

It's time...to do the right thing for TDCJ



During the 81st Legislative Session the demand and allocation of state appropriations has never been more contested. While the economic environment in Texas rates far better than many other states, the nation's economic challenges have brought a unique focus to this session.

In the mix of agencies working hard to meet an ever-growing challenge to deliver on its mission is the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Faced with high turnover, non-competitive salaries and a mission that is difficult on a good day, TDCJ should be high on the list of priorities for the Legislature to address.

When it comes to salaries, correctional officers have been behind the curve financially for years. This has contributed to a turnover rate that left the agency with nearly 4,000 staff vacancies as recent as the fall of 2007. While turnover issues and competing with the private sector for talent is a daunting challenge for every state agency in Texas, the turnover problems at TDCJ are incredible.

During fiscal year 2007 the turnover rate at TDCJ was 24 percent; however, as Executive Director Brad Livingston points out in his interview on page six, the turnover rate for new staff during their first 12 months with the agency was a staggering 43 percent.

High turnover at agencies like TDCJ brings on a specific set of challenges with respect to training and the lack of real experience for new hires. This directly relates to potential safety concerns, not only for the correctional officers and the staff, but for the inmates as well.

It is extremely important that the Legislature recognizes that even in difficult times they need to take aggressive steps to get salaries for correctional officers up to a competitive level so that the process of reducing the turnover and building a more experience and well-trained staff can proceed.

Not only does high turnover and the job vacancies (approximately 1450 currently) make it extra challenging to manage the agency from a staffing perspective, those officers currently on the job are having to work extraordinary hours. Their work is already difficult by nature without adding the additional stress of the long hours they are needed to work today.

The work place for these correctional officers is hard. The units have no air conditioning, the facilities are rife with disrespect from the inmates, and there is always the underlying concern for personal safety. These officers are true public servants in every sense of the term. They are doing the work that all Texas taxpayers expect, yet few are qualified or capable of doing. And then to ask these people to perform this work for non-competitive wages creates a major problem for TDCJ in regards to recruiting and retaining a well-trained staff.

Livingston states that TDCJ has requested \$450 million, or a 20 percent pay increase for the upcoming biennium. It is his belief this would provide the agency with the opportunity to put their substantial staffing shortage behind them. This staffing shortage has been allowed to exist for too long. The Legislature needs to accept the responsibility of fixing this problem. TPEA has been working aggressively with the TDCJ, the House and the Senate to address these issues.

TDCJ employees represent over 40 percent of TPEA's active membership. We are very concerned for the well being of these employees, as well as the agency being able to meet its challenge. We should all feel thankful that the management of TDCJ is operating the agency extremely well under difficult circumstances, and that they have developed a dedicated, professional staff to carry out its mission. While they have been "chipping away" at the staff shortages, there is much work to be done. They are shouldering a difficult burden and we commend them for their work. Now we need to get them the help they deserve...today!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary Anderson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Gary W. Anderson
TPEA Executive Director