



Wisconsin State Legislature

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Legislative Audit Bureau Releases Audit on Adult Prisons

The Legislative Audit Bureau released an audit of adult prison operations earlier this month that examines some of the main stressors to the corrections system in the state. The Department of Corrections (DOC) operates 36 adult institutions, including 20 prisons and 16 minimum security correctional centers. It also contracts with counties to place inmates in county jails when there is no space available at a DOC facility and provides security for the Department of Health Services' Wisconsin Resource Center, which houses inmates with mental health problems. In 2017-18, the Department of Corrections spent about \$934 million on these operations.

The Legislative Audit Bureau was asked to complete this audit because of rising costs of operating these facilities and looked at trends in revenue, expenditures and prison population. The audit found that Wisconsin's prison population increased by 7.9% between 2011 and 2018 to a total of 23,675 inmates. Wisconsin is the only Midwestern state whose prison population increased during this time period.

Staffing Wisconsin's prisons and correctional centers continues to be an issue for the department. Employee turnover increased from 18 percent in fiscal year 2013-14 to 24 percent in fiscal year 2017-18. The turnover rate for prison guards increased the most, going from 17.8 percent to 26.1 percent. The audit found that the turnover rate varied by location but four institutions had guard vacancy rates over 20 percent in July of 2018. To deal with the turnover and vacancy rate, DOC relies heavily on overtime to meet its staffing needs. Since fiscal year 2013-14, overtime hours have increased 50.7 percent. The department spent \$397.5 million on wages in fiscal year 2017-18. \$52.9 million, or 13.3 percent, was for overtime worked by prison guards. The audit found

that there were 438 guards who worked an average of 16 hours of overtime each week in fiscal year 2017-18.

One of the largest increases in expenditures has been for pharmaceuticals and medical supplies. The audit attempted to evaluate the way health care is delivered to inmates, but found the records kept by the department were not complete enough to conduct a meaningful analysis. The auditors are requesting that the agency submit a comprehensive report on inmate health care to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by January of next year. Additionally, the auditors recommend consolidating inmate transportation to medical appointments to reduce costs related to transportation and security personnel and increasing the use of telemedicine to reduce the need to transport inmates to different locations.

Wisconsin's adult prison population has exceeded the design capacity of existing facilities for a number of years. In fiscal year 2017-18, the total number of inmates housed was at 133.8 percent of design capacity, although this varied by facility. The department expects the adult inmate population to grow by two percent each year of this biennium. To address the capacity issue, the department contracts with counties to house inmates in county jails. The audit found that the department had contracts for 578 beds in county jails, but did not have written contracts with all of the counties in whose jails inmates were placed. The auditors recommended establishing written contracts for each county where inmates are housed.

The audit pointed out some long-standing issues at the state prisons, such as ongoing staffing and capacity issues. This information is helpful as the legislature takes up the Department of Corrections portion of the 2019-21 State Budget. It also brought to light some issues, like inmate health management and county contracts, where the department can improve its internal processes.

If you have any questions about any of the information I have included or if you have suggestions on other topics or issues you would like learn more about, you may call my office toll-free at (800) 991-5541; write me at P.O. Box 7882, Madison, WI 53707; or e-mail me at:

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