

Thompson editorial defends correctional employees

Posted On: Sep 15, 2010 (14:56:27)

Local 117 Secretary-Treasurer, Tracey A. Thompson, has published an [editorial in the Tri-City Herald](#) that defends correctional employees and strongly criticizes the Governor's proposal to increase the cost of health insurance for state employees by 117%. The editorial appears in full below:

[Correctional employees deserve affordable insurance](#)

By Tracey A. Thompson

In its Sept. 8 editorial, the Tri-City Herald editorial board insists that state employees, including employees at the Department of Corrections, have not paid their fair share and should agree to the governor's recent proposal for massive increases on the workers' share of health care premiums.

This position is an injustice to correctional employees and their families, who have made significant economic sacrifices during this recession. It is an injustice to the brave correctional employees who perform an essential and extraordinarily difficult, yet often overlooked, job to ensure the safety of our communities.

During the last legislative session, state representatives cut hundreds of jobs at the Department of Corrections. The state closed units at two DOC facilities, reducing Larch Corrections Center by half and cutting McNeil Island Corrections Center from 1,250 to 256 inmate beds. As a result, many correctional employees at institutions across the state lost their jobs.

In addition to the elimination of jobs, correctional employees are paying significant increases in point-of-service health care costs and "temporary layoffs" in the form of unpaid furloughs. These constitute wage cuts that take disposable income out of our communities and delay economic recovery. Now the state is asking correctional employees to pay an additional \$2,316 per year in health care premiums.

Contrary to public perception, correctional employees have not seen a wage increase or cost-of-living adjustment since the recession began. Taking more money out of the pockets of Americans who already are struggling to make ends meet does not make good economic sense for our state.

It's hard to imagine a more dangerous or thankless job than that of a correctional employee, yet the men and women of the Department of Corrections press on. Unseen from public view, correctional employees work among some of society's most violent offenders. Officers are routinely required to break up fights between inmates, and they often sustain debilitating injuries. Correctional employees, both custody and noncustody alike, are frequently the targets of verbal assault and are assaulted outright.

Prison workers in our state have reported being spit on and having toxic cocktails of feces, urine and other bodily fluids thrown at them. Outside of the workplace, they face intimidation and harassment when offenders attempt to access their personal information through public records

requests or when inmates with a score to settle are released into their communities.

Think about it -- every interaction at work inside a prison is with a known convicted felon. Can you say the same at your job?

As dangerous a job as it is, corrections work is equally important. Correctional employees protect us from society's criminals, while at the same time, help to educate and rehabilitate those offenders intent on returning to our communities to resume healthy and productive lives.

Thousands of residents of Southeastern Washington are employed at the Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Connell and at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla. It is a sad irony that members of our community who put their lives on the line to protect the public now are facing a 117 percent increase in their health care premiums and that newspapers across the state are suggesting that they need to pay more.

Instead of punishing public employees, we should be identifying ways to make health care more affordable for working families in our communities while making the wealthiest pay their share. The passage of fair-minded tax reform like Initiative 1098 would be a good start.

However we decide to solve our state's economic problems, to say that correctional employees have not shared the pain of the economic downturn simply is untrue and unjust.