

Safety in State Correctional Facilities

Update to 2020 Evaluation Report

February 2022

Problems Identified

- **Chronic Staffing Shortages.** Even though the Department of Corrections (DOC) nearly quadrupled its use of overtime during the 2010s, many prisons struggled to meet daily staffing needs. Limited staffing reduced DOC's ability both to monitor prisoners and to provide them with recreation, therapy, and employment—activities associated with lower violence levels.
- **Lack of Systematic Oversight.** DOC had not formally assessed how safe its prisons are, nor had it collected the data that would be needed to make such an evaluation. An internal DOC peer review process was helpful, but occurred infrequently and stalled in recent years.
- **Hostile Workplace Environments.** One in three DOC staff we surveyed told us that bullying and harassment among staff was a problem in the prisons where they worked. Some told us disturbing stories of retaliation by staff against other staff.
- **Inadequate Communication.** Both front-line staff and prisoners felt that administrators made many safety-related decisions arbitrarily. Lack of transparency fed distrust and lowered morale among front-line staff.
- **Outdated Infrastructure.** The antiquated living units in the state's oldest prisons—at St. Cloud and Stillwater—do not meet current standards and present physical security challenges.

Changes Implemented

- **Security Reviews Mandated.** The 2021 Legislature required DOC to form an independent security audit group to oversee biennial security reviews of state correctional facilities.
- **Data Systems Overhaul and Staffing Analysis Planned.** The Governor's supplemental 2022-2023 budget request includes funding for a new DOC data management infrastructure, which the department estimates could be implemented in 2025 if fully funded. DOC has also issued a request for proposals for a staffing and efficiency analysis of all of its correctional facilities, to be completed by the end of 2022.
- **Accountability Efforts Increased.** Among other changes, DOC has made it possible for staff to confidentially report misconduct without going through the chain of command and has required investigations of all complaints that meet certain criteria.

Actions Needed

- **Assess Impact of Change Efforts.** DOC is pursuing several initiatives in response to the report's findings, but it is unclear whether outcomes have improved. In part, it is impossible to fairly compare current outcomes to prepandemic outcomes. But DOC should also track and regularly assess its ongoing performance; the planned data reorganization should be helpful.
- **Plan for Facility Renewal.** DOC should prepare and present to the Legislature a long-term plan for rehabilitating or replacing the living units at its oldest facilities.