



Legislative Testimony

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

March 5, 2015

The Honorable Jeff Barker, Chair
House Committee on Judiciary

RE: House Bill 2806

Chair Barker and members of the committee, I am Kim Brockamp, Deputy Director of the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC). I am here to testify in support of HB 2806 and answer any questions.

What the Bill Does:

HB 2806 provides that DPSST may not deny, suspend or revoke certification of a corrections officer because the corrections officer seeks help with mental health issues, substance abuse or other counseling needs.

Background Information:

Currently, DOC has approximately 4,500 employees, the majority of which are employed as correctional officers within its prisons. While Oregon has one of the safest correctional systems in the country, staff must remain vigilant because they are often faced with threats of violence and other traumatic stressors that are inherent to working in a correctional environment. In addition, it is often difficult for employees to create a healthy balance between home and work life, due to operational factors such as shift work and mandatory overtime. It is because of this that DOC employees have some of the highest levels of stress among occupations. In fact, DOC has some staggering statistics:

- One in three DOC employees has symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – a rate higher than that of firefighters and deployed military, and four times that of the general population.
- Research shows that employees exhibiting PTSD-related symptoms have higher levels of tobacco and alcohol use, more health problems, and a higher number of doctor visits and workday absences.
- The effects of all this stress are profound: declining health, high divorce rates, alcoholism, suicide, and shortened life-span.

This issue is not specific to Oregon – it is prevalent among corrections staff throughout the country. And, despite correctional workers across the country having these high health and safety risks, the issue has received limited study. Because of this, DOC has made staff wellness its top agency initiative.

Recent studies on correctional officers conducted by Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) and Portland State University (PSU) identified a number of concerns pertaining to job-related demands and correctional officer well-being.

The PSU study focused on correctional officer stress, well-being, and work-life balance. Approximately 1,331 correctional officers from across the state participated in the study. Data on demographics, psychosocial workplace factors, work-family conflict, well-being, and health behaviors were collected from the surveys. The study identified a number of concerns pertaining to job-related demands and correctional officer well-being. The study found that DOC staff:

- Have high levels of perceived danger and hypervigilance;
- Have presence of depressive symptoms and PTSD-like symptoms;
- Have high levels of work-family conflict; and
- Get an average of less than six hours of sleep per night.

Requested Action:

Similar to other state agencies, DOC provides an Employee Assistance Program, and encourages staff to seek assistance as needed for family and emotional concerns, as well as substance abuse, and other issues that may affect work performance. As an agency, we realize that there are many things that can create stress and challenges in our lives, and seeking help is not a sign of weakness. In fact, it is a sign of strength when staff are able to recognize their own limits.

Further, protection from DPSST de-certification will help remove one of the barriers that staff may perceive when considering and seeking assistance for mental health issues, substance abuse, or other counseling needs. For the reasons explained above, the Department of Corrections urges you to vote HB 2806 out of committee with a do pass recommendation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Submitted by:

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