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Officials: Major understaffing in Idaho prisons raises risks

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Prisons in Idaho are so understaffed that correctional officers often end up working mandatory 16-hour shifts, leaving them just eight hours to sleep, eat and see their families before returning to duty, a prison official said.

Idaho Department of Correction Director Josh Tewalt told Board of Correction members about the staff shortages during a meeting Wednesday, saying roughly one-quarter of correctional officer positions are vacant.

“We've seen a very alarming new trend in our staffing that is cause for concern for us,” Tewalt said, noting that there are about 180 vacant positions statewide. Most of the vacancies are in the five-prison complex south of Boise, where 156 correctional officer positions are vacant.

That's the lowest staffing rate the state has seen in the past six years, according to department data.

The staff shortage means there's frequently not enough employees to allow prisoners to move normally throughout their daily schedule, forcing facilities to go on “restricted” status where offenders may be denied time in recreational yards or day room areas. The shortage also means visiting hours can't be held in

some prisons, because there aren't enough employees to screen visitors and monitor visiting areas.

Prison understaffing can lead to dangerous conditions for workers and inmates, slow response times to emergencies within prison walls and limit inmate access to programs designed to help them succeed upon release.

Understaffing has been a somewhat frequent problem in Idaho and nationwide: Chronic understaffing — and efforts to hide it — was part of what prompted Idaho to sever a prison management contract with Corrections Corporation of America, now known as CoreCivic, back in 2013.

The current staff shortage and subsequent long work hours is hard on morale, Tewalt said.

“When there is that much uncertainty in your work schedule, it is hard to have a life outside of work,” he said. “It's hard to plan things with your family. It's hard to be there for your kids.”

Tewalt attributed the staff shortage to a combination of issues, including the state's comparatively low pay for a highly stressful job.

Entry-level prison employees start at \$16.75 an hour in Idaho, but entry-level correctional officers in Oregon start at \$22.64 an hour, Tewalt said. Many other Idaho employers frequently pay \$15 an hour to entry-level employees, he said.

Prison officials hope lawmakers will raise the starting rate to \$18 an hour in the coming year and raise overall compensation, so longtime correctional officers don't find themselves making less than new hires.