

## Do more to enhance safety of prison staff

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The recent assault of two officers at the Monroe Correctional Complex is yet another reminder of the sacrifice our state's correctional employees make to keep all of us safe.

In the incident, an inmate blindsided an officer, punching him in the face, and then attacked a second officer who was providing backup.

This incident follows a terrifying one earlier in the year at the prison in Clallam Bay, where an inmate pried off part of a metal stool and struck an officer over the head until he lost consciousness.

These kinds of attacks occur too frequently in our prisons. According to a US Department of Justice report published in 2013, correctional staff suffer 2,000 injuries due to violent incidents every year, more than workers in any other profession.

Prisons in our state are particularly dangerous. The Department of Corrections acknowledges that "our prisons have a high proportion of high-risk, violent offenders, and consequently the safety of both staff and offenders is a concern."

Assaults in a prison setting cannot be avoided altogether, but we owe it to corrections staff to make sure we are doing everything we can to keep them safe.

Unfortunately, not enough is being done.

Correctional staff need more training opportunities to prepare them for a dangerous profession. If programming for inmates is a good use of taxpayers' dollars, educational opportunities must be provided to our public servants as well.

Washington prisons operate under a staffing model that was established in 1988. An external audit of staffing levels would identify parts of the prison system that are understaffed and make recommendations for improvements.

The Department of Corrections needs to reform its retirement system. Most correctional staff work well into their sixties before they can afford to step down from state service. Staff should be able to retire at an age commensurate with other public safety professionals.

Pay for corrections work in our state must be equitable. Increasing pay will boost morale and help recruit and retain qualified staff, thereby creating a safer environment for staff and offenders alike.

In May, we celebrate National Correctional Employees week. This is a time to recognize the brave men and women who work in our state's prisons.

Prison staff are officers, sergeants, nurses, counselors, dentists, psychologists, prison chaplains, clerical staff, maintenance staff, and others. They put their lives on the line every day when they report to work.

Our recognition of their sacrifice must go beyond gratitude in words alone. It must consist of concrete, legislative change that results in a safer, more dignified working environment.