage offered to start at an Amazon warehouse in Kentucky. In fact, to be more competitive, [Amazon last year offered](#) to boost starting pay even higher, to \$18 an hour, with signing bonuses up to \$3,000.

At the back end, the legislature reduced the state's retirement benefits several years ago to address the massive pension debt. Traditional pensions were replaced with "hybrid" cash-balance plans that put more responsibility on state workers to save enough for their retirements.

While lawmakers' concerns about pension debt are understandable, state pensions "were a necessary and valuable tool that we needed to recruit and retain people to work inside these facilities," Harvey said.

"These jobs are stressful," he said. "Stressful doesn't really do it justice. They are intense. They are not for everybody."

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

To help with recruiting and retention, Gov. Andy Beshear in December approved a 10% pay increase for security staff at the prisons. The Justice Cabinet announced Friday it also will provide smaller incentives, including an extra \$2.13 per hour for employees working between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. at the adult prisons.

Harvey said the Beshear administration supports [House Bill 135](#), which would restore traditional pensions for corrections officers and other hazardous-duty positions in government. The bill's [estimated cost](#) would be \$5.9 million in fiscal year 2023 for the state government and \$15.4 million in that same period for local governments.

The bill was filed Jan. 4 by Rep. Buddy Wheatley, a Democrat from Covington in a Republican-majority legislature where Democratic-backed bills seldom are called up for action. The bill has not moved so far, although Wheatley said Monday that he hopes it will get a House committee hearing in the near future.

Law enforcement officers and firefighters are starting to speak in favor of the bill, which could give it some momentum at the Capitol, Wheatley said.

“Most states have some sort of set-aside that recognizes their hazardous-duty employees, but Kentucky hardly does,” Wheatley said.

Meanwhile, the Corrections Department is on track to spend more than \$23 million for overtime by the end of the fiscal year June 30. The \$228 million that it planned to spend on adult prisons personnel this year already was up 15% from the sum budgeted in the previous year.

The problem won't be fixed until more people want to take a job in the prisons, Harvey said.

“Think about how difficult it is to work in these facilities,” Harvey said. “Think about doing that 60 hours a week, 72 hours a week. We have to address this. We have to have a compensation package that gets us in the market.”

Corrections officers must have a high school diploma or a GED, a driver's license and no convictions for felonies or misdemeanor crimes related to domestic violence or trafficking in drugs. There is a five-week training academy for all applicants who are hired.

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