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Tennessee Jail Staff Wellness

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Background

In an effort to address correctional staffing challenges and increase job satisfaction among staff working in Tennessee's jails, the Tennessee Corrections Institute (TCI) partnered with researchers from Austin Peay State University (APSU) and the Crime and Justice Institute (CJI) to conduct interviews with a sample of jail staff across the state. TCI is a state agency that regulates standards and guidelines, monitors certifications, provides technical assistance and research, and educates staff within local jails and adult correctional facilities. With these interviews, TCI aimed to learn more about the stressors jail staff face and potential strategies to increase job satisfaction. This project is funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, as part of Tennessee's participation in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

Interviews covered both large and medium sized jails in more urban areas, as well as smaller facilities in more rural areas.¹ Between November 2022 and January 2023, CJI met with security staff at six county jails across Tennessee, including in Greene, Hawkins, Sumner, Dyer, Smith, and Haywood Counties. Participants were mostly corrections officers, but also included those with other titles such as Captain and Lieutenant. This brief summarizes the findings from the series of interviews CJI conducted with staff in six Tennessee jails, including participant demographics, an overview of major themes, and correctional staff recommendations to improve staff wellness. These recommendations include ways to address staffing challenges, improve staff training, strengthen communication, support staff wellness, and bolster support and recognition for staff.

Five main themes emerged from the interviews with staff in these facilities.

1. Staffing challenges, including recruitment, retention, dangers, and low pay

Staff concerns included high turnover rates and the sense that jails have difficulty attracting appropriate candidates. As a result, staff work many overtime shifts that can lead to burnout. Staff also said low pay is a factor in hiring struggles and job stress.

2. Acute need for additional training

According to those interviewed, the current training provided for new officers is not sufficient to prepare them for the role. Jail staff reported they may need to respond to scenarios for which they are not equipped or trained to handle, such as helping incarcerated individuals struggling with mental health issues.

3. Challenges with communication between staff and from leadership

Staff reported that communication across different shifts is lacking. They also discussed a lack of clear communication from leadership about critical issues, including changes to internal agency policies, such as use of the sanctions matrix.

4. Impacts on mental and physical wellness

The difficult nature of the correctional role and environment can negatively impact staff mental and physical health as well as interpersonal relationships and their home life. When staff regularly work overtime shifts, they have little time for stress coping mechanisms (e.g., physical activity) and family and friends, which can compound their stress.

5. The need for additional support & recognition

Staff highlighted a lack of services and a lack of awareness of services to address job-related stressors. Additionally, jail staff said that leadership does not sufficiently recognize their hard work and dedication.

1. CJI staff utilized the Interview Guide developed by APSU for these interviews.

Characteristics of Jail Interviewees

As part of the interview process, CJI asked participants some demographic questions at the start of each interview. There was some variation among participants who provided demographic information, but most were white (79%), male (61%), and served in the corrections officer role (77%).

Additionally, most had worked in corrections for five years or less (61%) and had been employed at their current facility for five years or less (87%) at the time of these interviews.

Demographic Characteristics of Responding Participants

Category	Demographic Characteristics	Number	Percent
Gender (n=31)	Male	19	61%
	Female	12	39%
Age (n=27)	Under 24	0	0%
	24-34	16	59%
	35-44	5	19%
	45 and older	6	22%
Race (n=29)	White	23	79%
	Black	6	21%
Position (n=31)	Officer	24	77%
	Sergeant	3	10%
	Other	4	12%
Time Working at Current Facility (n=31)	Less than 1 year	6	19%
	1-5 years	21	68%
	More than 5 years	4	13%
Time Working in Corrections (n=31)	Less than 1 year	2	6%
	1-5 years	17	55%
	More than 5 years	12	39%

Major Themes

As noted, five main themes emerged during the interviews:

- 1. Staffing challenges including recruitment, retention, dangers, and low pay**
- 2. Acute need for additional training**
- 3. Challenges with communication between staff and from leadership**
- 4. Workplace impacts on wellness**
- 5. The need for additional support and recognition**

1. Staffing Challenges: Recruitment, Retention, Dangers, and Low Pay

Jail staff are dealing with significant burnout due to concerns around four interrelated staffing challenges – from 1) difficulties in recruitment and onboarding; 2) increasing burdens put on existing staff contributing to low retention rates; 3) increased dangers due to understaffing; and 4) low pay. Staffing shortages in corrections environments are currently pervasive across the country. Tennessee jail staff interviewed attributed their high vacancy rates to several issues. First, they noted that their jails struggle to attract and hire appropriate candidates. For example, new hires may be young, inexperienced, and may not understand or be suited for what the job entails. One recommendation staff raised is to have some type of job shadowing either before hiring a new officer or early in the training process to allow potential employees to preview the day-to-day job responsibilities and jail environment.

Retention is the second issue around the high number of vacancies according to staff. When new hires come to the job with limited knowledge and experience, additional burdens of training and oversight are placed on the more experienced staff, which can cause added stress and fatigue. These more experienced officers must then continue to offer support for less experienced staff and/or fill any gaps if the new officers leave for another job because they were not prepared for the corrections environment. Taking on additional training and support responsibilities results in significant challenges with staff retention. Further, this training and oversight burden is coupled with mandated overtime shifts that stretch the capacity of existing experienced staff.

Despite the amount of overtime worked, shifts may still be understaffed, making handling emergency situations more stressful and dangerous. In some jails, for example, medical

and mental health staff do not work nights and weekends. If there is a medical emergency, officers must call EMS to respond rather than having access to in-house medical staff. This lack of immediate access to key services and facility leadership after daytime hours leaves officers and their immediate supervisors to deal with challenging situations that arise and can mean staff are pulled away from their other responsibilities for a period.

Further, many staff noted low pay as a major shortcoming of this work that impacts hiring and retention and is an additional stressor. For example, jail staff reported either themselves or their coworkers being unable to pay bills at times or struggling to pay for childcare. Participants also expressed frustrations about the lack of increases in wages; they feel county commissioners, who can authorize pay raises, do not fully understand what working in a jail entails. Other frustrations included trainees receiving the same pay as experienced officers.

Given the significant challenges with attracting and retaining appropriate candidates, long hours, and low pay, staff reported feeling burnt out and expressed concern for their coworkers. Jail staff discussed missing time with their families, including holidays and other important events, because of demanding work schedules that include mandated overtime. In addition, some participants reported being moved between day and night shifts, which impacted their physical health (e.g., insufficient sleep). This stress may be compounded by the burden of training and supporting new staff, responding to emergency situations without support, and/or feeling unable to pay bills. These experiences all contribute to burnout among jail staff.

2. Acute Need for Additional Training

Staff interviewed indicated there is insufficient training for officers to effectively carry out certain responsibilities of their job. They described encountering situations they are not trained to address, such as mental health or medical challenges. In addition, staff may also be expected to assist with technological issues, including problems with tablets used by the incarcerated population or payment machines used by families and others, with no prior training.

Staff noted that the time new officers spend working alongside a Field Training Officer is essential, and that

agencies should expand training for new officers to include more scenario-based activities. Staff discussed discrepancies in what the current training encompasses versus what staff encounter in the jails; expanding this type of training could help better prepare new staff for their role, and hopefully boost retention rates. Corrections staff are also interested in new or additional training to aid in difficult interactions with those incarcerated in jails. Recommendations included training in defensive tactics, an overview of legal liability, effective ways to communicate with and support individuals struggling with mental health needs, and crisis intervention techniques.

3. Challenges with Communication Between Staff and from Leadership

Those interviewed described communication-related challenges they experience in their role, including lack of clear communication from leadership to staff and between staff on different shifts. Staff noted that line officers may not receive consistent, clear communication about decisions made by leadership. This lack of communication makes understanding policy and practice changes difficult. For example, interviews described how leadership may “write up” officers for failing to follow a new policy, but that policy was not communicated to line staff. Correctional staff may also be unaware of which versions of the policies are the correct ones, and some mentioned they have received conflicting orders. Turnover among leadership can exacerbate these challenges.

Jail staff also reported a lack of communication between staff on different shifts. For example, key information about incidents may not be passed on to the next shift because staff are tired after having worked overtime and are focused on getting home. Passing along information about the prior shift is crucial for staff safety in a correctional setting, as well as safety for those housed in the jail. Additionally, communication gaps can contribute to inconsistency across shifts in understanding and application of policy or procedures and this can lead to confusion and frustration.

4. Workplace Impacts on Wellness

While staff cited benefits such as stability of employment and the rewarding nature of helping others, staff depicted a challenging set of occupational hazards and job-related stressors impacting personal wellness. Given the nature of corrections, officers are exposed to and required to intervene in violent and other traumatic situations and stressors such as suicides, suicide attempts, and drug overdoses among the incarcerated population. Staff also noted other job-related stressors including feeling restless or claustrophobic in the facilities with little opportunity to get outside while on shift; one person described how this makes them feel incarcerated themselves. These experiences, along with any past traumas (e.g., military and family trauma), can negatively impact officers’ mental and physical health. For example, one participant noted high blood pressure as an impact of work-related stress. Others discussed knowing colleagues who have committed suicide.

The exposure to significant job-related stressors, and even traumatic situations, can impact officers’ behavior and interactions outside of work. Staff reported feeling hypervigilant and even paranoid while not at work. They are concerned about encountering people previously incarcerated in their jail while out in the community. Staff reported worrying about their safety and that of their families and are often on alert. Staff also reported that it is difficult to discuss their experiences on the job with people outside of work, especially with friends or family who have not worked in corrections or law enforcement. They discussed not wanting to burden loved ones with their work experiences. This can create distance or strain in relationships, as well as leaving the employee with fewer people with whom to talk and receive support.

In addition to the impact on interpersonal relationships, misconceptions about the role of corrections officers can also be a source of stress that impact how people who work in jails interact with their communities. Officers reported that critical attitudes from community members about corrections staff can create feelings of isolation. A few Black officers in one jail described this being more pronounced among their family and friends, as corrections officers can be seen as law enforcement at a time and in communities where that profession is not well-regarded.

Given their exposure to a difficult work environment that includes these occupational hazards and significant job-related stressors, officers reported experiencing several health and wellness issues. These include poor mental and physical health outcomes, strain on interpersonal relationships, and feelings of isolation due to the public having misconceptions about the role of correctional officers. While some described their coping mechanisms, such as spending time with loved ones or outdoor activities, staff cited that it can be difficult to employ stress-reduction strategies when regularly working overtime shifts.

5. Need for Additional Support and Recognition

When asked about support for employee health and wellness, corrections staff expressed concerns that the jails have little to offer in-house and that there may be a lack of awareness around available resources for wellness; many described a desire to seek a culture change to better access or receive supports. They expressed that having a trustworthy person to talk to about stressors, acknowledging the stigma around mental health in jails, and having more support and recognition from leadership, could help to fill those gaps.

While there are some available resources, including the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), those interviewed voiced concerns that not all staff were aware of the resource. Staff noted that if anyone asked for help, jail administration would point them in the direction of community-based services such as individual therapy. Related to this, staff highlighted that it would be helpful to have more information about what agency resources and community resources are available to support staff.

A few participants suggested having a person (e.g., a peer supporter or clergy member) in the jail setting who staff could speak with about their stresses and to help with coping mechanisms could help address the lack of supportive services offered to staff. This, however, would require a change in culture around mental health and help seeking. The jail staff noted that a stigma exists among corrections professionals; they are “supposed to be tough” and not ask for help. They talked about the fear that seeking help might result in negative consequences, like being seen as unfit for the job.

Given the gaps participants saw in resources available to staff, participants discussed the importance of increased employee recognition as a strategy to make staff feel supported. Some expressed disappointment that staff tend to hear from leadership about shortcomings in job performance. They would like to be recognized and appreciated for the work they do and for good performance. Staff suggested leaders could use recognition and incentives, such as an employee-of-the-month program, flexibility in choosing shifts, and increased pay.

Conclusion

Throughout the interviews, jail staff discussed shared experiences and noted areas for improvement. Many expressed challenges with finding appropriate candidates for hiring and retaining staff, as well as demanding overtime requirements resulting in burnout. They frequently noted the need for increased pay and challenges with lack of clear communication from leadership about policy changes. Many felt that more training is needed to prepare new staff for their roles.

Notably, working in a jail can impact staff wellness, including mental and physical health. Many cited that it can be difficult to “leave work at work,” and that personal relationships may suffer as a result. Staff may also be exposed to traumatic events in this role, such as violence or suicide. Because of this, participants discussed the need for support, and many emphasized the need for resources to help them cope with work-related stressors.

Participants offered concrete suggestions for improvement, including taking steps such as the following:

To address staffing shortages, overtime, and low pay:

Allow staff members more flexibility and/or input on shift selection, including more choice in when and how much overtime to work.

Implement bonuses or recognition for staff with many years of service and/or those with exemplary performance.

Increase pay. Staff suggested educating county commissioners on what the job of those in jails looks like, and further suggested that commissioners be invited to tour and spend time in the jails during different shifts as a way to inform employee pay.

To improve staff training:

Provide training on a wider range of topics, and ensure training includes practice via scenarios based on what employees will face in their jobs.

Increase job shadowing opportunities for new employees early in the hiring or training process to give them a better sense of what the job entails.

To strengthen communication:

Improve and increase communication from leaders on policy and practice changes, including why the changes are being made.

Ensure shift briefings are conducted and designed to focus on key information sharing and increasing consistency between shifts.

To support staff wellness:

Provide frequent communication to staff about the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and any other staff health and wellness programs to ensure all staff are aware of employee supports.

Make a peer support officer and/or trusted faith leader available to staff. If this is offered, staff suggested it would be helpful if leadership provided clear communication to staff about when that support is available and how to access it, and to ensure in policy that interactions with these resources are confidential.

To bolster support and recognition for staff:

Implement employee recognition programs, such as employee-of-the-month.

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