

Correctional Officers: Hiring Requirements and Wages

In a similar survey *Corrections Compendium* conducted early in 2004, 43 percent of the respondents in U.S. correctional systems noted that they experienced problems in recruiting qualified candidates for correctional officer positions. The current survey indicated that little has changed. Forty-four U.S. correctional systems and four Canadian systems responded to the survey, with 44 percent of them experiencing problems in recruitment.

Recruitment Efforts

Twenty-three percent of the U.S. respondents stated that they were experiencing no difficulty in recruitment efforts, and only little problems were reported in Minnesota. No recruitment problems were reported in Ontario. The major obstacles indicated by the reporting systems were the rural locations and lack of resources of many of their facilities and competition for wages with law enforcement and the private sector in all locations. Mississippi identified the recruitment of male officers as its major problem.

In order to fill the necessary correctional officer positions, numerous recruitment practices are in use by the reporting systems. Job/career fairs are the primary method mentioned. Other methods noted were stipends for applicable rural locations; bonuses paid for successful employee referrals; media advertising of all types; Web site postings; promotions to high school guidance counselors; on-site recruitment at universities and community colleges; billboard advertising; speaking presentations at local group meetings; internship opportunities; signing bonuses; paying shift differentials and overtime wages; providing transportation to/from certain locations; providing free uniforms or meals on the premises; and holding an open house for the public at facilities. Louisiana reallocates its correctional officers to sergeant status after six months, which includes an 11 percent increase in wages. And Maryland has developed a contract with its retired officers to fill limited positions. Specific programs to recruit veterans also were prevalent.

As conditions for employment, 14 percent of the U.S. reporting systems do not include pre-employment elements in their hiring policies. Those systems include Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and Vermont. The remaining reporting sys-

tems incorporate a wide variety of pre-employment techniques, such as written exams, oral interviews, general background checks, a general medical or a physical fitness examination, psychological evaluations, previous employment references, a civil service test, fingerprinting, or a correctional officer overview video. Additionally, 36 percent of the reporting U.S. systems conduct drug screens of their applicants and 34 percent conduct specific criminal background checks. Manitoba also conducts specific criminal background checks, including checking for a history of child abuse.

Wages

Louisiana, South Dakota and Nova Scotia require a minimum of 120 hours of preservice training for their correctional officer candidates. Preservice hours range upward to 480 in Alabama, 532 in Florida, 576 in New Jersey and 640 hours in North Carolina. Newfoundland maintains a training schedule of one year for its correctional officers.

As noted in Table 2, the systems were asked to state the wage range paid to their correctional officers at entry level, after the first year of service, and for captains or their equivalent. The minimum starting wage in New Jersey is \$45,549. Top wages for the entry-level category were reported by Wisconsin as \$50,759, Colorado as \$52,368 and Nevada as \$53,390.

After the first year of service, the highest starting wages are \$41,154 in Nevada and \$50,105 in New Jersey. The top wages paid by U.S. systems after the first year are \$57,236 in New York, \$58,401 in Nevada, \$58,802 in Pennsylvania and \$72,136 in New Jersey.

For the category of captains or the equivalent, a minimum starting wage rate is applied in Connecticut at \$62,780 and at \$65,873 in New York. The top wages paid to captains or their equivalent is \$80,531 in Connecticut, \$82,525 in New York, \$84,876 in Delaware and tops out at \$109,297 in New Jersey.

Fringe Benefits

A cafeteria selection plan of fringe benefits is available in 55 percent of the reporting U.S. systems and in none of the reporting Canadian systems. The systems were asked to identify specific benefits included in their packages from the following list: cost-of-living increases, merit increases, paid holidays and vacation days, sick days, personal days, retirement pay, health insurance, dental insurance, disability pay, and life insurance (see

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Table 3). The dollar amount, if any, of cost of living or merit increases is determined by the state legislatures in 18 percent of the systems. Numerous other benefits were provided, such as longevity bonuses, flexible spending accounts, shift and weekend pay differentials, meal allowances (or for free), uniforms and uniform cleaning services, hearing aid benefits, a prescription drug plan, and eligibility for retirement at age 50 (Pennsylvania).

Educational Requirements

A GED is the sole requirement for correctional officer candidates in Delaware, Maine, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Vermont. A candidate must be at least 18 years old in Louisiana with a valid driver's license; in Michigan, candidates must complete 15 semesters or 23 college credits in specifically related courses by the end of their first 18 months of employment; and candidates must pass a civil service exam in Pennsylvania. Educational requirements can be waived for experience only in Hawaii, North Dakota, South Carolina, Virginia and Newfoundland. Twenty percent of the reporting U.S. systems do not have written guidelines for promotion opportunities in place, while each of the reporting Canadian systems do. Reimbursements for taking outside courses may be provided in whole or in part by 66 percent of the reporting U.S. systems, primarily for those courses that relate directly to the job. Hawaii offers paid leave when attending training in CPR, firearms qualification, blood borne pathogens identification and computer training.

Retention

In spite of all the methods employed by the systems and the costs incurred with recruitment efforts and the training of correctional officers, the turnover rate of those officers in their first year of employment could still be considered staggering. For instance, the turnover rate is 35 percent to 40 percent in Missouri, 37 percent in Mississippi, 45 percent in Nebraska, 48 percent in South Carolina, 54 percent in South Dakota and reaches 67 percent in Louisiana. Turnover rates were not available or not tracked in six reporting U.S. systems and Correctional Service Canada. Positively, low turnover rates (3 to 4 percent) were reported by Massachusetts, Michigan and Rhode Island, and Maine has a 4 percent turnover rate.

Table 5 identifies the formal retention efforts being used by the correctional systems. Perhaps adding new efforts to the cadres of methods currently in use may lower the turnover rates in future surveys on the subject.

For information on monthly surveys featured in this or past issues of Corrections Compendium, contact Cece Hill, CECA Services Inc., P.O. Box 81826, Lincoln, NE 68501; (402) 420-0602.