

Safer Prisons, Safer Communities



We are in the midst of a profound crisis in our nation's correctional system. Prisons across the country are dangerously understaffed, overcrowded, and plagued by rapidly deteriorating conditions. As a result, our prisons are not conducive to rehabilitation and produce increasingly poor outcomes for corrections staff and incarcerated people, as well as our families and communities.

While these are not new problems, many prison systems now face unprecedented staffing shortages that make it nearly impossible to ensure the safety of staff and the people in prison, provide adequate medical and mental health care, or offer the treatment, education, and job training programs that have been shown to reduce reoffending and make our communities safer.

The repercussions of our national staffing crisis are not confined to the prison walls. [The overtime required to fill gaps in staffing often requires officers to work 16 straight hours multiple times per week](#) - expecting the impossible at work and keeping them from their families. The lockdowns that result from understaffing also keep families on the outside from contacting their loved ones in prison and maintaining critical family bonds.

According to data collected by The Marshall Project, [the number of full time staff working in state prisons is down 10 percent since 2019](#) and now sits at its lowest level in two decades. [Some departments have vacancy rates of more than 50 percent.](#) The pandemic and economic conditions have exacerbated this problem but staffing levels have been falling for years. Prison populations, on the other hand, are rising for the first time in a decade when we can least afford it.

It is time for our country to pay attention to what happens behind the walls. Years of chronic neglect are putting lives at risk and [creating a vicious cycle of low staff morale and high turnover](#) that makes these problems more severe and also more difficult to solve. [Corrections officers have a suicide rate that is 39% higher than other professions](#) and rates of PTSD are higher for staff and incarcerated people alike. Unless policymakers act now, there will continue to be more violence and trauma behind bars, staff wellness will further deteriorate, fewer people will leave prisons rehabilitated, and more people will become victims of crime in our communities.

One Voice United (OVU) and FAMM, respectively, are two of the leading organizations representing correctional staff and incarcerated people and their families. For too long, our constituencies have been pitted against one another while the safety and wellbeing of our colleagues, friends, and loved ones has suffered. While it may be surprising to some people that we would work together to draw attention to this crisis, we know our fates are intertwined and we have a shared goal of ensuring the health and safety of everyone who works and lives in prison.

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For this reason, we are working together to draw attention to these problems and find solutions to understaffing and overcrowding that will end the national corrections crisis. While the specific policy responses will be jurisdiction specific, we agree in principle that policymakers must commit to the following:

1. Improving the health and wellness of prison staff.

Correctional officers and staff have stressful and often dangerous jobs. According to one study, [29% of corrections staff report being seriously injured at work and 50% report that they rarely feel safe](#). As a result, corrections officers have shorter life expectancies and higher rates of depression, suicide, divorce, and substance abuse than the public. In fact, [the life expectancy for a correctional officer is 59 years](#), compared to 75 years for the average American - meaning you lose 16 years of life expectancy just for doing this job.

Understaffing is making their jobs even more difficult, as they are forced to endure longer shifts and more overtime, which in turn leads to more burnout, higher rates of turnover, and even greater levels of understaffing.

2. Increasing rehabilitation opportunities for incarcerated people.

Chronic understaffing is also hurting incarcerated people and their families, making it harder for people to access critical treatment and rehabilitation programs that will help them turn their lives around and earn their way home. Understaffing has limited programming in prisons because teachers, social workers, and counselors who normally provide education, job training, drug and mental health treatment are now performing the duties of correctional officers. Sometimes referred to as “augmentation,” this practice not only places inadequately trained staff in dangerous situations, it prevents the corrections system from fulfilling its rehabilitation mandate and offering the programs that are often required for people to be considered for release.

Research also shows that maintaining family bonds is critical to reentry success, but understaffing leads to lengthy lockdowns during which families cannot visit their loved ones or receive updates on their health, safety, or basic needs. Denying visitation and opportunities for incarcerated people to participate in rehabilitation programs leads to higher recidivism rates, which is yet another reason to prioritize hiring, training, and retaining qualified corrections staff.

We need to **prioritize the safety** of corrections officers and incarcerated people.

3. Increasing safety for everyone, including our communities.

We all deserve to be safe, including the people who live and work in prisons. Understaffing increases the risk of neglect and trauma behind bars, which affects both corrections officers and incarcerated people. Prison violence leads to higher rates of injury or death for everyone, and PTSD and other mental health issues are rising among staff and incarcerated people because of the unsafe conditions.

These problems spill over into our communities when corrections officers leave work and incarcerated people return home. If we want to maintain safe and secure prison facilities, and make headway on public safety in our communities, we need to prioritize the safety of corrections officers and incarcerated people.

4. Increasing transparency and accountability for taxpayers.

Prisons are inaccessible and too often unaccountable to stakeholders, leaving the people who live and work in them worse off. [States and the federal government spend more than \\$89 billion on the corrections system every year](#) and taxpayers deserve to

have greater visibility into how that money is being spent. Government waste and misguided spending are major problems in the criminal justice system, and we need greater transparency to ensure proper oversight and effective management of prisons to ensure the safety of corrections officers and incarcerated people. Our prisons systems are producing tragic results - the numbers show it - and in no other industry would we allow this type of investment and these poor results to stand.

5. Exploring ways to safely reduce the demand on our prison system.

The size and scope of our national prison population is exacerbating our understaffing crisis. As we work to ensure proper staffing levels in our prisons, we should also explore ways to reduce the high demand on our prison system through mechanisms designed to [safely release individuals whose sentence is no longer necessary to protect and promote public safety](#) - such as individuals who are terminally ill or geriatric.

This crisis did not start overnight and it will take a concerted effort from all stakeholders to find solutions that address the concerns of everyone involved. That is why OVU and FAMM are joining together in this effort to raise awareness, educate policymakers and the public on our shared goals, and propose concrete steps that states and the federal government can make to create safer prisons and safer communities. We invite all other stakeholders - department directors, governors, our families, and neighbors to join us in the crucial effort.

One Voice United is dedicated to elevating the voices of correctional officers and staff in national conversations about corrections and the criminal justice system. By building bridges and bringing together a broad range of stakeholders, we are cultivating a unified approach to the policies, programs and narratives that define criminal justice reform. We are working to shift the conversation from one that perpetuates tension between incarcerated individuals, corrections staff and budget constraints to one that is centered on protecting the safety and interests of all who are impacted by the corrections system.

FAMM's mission is to create a more fair and effective justice system that respects our American values of individual accountability and dignity while keeping our communities safe. We do this by making sure people are treated equally and sentenced proportional to their offense; eliminating disparities based on race and ethnicity; ensuring people are incarcerated close to their homes in order to maintain important family bonds; and advocating for correctional facilities that are safe and humane, provide appropriate medical care, and offer educational, vocational, and rehabilitative programming.

