

Texas short on guards as lawmakers mull new prisons

May 22, 2007

By MICHAEL GRACZYK
Associated Press Writer

RIVERSIDE, Texas — The repeated staccato cries of "Oosh! Oosh!" echo through the tall East Texas pines from inside a low one-story modular building.

"No matter how big you are or how strong you are, here's the place where you hit somebody," training officer Louis Garcia tells about 40 men and women in workout clothes. "Trace your ribs up to your sternum, take your knuckle and knock on it. On this sternum, no meat grows.

"That's where we punch."

Jabbing at a nonexistent opponent, the group responds, crying out with each thrust of their arms and hands.

"Oosh!"

"Oosh!"

Learning self-defense is a critical skill for newly minted corrections officers about to join the nation's second-largest prison system.

But as a healthy Texas economy fuels a population boom in the state, so grows the population of prison inmates. And that same healthy economy is luring men and women who might seek jobs as guards to jobs elsewhere with better hours, higher pay and a more pleasant work environment.

That leaves the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Institutional Division, which currently houses 153,000 inmates, at a crossroads. It anticipates needing more prisons to hold more inmates, but doesn't have enough people to guard the ones it has now.

The TDCJ work force was 3,173 officers short — a 12 percent deficit — as of the end of March.

While training centers like this one a dozen miles north of Huntsville continuously are preparing rookies to plug the gaps, statistically one out of four won't stick around long. The department has a 24 percent turnover rate.

And the possibility of new prisons requiring hundreds of new officers would seem to exacerbate the problem.

"Not to step on any political toes, but when the state unemployment rate is 4.3 percent, and in every business across the state you can't help but see a 'help wanted' sign, we're not any different," says Maj. Troy Selman, who runs the agency's Minnie Houston Training Center. "It's a tight job market now."

Department officials asked the Legislature to consider building prisons for 5,000 more convicts. Under a plan backed by Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, two prisons would be built by the state. A third would be intended for a private corrections company.

The Senate version of the state budget for the next biennium now includes money for those prisons. The House version does not. And discussions of which direction is the proper course depend on the interpretation of numbers by politicians, some of them wanting to be seen by voters as tough on crime.

"Our population is exploding," Dewhurst has said. "The people of Texas don't want to have dangerous people on our streets."

Others point to parole reforms and substance abuse treatment improvements as ways of easing the inmate population crunch. Money in both versions of the budget bill would accomplish that.

"If we are stuck on building prisons just for the sake of saying that we're building prisons when the numbers do not justify it, I don't see how we can justify it on either safety or need or fiscal dollars," Houston Democratic Rep. Sylvester Turner has told his colleagues.

But staffing even the current prisons is difficult.

The 1,300-inmate unit in Dalhart, among those constructed during a billion-dollar prison expansion in the 1990s, is operating with about two-thirds of its allocated staff.

Dalhart offered the department 1,500 acres of land as a lure to put the prison there. But now the pool of potential prison guards from the area's 7,000 residents has been exhausted.

"This is what our challenge is," Carol Johnston, the department's human resources director, said. "We have some units we could staff all day long. But talking those people into relocating 400 miles is not something most individuals have an interest in."

The size of security staff of prisons ranges from units like Coffield in East Texas, where 483 full-time officers supervise more than 4,100 inmates — 68 percent of the authorized force. At the small end are substance abuse facilities like the Jester I Unit in suburban Houston, which has about 300 prisoners and fewer than 100 officers, but that's 97 percent of its authorized strength.

"I've been here for 23 years and because of the way we go through the academy process and turnover, you're never 100 percent at the units," Johnston said.

Agency spokeswoman Michelle Lyons said the work is made up with voluntary overtime and giving some areas, like inmate housing and guard towers, priority staffing over others.

Corrections officers now start out at \$1,870 per month, rising to \$2,467 monthly within two years and reaching \$2,773 after eight years — about \$33,280 annually, plus attractive state health and retirement benefits.

"Those are benefits that have eroded in the private sector and it's still something very important to people," Johnston said.

The Correction Association of Texas, which represents correction officers, is opposed to new prisons and would prefer to see more money spent on bigger raises for its members. According to the group, even with proposed raises over the next two years, annual salaries would be \$36,000, the national average nine years ago.

Selman, 39, had no intention of staying when he signed up with the agency 18 years ago and saw it as a way to work through college. He stayed, and has risen through the ranks to the training center director post.

"It's a combination of a lot of things," he said. "I promoted, once, twice. Now I'm sitting here. There's job security."

After two more years, he'll be guaranteed retirement, which he probably can begin around age 50.

What officers face in a unit, and what clearly drives some to quit, can be intimidating: being up close and personal with some of the state's toughest and most violent felons. But those who remain with the agency, like Selman and Garcia, the training sergeant, say the job can be rewarding and satisfying.

"I know TDCJ is not for everybody," said Garcia, who took his first job almost 11 years ago at the Dominguez Unit near San Antonio after a stint in the military. He was 20.

"I had planned to stay in a little bit and go to school," he said. "I wasn't planning for more than a couple years. I stayed. I liked the people. I started seeing I wanted to do something more for people. I made sergeant, started teaching classes. I liked doing that."

Garcia acknowledged frustration knowing a good chunk of the recruits he's training won't be around for the long haul.

"I took it personally," he said. "Now I know. I had to learn to accept it. I try to look at it in a larger context."

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