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# Face the Facts: We Need to Focus on Recruitment

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**I**t is becoming increasingly more difficult to recruit, train and retain a correctional work force. As baby boomers retire from the work force, organizations are losing key people in critical positions. This is one of the greatest challenges corrections will face in the future.

A labor shortage is defined as an economic condition in which there are insufficient qualified employees to fill the marketplace demands for employment at any price. Economists sometimes refer to this condition as “an insufficiency in the labor force.” State and local budget restraints have kept many state departments of correction from being fully staffed, and competition is further adding to states’ staffing woes as some workers realize that jobs in the private sector may come with more pay and less bureaucracy.

Uncompetitive salaries are often cited as one reason for corrections’ inability to attract qualified candidates. Hiring skilled nurses is especially difficult because acute-care nurses can make as much as \$15,000 to \$20,000 more in the private sector. Also, sign-on bonuses of \$10,000 or more are often used to lure nurses and other professionals to the private sector. As the need for correctional officers, social workers, and health, mental health and educational professionals increases during the next decades, educational outreach, career incentives and financial opportunities are needed to attract qualified workers with specializations.

Impending health and mental health work force shortages nationwide are growing more urgent, and new findings show that the problem will grow during the next four years. Across the U.S., shortages of skilled state and local public health workers are being documented and forecasted as tens of thousands of workers enter or prepare to enter retirement. By 2012, more than 50 percent of some state health agency work forces will be eligible to retire.

North Carolina’s state community college system stated that it must produce thousands of additional graduates each year to deal with North Carolina’s looming worker shortage. By 2016, the state’s population is expected to grow by 15 percent, and a huge wave of baby boomer retirements means community colleges will need to produce 19,000 more graduates each year — a 75 percent increase from current numbers.

Several jurisdictions and adult and juvenile correctional agencies have developed work force plans to identify potential gaps in the work force and to develop strategies to address those gaps. With a strategic work force plan, a detention center, correctional agency or community corrections program can determine if its human resources plans are aligned with overall goals and objectives. For correctional agencies, having a work force plan that reflects trends and innovative approaches is critical to addressing future work force challenges.

The graying of the work force is adding to the shortage. The New York City Department of Corrections knows that 44 percent of its uniformed employees will become eligible for retirement in the next four years. Past experience at that DOC has shown that, approximately 60 to 75 percent of employees will retire at the earliest point of eligibility. Identifying approaches to keep experienced and veteran employees on the job longer is, in many cases, an advantage to the correctional agency and to the employee who wishes to keep working.

Recent statistics show that less than one-quarter of Americans see the graying of the work force as a problem for the government. Right now, however, shortages of qualified state and local workers are having very real impacts. ACA needs to play an active role in identifying these challenges and potential solutions. In this issue, there are articles addressing employee empowerment; work force improvement through staff certification; the role of training and mentoring; and recruitment and retention of staff through culture change. This issue will shed light on the challenges that lie ahead and suggest some solutions that can be replicated nationwide. ♦