

JLARC Hearing Testimony – April 20, 2016

Michelle Woodrow, Director of Corrections & Law Enforcement – Teamsters 117

Good afternoon, Chair Braun and committee members. For the record, my name is Michelle Woodrow and I am the President and Director of Corrections and Law Enforcement for Teamsters Local 117.

Teamsters Local 117 represents 5400 devoted public servants working inside the Washington state adult prisons. They sacrifice their own safety for ours, and we owe it to them to ensure that staffing levels within the prisons are appropriate. After all, staffing levels have a direct correlation to prison safety, and therefore to the well-being of staff, offenders, and the communities that staff are charged to protect.

Unfortunately, the Department of Corrections is currently operating under a staffing model that is outdated, inflexible, and inadequate. It is a model that was established in 1988. Since that time, it has not been comprehensively reviewed to ensure it is appropriate for the types of offenders being housed based on the risk associated with the demographics and offenses of the offender population, the deficiencies as a result of aging facilities, and a substantial increase in duties performed by correctional workers as a result of safety mandates imposed pursuant to ESB 5907 that was passed in 2011 after Officer Jayme Biendl's murder.

There are two conclusions that we believe are inevitable when thinking about staffing within the prison system. First, the staffing model has not be updated in 28 years and does not take into account the additional demands placed on staff since ESB 5907. Second, in order to correct other issues identified in the audit, we believe the DOC will need to add additional staff.

We think a staffing model audit conducted by an external entity is warranted and that a decision to forego such an audit would be irresponsible. The external audit should focus on the additional demands already placed on staff while at the same time considering how many additional staff will be needed to remedy the issues around staff searches, cell searches, visibility, and searches of people other than staff entering the facility. In addition to those considerations, the audit should contemplate the unique physical layout of each facility. The current 'cookie cutter' model used to determine how many staff should be assigned to an area based on the custody level of the offenders being housed is outdated and dangerous. It would be irresponsible to cling to a universalized formula for staffing, as the audit report (on page 9) expressed unequivocally:

The facilities vary dramatically in age, from the Washington State Penitentiary, which opened in 1886, to the newest facility, Mission Creek, which was opened in 2005. The age and physical structure of each facility, as well as the mix of offender populations and sizes, means the state must customize its efforts at each facility to best promote staff safety.

Another consideration is sentencing reform, which has led to the DOC housing less offenders than other prison systems across the county, but those offenders are older, more violent, and more likely to suffer from mental illness. Due to this unique situation in WA, we believe an external audit will find a need for increased staffing levels.

Please consider appropriating funds to support a staffing model audit conducted by an external entity. This is vital to ensure the safety of our members working inside WA prisons.

I would like to thank the Auditor's office and their staff for the work putting together this important report. We also appreciate you holding this hearing and thank you for the opportunity to comment. We look forward to ongoing discussions with you and I am available to answer any questions.