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New Report: Colorado Corrections in Crisis as Legislators Continue to Open Prison Beds Despite Severe Staffing Shortage

The FY2023-24 Long Bill set to be filed Monday will include a \$1 billion-plus DOC budget that expands prison capacity, which would be “dangerous and irresponsible”

“To avert disaster, the state must take meaningful steps to manage the prison population and continue aggressive hiring efforts”

DENVER — The Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition released a report Thursday that highlights the severe staffing shortage at the state Department of Corrections and the implications of continuing to open additional prison beds. The full report, “Colorado Corrections in Crisis,” is available at <https://bit.ly/colorado-corrections-in-crisis>.

“The sheer number and frequency of DOC staff vacancies have reached the point at which: staff and inmate safety and wellbeing have been compromised; basic prison operations have been interrupted; and the delivery of quality rehabilitative, medical/behavioral health treatment has been effectively disabled,” according to the report.

“With an unemployment rate below 3%, competition from the private sector and higher-paying law enforcement agencies, and the DOC’s unique hiring challenges, it is time for Colorado to face a harsh reality: There are simply not enough people in the available labor pool to meet DOC’s staff needs.”

To cope with the staffing crisis, DOC has instituted mandatory overtime that raises significant concerns about staff members' physical and mental health, substance use, relationship stability, and safety; reassigned program and teaching staff to security duties; and lowered hiring and training standards. These strategies "should be extremely alarming to policymakers," said CCJRC Executive Director Christie Donner.

Yet the Governor's Office requested, and the General Assembly approved, opening another 400 prison beds as part of the FY2022-23 DOC supplemental bill (SB23-113). Additionally, the FY2023-24 Long Bill set to be introduced Monday will include a \$1 billion-plus DOC budget that includes more than \$7.3 million to open 542 more state prison beds and 198 more private prison beds.

CCJRC and Colorado Workers for Innovative and New Solutions (Colorado WINS), a union representing more than 24,000 state employees, say it is "dangerous and irresponsible" for the General Assembly to continue expanding prison capacity amid the current staffing crisis.

"The status quo is no way to treat state employees and inmates or operate the DOC. Just throwing money at the problem will not make it go away, and simply warehousing people in prisons does not promote rehabilitation and public safety. To resolve the DOC's staffing crisis, policymakers and the Governor must take meaningful steps to manage the prison population, as well as continue aggressive hiring and retention efforts that do not lower hiring and training standards."

The report also includes recommendations for strengthening prison population management measures (PPMM), which were created by a state law approved unanimously by the state Senate and House of Representatives in 2018. The PPMM is triggered when the prison vacancy rate is 3% or less to help mitigate the need for DOC to open more prison beds, use sled-beds, or double-bunk.

The report features more than 20 firsthand accounts from DOC employees and inmates at correctional facilities around the state, describing the staffing shortage and problems that stem from it.

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The Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition is a nonprofit organization dedicated to eliminating the overuse of the criminal justice system and advancing community health and safety. For more information, visit <https://www.ccjrc.org>.