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## Testimony in Support of Assembly Bill 824

*Assembly Committee on Corrections*

January 11, 2022

Members of the committee, thank you for holding a public hearing on Assembly Bill (AB) 824. With the extreme corrections officer shortage we're experiencing in Wisconsin, this is a step in the right direction, showing current workers and potential recruits that their safety is a top priority in our state facilities.

Under current law, a person who intentionally causes bodily harm to a probation, extended supervision, or parole agent commits special circumstances battery and is guilty of a Class H felony. The penalties increase for battery that results in greater bodily harm. However, there are currently no penalty enhancers on the books that specifically apply to battery against corrections officers. Additionally, because in some cases where assaults by inmates are properly reported, prosecuted, and a conviction occurs, the sentence is made concurrent to other crimes already being served. This unfortunately gives some the belief that they can commit assault against correctional staff knowing that it will result in no additional time required in prison. This environment of 'actions without consequences' has the potential to be extremely dangerous for staff.

Our proposal increases the maximum imprisonment penalty for battery against a corrections officer by five years. In addition, if the person is already serving a sentence at the time the battery crime is committed, the sentence imposed must run consecutively to the one the person is already serving.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify in support of AB 824. I hope to see your support on this important legislation.



**DAN FEYEN**

**STATE SENATOR**

18th Senate District  
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<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/18/feyen>

To: The Assembly Committee on Corrections  
From: Sen. Dan Feyen  
Re: Assembly Bill 824

Hello Chair Schraa and members of the committee and thank you for taking the time to hold a public hearing on AB 824.

Being a corrections officer is already one of the toughest jobs you can have in our state. The challenges of their job are compounded by the threat of bodily harm that they face on a daily basis.

Currently, it is a Class H felony to commit battery against a probation, extended supervision, or parole agent, but there are no enhancers in state statute for harming our corrections officers. This bill prioritizes Department of Correction's (DOC) employee safety, by adding a five year enhancer to the maximum sentence of anyone in DOC custody who intentionally causes bodily harm to a DOC employee.

Many times, when battery is committed against our corrections officers, the sentences handed down will run alongside a prison sentence they are already serving. This can create the impression that there is no penalty for these violent acts. Under this bill, the five year added sentence must run consecutively to any current sentences the person is serving. This ensures a penalty is paid for any battery committed against our corrections officers.

It is no secret that Wisconsin is facing workforce shortages across many sectors of our economy. One of the hardest hit right now is our corrections facilities. Many people are leaving their jobs in our correctional facilities in fear of their safety. In an industry that is already hard to recruit and retain employees, we need to show that we are going to put their safety first and do everything in our power to deter these violent acts from being committed against our corrections officers.

Thank you again for holding a public hearing on this important legislation.



To: Assembly Committee on Corrections  
From: Patrick Wycoff Council 32 Executive Director and John Grabel AFSCME International  
Re: AB 828, AB 824 and AB 825  
Date: 1.10.22

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This memo outlines AFSCME Council 32's position on three bills before the committee on Tuesday, January 11<sup>th</sup> 2022. Unfortunately, we will not be able to attend the hearing in person, but are happy to answer any questions you may have before or after the hearing.

#### **AB 828**

For your information we have included the memo AFSCME Council 32 sent to members of the Joint Committee on Employee Relations for their December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021 meeting when they considered the state employee compensation plan and companion legislation as proposed by Governor Evers. Included in that memo are several letters from Correctional Officers around the state detailing their personal experiences as impacted by the dangerous staffing vacancies throughout DOC.

It is important to note the fact that Correctional Officers and other DOC staff are denied the freedom to form and join a union for the purposes of collectively bargaining and negotiating with their employer. This continues to be the central reason why pay, benefits and workplace safety at secure institutions have become so poor that Wisconsin is increasingly seeing vacancy rates of 30% and 40%. Increasing pay to more competitive levels is but one step in addressing what has become an ongoing threat to the health and safety of not only the people who are protecting our communities, but of our communities themselves.

As AFSCME communicated with JCOER, our union members are in full support of the legislature joining Governor Evers proposal to immediately increase pay at all secure institutions by \$5.00 an hour, as well as an additional \$2.00 an hour at maximum security institutions. AFSCME also strongly supports providing this increase with state GPR dollars to ensure that the pay increase is accounted for in future base budgeting calculations. Finally, AFSCME is concerned that as currently written AB 828 sunsets these raises at the end of 2023.

On behalf of AFSCME's members we urge the legislature to work with Governor Evers, DOA and DOC to implement meaningful, permanent raises to address the staffing shortages at DOC.

#### **AB 824 and AB 825**

AFSCME supports the passage of AB 824 and AB 825. Conditions at many secure institutions are becoming increasingly dangerous and corrections staff are far too often becoming targets of violence by the people housed in state facilities. Providing additional penalties for battery of Correctional Officers and ensuring that records of these incidents are created and recorded with local law enforcement will send a strong message that our state and our communities stand with the people working on the front lines to keep us safe.



To: Joint Committee on Employment Relations  
From: Patrick Wycoff Executive Director Council 32 and John Grabel AFSCME International  
Re: State Employee Compensation Plan  
Date: December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021

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AFSCME Council 32, representing state employees across state service, including the Department of Corrections, Department of Health Services and Department of Children and Families, urge you to adopt the compensation plan and companion legislation introduced by Governor Evers in October.

During the pandemic AFSCME represented state employees have served on the frontlines of keeping our state and our communities safe. They have done so before vaccines were available, through variants, in confined 24/7 facilities all while seeing historic levels of vacancies and understaffing. There is no doubt that state employees being denied the freedom to negotiate and collectively bargain with their employer has eroded state employee compensation and made it increasingly difficult for the state to attract employees. This is most pronounced in the Department of Corrections, where high vacancy rates have created an exhausted workforce and dangerous conditions throughout the state.

Governor Evers, members of this committee and the legislature took steps in the last biennium, and the most recent state budget, to address wages in hopes of reducing the worker shortfall, and our members are appreciative of those efforts. Unfortunately, the reality is that those steps have not been enough, and aggressive changes to the compensation plan need to be undertaken to recruit and retain high quality workers to the state's DOC and Security and Public Safety workforce.

Attached are messages received by AFSCME Council 32 over the weekend from members after Council 32 received word that the committee planned to meet on Tuesday. The include letters are from employees at:

Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution  
Taycheedah Correctional Institution  
Copper Lake and Lincoln Hills Schools  
Redgranite Correctional Institution

Green Bay Correctional Institution  
Mendota Mental Health Institute  
Winnebago Mental Health Institute  
Stanley Correctional Institution

The letters describe the challenges state employees face across Wisconsin, especially in the Department of Corrections, and ask that this committee work to enact the entire proposal set forth by Governor Evers. This includes the companion bill and the general-purpose revenue necessary to fund the plan. We hope you will consider their stories as you engage in your deliberations.

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

I am writing to encourage you to pass the compensation plan. I started this job in 1991 when hundreds of people would take the test to become a Corrections Officer. It was a highly sought-after job with excellent benefits. I was proud to work as a Correctional officer for the State of Wisconsin.

In my 30 year of service I have seen many changes. I was able to coach my sons' sports teams and be active with his school. I was able to balance work and my family life. I don't know how you expect people to lead a balanced life when they are working 3 or more extra shifts a week. We need help.

When Act 10 passed we started to lose all of our benefits and received minimal pay increases. We started to lose good people. The state we are in right now is a direct effect of this. It took 10 years to get to this point. Passing this bill would be a step in the right direction to start keeping and hiring new employees.

Right now, we are losing good people to the county jails because of the large pay discrepancy. We are losing others to factories, who offer similar starting wages, better, more frequent pay increases. The majority of these factory jobs do not require you to work weekends along with multiple shifts per week.

The burnout rate in corrections is higher than ever. This affects everyone's quality of life and limited family time. Today men and women are doing this job, losing so much and they are not receiving the proper compensation.

CO II Randolph Merkes  
1496 Cattail Lane  
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin 54937

Employee for 30 years KMCI

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

I have been an Officer at Taycheedah Correctional Institution for over ten years now. I love this job and I am good at it. Unfortunately, I will be forced to leave it if something doesn't change dramatically now.

The high vacancy rate has taken a toll on me both physically and mentally. Several times in the last 2 years I have been forced to work double shifts (16 hours) four days in a row. There have been multiple times where I have arrived back at my home and honestly didn't even remember the drive home.

I was raised to work hard and to be where you are expected to be. I have worked so much that I am standing up to keep myself awake on my post while maximum custody inmates are walking around me. This is a very dangerous situation for not only myself but for the inmates I am responsible for as well.

In the last three years I have watched hardworking friends leave Taycheedah and find other jobs with higher pay and better hours. They are constantly asking me to join them. I have never wanted to go because I like this job and find it very rewarding.

Please help us by voting to pay us fairly for the jobs we do. We are the first responders. We are the "Forgotten Officer".

CO II KellyAnne Merkes  
1496 Cattail Lane  
Fond du Lac, Wisconsin 54937

To The Members Of JCOER,

My name is Luke Skic. I am a Youth Counselor Advanced at Copper Lake Lincoln Hills School I have been employed for 7 years. The reason I applied for this position is because of the great wage and benefit package and to help the youth under my care.

When I began my employment, staff vacancies were at a minimum. Since the pandemic we were considered essential employees. There has been more risks involved since this pandemic which has caused a vacancy rate well over 30%. The emotional and physical stresses this has caused on the employees has increased dramatically. The amount of hours being worked has put a toll on the employees both physically and emotionally. And it's a fact that when our bodies are run down like this we are more susceptible to medical issues such as Covid. Which then puts a burden on our fellow employees to cover shifts of sick employees. When units aren't fully staffed their safety is being jeopardize. This isn't only a burden on employees but their families as well. What makes me a good parent Also makes me a good counselor. I take pride in my position but within the last 2 years this has been challenging to keep a positive attitude for my fellow coworkers and to the youth to witness.

In order to retain great dedicated employees and to hire qualified candidates our compensation plan has to be more competitive within the Department of Corrections. This isn't just a trend within department. It's a national trend with every industry. I believe the Wisconsin Department of Corrections wage and benefit package isn't competitive compared to other states or within the the same line of profession. We need to increase our rate of pay to compensate our hard working front line employees that sacrifice so much back to the state of Wisconsin by protecting the safety of the community and youth under our care. This is our daily mission when we walk on this state property every single day.

Please highly consider passing Governor Evers state employee pay plan along with the companion bill, to increase pay for Correctional Officers across Wisconsin and bring down the dangerously high vacancy across the state.

Sincerely,

Luke Skic

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

My name is Aaron Gravunder I have been a Correctional officer for 23 years, and I currently work at Redgranite Correctional. I am writing this to bring to your attention of the serious problem we have in the Department of Corrections with SEVERE Staff shortage's at all facility's across the state. RGCI when fully staffed has approximately 150 Sergeants and Officers but currently we are at a 18.9% true staff vacancy which requires RGCI to hire prescheduled overtime. RGCI had to hire 167 8 hour shifts of overtime for next week. We have approximately 30 Sergeants and Officers that will be retiring in the next 3 years that are either at the age of retirement or just tired and wore out from the grind of the job. We also have many staff stating they are going to find a different job because they are tired of the extra hours they are ordered to stay for. They question why they would stay at a job where their life is in danger everyday for \$19.00 an hour when you can currently go work in fast food for a starting pay of \$15.00 an hour or a factory for \$21.00 an hour? We experience verbal abuse, threats of physical harm, respond to fights, suicide attempts, illegal drugs coming through the mail, all these things are potentially life threatening, and for what? Correctional Officers put their life on the line everyday but aren't respected enough to get the pay we deserve. Without people like us where would all of the individuals that commit crimes go? We do our job to protect the community, now I'm asking you to protect my quality of life. The stress level of the job is at an all time high and has directly affected my quality of life, I currently work 30 to 40 hours of unwanted overtime every 2 weeks and continually miss out on family time because of the unwanted overtime. Some of my fellow correctional brothers are working much more overtime, some they want but most they don't. In November RGCI lost an incredible Correctional Sergeant in Aaron Murphy, Sgt Murphy loved to go to the gym and workout with his young son but this year he was working a large amount of overtime to just try and take the pressure off some of the other staff getting ordered for 16 hour shifts which took away from his gym time. On November 17<sup>th</sup> Sgt Murphy had a massive heart attack and passed away at the age of 52. The current age for life expectancy for Correctional officers is at the young age of 59. Every Friday for the last 3 weeks we have all received an email from our Supervisor's asking if we could go to Columbia Correctional Institute to help out because they are at a "Critical Staff Shortage" RGCI is also required to send 2 staff every 2 weeks to Waupun Correctional to fill staff shortage's and in January of the new year we will be required to send 3 of our staff to WCI. The staff shortage is definitely at a "CRITICAL LEVEL" and it is extremely dangerous for all staff, PIOC's and the general public. The state employee pay plan along with the companion bill to increase pay for all Correctional officer must pass we need to bring in new staff and keep the current experienced correctional officers we have now. This job has always been a very dangerous job but it is at an all time high now.

Sincerely,

Aaron Gravunder



To the Members of the Joint Committee on Employee Relations

15 short years ago I began this career in security at Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution recommended through a friend's father while eating breakfast at a diner. Many things have changed in that time. KMCI had a full staff with 0% vacancy rate, health benefits and retirement were beyond amazing as doctor's visits and prescriptions were little to no cost. Fast forward to the implementation of Act 10 and that friend's father along with countless other senior security staff left state service as quick as they could to which we never recovered. Benefit costs quickly added up with nonexistent pay increases for the better part of a decade. Those job conversations with friends and family ceased to exist of recommending this as a career and our applicant pool and ability to retain staff has dwindled.

Next, we begin the age of Covid and overtime burnout as security staff worked around the clock filling in for other security that fell ill in another endless cycle. Again, more staff left as the hours are too much to overcome for families and individual's burnout. We have come to an aging security staff that is beginning their time to retire with nearly no new staff to replace them. Of the few that apply most new staff do not make it past 1 year of service. Secretary Carr spoke about having to compete with Kwik Trip and Walmart as their employees are making \$23 an hour and Corrections are only making \$19 which made televised news about the crisis level of short staffing. Many entry level professions have surpassed corrections in pay as we stood idle and unable to recruit or change with the times. To talk of advertising on billboards and milk trucks shows how unequipped we are to deal with this staffing crisis. Nearly all other professions have safer working conditions where they do not have to worry about being assaulted and making it home to see their family free from the burning effects of pepper spray or the bodily fluids being thrown at you. Now you add in the long hours of forced unwanted overtime and you begin the cycle downward. Many staff are having to work 60-70 hours a week which is about to get worse as we have 13 known retirements. I myself have averaged 65 hours of work per week in 2021 and anticipate 70-80 hours a week in 2022 due to the massive vacuum of staff leaving. This is a lot of time not spent with family all while working a majority of weekends and holidays. My Christmas Eve and Christmas Day will be spent working 16 hours with coworkers and PIOC instead of children and family. I myself have been asked several times after missing family events to reevaluate my career choice.

August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021 the State of Wisconsin had 889 vacant security positions representing a 19.2% vacancy rate. Fast forward only 4 short months that number has jumped to another 212 Security Staff that have left this field. The latest update now shows we have 1101 vacant security positions representing a 23.7% vacancy rate. This is an unbreakable cycle unless JCOER can act in a drastic fashion. We have already begun collapsing numerous positions reducing the number of staff that are able to respond to serious incidents and have had to resort to upper management filling the void of working frontline positions. If JCOER is unable to act in a substantial manner our security staff is vulnerable to a catastrophic collapse. As slow as the bodies of government can be to come together in unity for a decision, I am yet hopeful that this is the time in which they can act with appropriate measures before we are beyond repair. In short, this low level of compensation has proven unsustainable without substantial action given the sacrifices our Officers and families continue to make.

Paul Bilgrien, KMCI

December 18, 2021

To : Members of the JCOER Committee:

From: KMCI Correctional Officer II, Patty Schmitz

I would like to express my sincere concern for what may happen if the additional compensation of \$5.00 is not awarded to the protective staff in the DOC. The staff are already severely overworked, and underpaid for the risks that we have been willing to take. If the announced budget proposal doesn't become a reality, I am afraid that there will be a mass exit from the weary staff that are hoping for two things: A monetary recognition for our commitment to the DOC, and relief from the constant forcing and lifting of protections. This can only happen if the job is more desirable than a cheese factory that continually advertises starting pay from \$25.00 to \$30.00 to start. Why would anyone be willing to be forced for sixteen hours several days in a row, some more than three days, or forced the day of, when you can earn more and know you get to go home. Have you had to take scheduled overtime to protect your time off with your family? That family time is also after working 16 hours, so you are merely present; not able to actually enjoy the time because you are dead tired, and usually work the next day again, and usually another double. How many times have you worked 48 hours in 3 days, or worse 64 hours in 4 days? Protections are there for a reason, to protect the staff from being burned out, but they seldom exist in corrections anymore. This is not healthy for anyone. I know personally, after 24 years of service, how detrimental all these hours are to one's health.

At what point will you stop sacrificing your staff's health and keep protections in place? They should never be lifted, yet we are stupidly working, so we are not penalized. Nobody should be forced to work more than 12-hour shifts. Legally truck drivers can't, yet we are on the roads after a 16 hour shift more often than not. How safe is that for us to be driving when you can't remember half your ride home. How safe is that for the public? How many accidents are caused from officers falling asleep?

Considering that these are 24/7 positions that need to be filled, staff's safety is also at risk when positions are regularly being collapsed. There is nobody left to respond to emergencies on the units, for staff or person's in our care. PIOC's know that we are understaffed and are being bolder because they know that their sanctions, if any, will be cut in half, mostly due to the lack of staff. The shifting of inmates from maximum custody to medium before they should be is also setting us up for higher risks. We won't be able to respond when they are in the wrong setting, they act out, cause fights, and something even worse happens.

The risks of contracting COVID is much higher in this environment as well. You constantly remind PIOC's to wear their mask and some won't comply. This exposé increases our risk when our immunity is already lower from pure exhaustion. We are essential workers that have not been compensated for our risk level.

Please consider this from staff that know if the pay doesn't increase, the vacancies will increase and there is no incentive to work in corrections.

Sincerely,

Patty Schmitz

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations

This is C.O. Frappier President of Local 32, GBCI. I've wondered long and far about what to do to get people interested in working for the DOC. I'm not much for narrative so here are my points;

- 1) A 2 and 2 increase won't bring people flocking to the doors to be treated with hostilities from inmates, supervisors, or the public even in some cases.
- 2) To walk in the front door and have to wonder out loud if I may have to work a double today.
- 3) And this is the main part of " may have to work a double". I have to play my cards exactly right. If I choose to work a double today can I sneak out of here the rest of the week without getting forced.
- 4) Or do I have to get forced in order to not get forced for a day in the week that I really need to be off for.
- 5) I used to help coach the JV wrestling team. But had to tell the team I couldn't make it anymore cause of overtime was a real challenge. So instead of taking a force which I know is going to happen I take prescheduled to try and avoid the force the day of the meets. Sometimes it worked sometimes it didn't. Then I get to try and explain why I couldn't be there to help the kids out on the mat.
- 6) My son has Asperger's/ADHD and has episodes. I get calls from the school often. The last one he told his teacher that he wasn't "\$#!%\*@" talking to them. And here I am at work on overtime over an hour away. I live near Crivitz and work in Green Bay.
- 7) But I have to be at work. There is no compromise. If you fail to show or leave early you get forced the next opening. No excuses. That's not worth 2 percent.
- 8) And any temporary add on only adds insult to injury. Getting money now only to get it taken away later is pathetic.
- 9) You can't talk about problems without having an answer...so here goes.... Accept that we are first responders, we worked through COVID. Accept the fact that without us there would be a lot more criminality out in your neighborhood. I realize that we don't keep the dangerous felons off the street... Oh wait...yes we do. Accept the fact we have the legal right to use deadly force on another to prevent escape, serious assault, serious damage to property. Accept the fact that we are officers appointed to help the State of Wisconsin.
- 10) 2 percent and 2 percent plus the \$5 and \$2 add-ons to be permanent will bring new staff in the doors. More importantly it will keep the senior staff here a bit longer to train the new staff and help them learn that the blue shirt you put on before work does not make you superman. And trust me.....that is more needed now than ever before.

Chad Frappier – Green Bay Correctional Institute

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations;

My name is Jordan Thomas. I have been a Psychiatric Care Technician at Mendota Mental Health Institute for just shy of 11 years. I have spent 7 of these years working closely with the training department training new staff in IOC, Mendota's verbal de-escalation and physical restraint program.

The skills required to do this job effectively and safely take time to develop. Our poor staff retention and high turnover rate mean we are not only short staffed in numbers, but also in experienced staff who are capable of mentoring new staff in developing the necessary tool set to do this job safely and effectively.

For the past three years I have taken on the additional role of "NEO Guide", which is a mentorship program implemented to provide new employees an open channel to experienced staff, for the purpose of staff retention. The results of this program, unfortunately are not what we hoped for. We are fighting a losing battle, as evidenced by the presence of agency nurses on temporary contracts and the National Guard on assignment to assist with our current staffing crisis.

The high stress, physical danger and overloaded work schedule are proving too large a problem to be corrected internally. Put simply, new hires and existing staff are not willing to do it for the pay provided.

I fear we are at a critical juncture. We're watching a negative feed-back develop. The longer we are understaffed and underpaid, the more staff leave to reorient their work life balance, leaving more burden for remaining staff to carry...driving more staff out.

Please help end this feedback loop and approve the proposed legislation.

Thank you,

Jordan Thomas

To Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

My name is Mason Jacobs and I am a Psychiatric Care Technician employed by DHS at Mendota Mental Health Institute. I have been employed with DHS since 2015 with time spent at Sandridge before moving to Mendota in 2017. In my time working for the State I have never seen or experienced the shortage of staff and in ability to retain staff that has happened over the last year. I believe there are many *contributing factors to this issue*. 1<sup>st</sup> of which is the dangerous working environment with the clients that are remanded to the secure facilities in the state. I personally have been punched, bitten, spit on, had my genitals grabbed and urine thrown at me. I feel that the job we perform is a of vital necessity in order to help maintain public safety, but because of such a risk for violence in the job setting it is understandable why staff would chose to leave and go work at other jobs with less apparent risk. The pay wage at state wide institutes with the high risk of violence involved is not worth the inherent risk to many when you can go the private sector and make upwards of \$20+ an hour without the risk.

The high vacancy rate has caused even more staff to leave due to being mandated to work "forced" shifts. Who wants to come to a job where 2-3 times a week you come in for your shift and are told you have to stay for longer than you had planned on. This can take a toll on people in the personal life as well as professional life and ability to care for the clients we are responsible for. When you are being mandated to work 16hrs a day your ability to stay sharp and aware of your surroundings is drastically reduced and the potential for accidents or violent attacks goes up. The individuals we work with have nothing but time to watch staff and see when there is a weakness with them and ANYONE who is constantly required to work more than their scheduled shift will lose the necessary ability to be fully aware of their surroundings.

In Conclusion without the passing of the Comp Plan and Companion Bill there is little doubt that the ability to retain and hire employees will continue to be difficult. Staff will continue to be forced to work more than scheduled shift excessively and be put at a higher risk for violent attacks. What would happen if the State lost another 15% of security employees? The passing of this bill should not even be an issue and this needs to become a bipartisan passing. The safety of the Public, Staff and Clients is and should be everyone in here's concern.

Thank you for your time,

Mason Jacobs

12/19/2021

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

My name is Jessica Nachtigal and I have worked at Mendota Mental Health Institute (MMHI) as a Psychiatric Care Technician for over eight years. In the years that I have worked at MMHI, the staffing shortage that has led to our current staffing crisis has never been this bad. The low staffing numbers, that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, are creating numerous issues at institutions throughout the state. Low staffing has resulted in increased forced shifts/mandatory overtime and burnt out staff which is detrimental to institutional safety. When staff are working so many additional hours, we are unable to get adequate sleep before we have to be back to work for our regular shifts. This increase in forced overtime also affects staff's personal lives, as we are away from our families for many more hours. Many staff are doing as much as they can to fill overtime shifts that are available but it is never enough to fully staff the institutions. Many staff have left to find other employment throughout the pandemic because of the strain of working in these dangerous environments. We are strongly urging our legislators to pass the Compensation Plan and Companion Bill to give our overworked staff the raises that they deserve and in hopes that it will help retain the staff who are working so hard throughout the pandemic. These raises would also provide an incentive for new staff to be hired to help us during this difficult staffing crisis. Please do your part and vote to pass Governor Evers' state employee pay plan, along with the companion bill, to increase our pay in prisons and institutions across Wisconsin and bring down the dangerously high vacancy rates across the state.

Jessica Nachtigal

Psychiatric Care Technician-Mendota Mental Health Institute

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

My name is Sean Heiser. I work at Mendota Mental Health Institute as a Corrections Officer. I have over 35 year's seniority at Mendota. Since the pandemic has hit, we are currently down 15 positions in a 40 person work force. Forcing in our department is horrendous. People are getting forced 3 to 4 days a week. Sometimes posts get collapsed making a bad situation worse. We have had more situations of patients running off units and more staff being assaulted. In all my time, this is the worst that I have seen it at Mendota. Except for 7 years, all of my seniority has been at Mendota.

Mendota was a decent place to work at, lots of camaraderie, staff cohesiveness, and lots of experienced staff to work with. Now, most people less than 1 year experience and some around 5 to 10 years' experience. With the exception of 3 or 4 people, I have the most seniority/experience at Mendota. Low pay, bad working conditions all add up to low morale and high turnover rates. While the pay may not correct all the issues, it will help stabilize it enough to bring in the more experienced and higher quality caliber of staff that is needed to work in this challenging environment.

One thing to take into consideration is that all employees are paying for their retirement, health insurance and other insurances. On average, a single person will pay between \$400 and \$500 monthly while a family person will pay between \$500 and \$700 monthly. Averaged out, at \$500 monthly that is \$6000 annually divided by 2088 hours (which is what a FTE works annually) equals a loss of hourly pay of \$2.87. That doesn't include overtime wages which causes your retirement calculation to go up. So a brand new employee coming into state service as a Correctional Officer or a PCT is making \$20 an hour, they are actually only earning \$17.13 an hour. I can go work at most places making \$18 an hour and not have to be forced 3 times a week, have nights and weekends off, and not have to worry about being assaulted on the job.

The compensation plan that is being proposed by the Governor's Office and the Department of Administration will go a long way to making Mendota a better and safer place to work.

Sincerely,

Sean Heiser

To Joint Committee on Employment Relations;

I am writing in regards to the staffing issues state agencies are facing, particularly Winnebago Mental Health. As a nurse working many 16-hour shifts, I can tell you it is affecting not only staff, but patients as well. The emotional and physical toll this is taking on all of us is at times, debilitating. Having worked state service for seven years now, I can personally and honestly say I have never seen morale so low. I would like to make you aware of some concerns from a nursing point of view. As a nurse, I take great pride in being empathetic to not only our patients, but my co-workers as well. I have both seen, and experienced, tears flowing from pure exhaustion. Working multiple 16-hour shifts days in a row is not only unsafe, but also unhealthy. I learned in nursing school that the body needs 8 hours of sleep for optimal functioning. That amounts to 72 hours a week. My co-workers are only getting 8 hours a day to drive home, spend with their families, run their errands, and then find time to sleep. I can tell you in the past three days, I have personally only gotten to spend 20 minutes with my family and have only gotten approximately 13 of the 24 hours of sleep I should have gotten. When dealing with some of the most violent people in the state, this can have catastrophic repercussions. It only takes a slight distraction for a psychotic person to take advantage and cause some serious harm to either themselves or a staff member. I urge you to take a look at Winnebago's injury reports to see just how many staff are currently out or on light duty due to injury. Staff morale is at an all-time low. The once happy conversations between staff have turned negative. This has not gone unnoticed by the patients. Staff are shorter-tempered which can affect how patients are treated. There are times I wonder if staff even care anymore, which brings me to my biggest concern regarding all of these forced shifts; my nursing license. PCT-A's work under my license. If they are not alert or in a poor mental state, accidents can happen. Accidents that ultimately fall under my license. I worry about my own mistakes that could happen as well. I deal with high risk medications all the time. One wrong med error could take the life of a patient. I do not think the excuse "I was tired" would hold up in court. These are just a few things that have crossed my mind. I could go on and on about what "could" happen in this environment we work in, but at this point, I feel my words are just words, and they fall on deaf ears. This is ultimately, why I am writing though. I hope to help you understand the exhausting conditions state employees are working in and hope you give serious consideration in compensating state workers fairly. We need some relief and if higher wages will bring us help, I am begging you to consider it.

Sincerely, Kim Truckey, RN



To Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

I currently am a psychiatric Care technician advanced at WMHI. I am writing this letter with much concern for the future of our facility and our staff. I have a few points to touch upon so please bare with me. First off I urge you to consider passing the pay raise for facilities like ours. It may help retain our already existing staff, most of which are exhausted and at wits end. It will also help bring people in to help relieve our severe force rate we've been dealing with for almost a year now. So I urge you to please pass this, you'd be helping retain and bring in staff. Next up, I am begging you to please address the high vacancy rate in these facilities. All these openings are creating outrageous overtime rates. Forcing people 5-6 days a week into their days off and vacations. Making people like myself literally vomit on the units due to pure exhaustion. Working that many days in a row is not safe for anyone's body or mind. Making staff zombies to only end up getting hurt by patients putting them on alternate duty. Sometimes leading them to quit. Or even have accidents on the way home causing harm to others and themselves. Please, please address this issue. When staff ask the higher ups they end up blaming us to where we feel unheard to the point where we just stop talking because what's the point. We're ignored anyway. I've never seen these surveyors that they claim walk through, but if I did I'd have a few choice words. But then again I work night shift and that's the shift that's pushed aside because we don't matter. Even though we're hit the hardest with the Forcing. Walk through on nights, I beg you. But I forgot, things only happen from 9am-5pm. Having been forced so many times into days off and every single day. I've missed multiple funerals, birthday's, anniversaries, & weddings. How is this fair? How?! There is no work life balance. We're missing our families! Also having higher ups deny us trades on weekends to fill the spots they never offer to help with doesn't fix our situation it fixes theirs! They get to work Monday- Friday 8hr shifts and enjoy their family and fun time. Leave the rest of us to end up resenting the job they used to have a huge passion for. This situation causes call ins and refusals because people don't want to miss things that could easily be fixed by having trades and more staff here. By restricting staff schedules more and more and forcing staff that have already worked their shifts and more staff are disheartened. Causing this vicious cycle. Please do something! Staff being tired and broken mentally is making managing the patient population impossible. Staff can only handle being called so many things and being beaten on for so long without a break from this place. We're all at wits end, and our mental health is at stake and it appears no one cares. We can only take so much before our therapeutic side is so worn down it's almost impossible to care for other people. Our family's are suffering because we sleep and work then go back for more making us short with them and patients. Why has nothing been done? Why have "all claims been unsubstantiated"! That's impossible! Finally, expecting healthcare workers to work like this in this pandemic and threaten their jobs if they don't comply is ridiculous. A year ago our facility didn't even have PPE but now bullying us to get vaccines and having us use our own sick leave if we do get this illness is horrible. Last year people were given the 10 day grace period of they had the illness. It was part of our jobs. Now if we get it and don't have the leave then we get in trouble? What is that?! We've had to expand units when we already have a staffing shortage causing even more forcing. We've had to isolate units that had exposure causing patients to sleep in seclusion rooms and dayrooms. In not sure what needs to be done, but something needs to be done.

Thank you in advance for your time,  
Andrea Gilbertson PCT-A

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

I am a nurse at Winnebago mental health. I am 17 weeks pregnant with twins. I have been with Winnebago since January of 2021. The high vacancy rates for nurses has caused me to work an excessive amount of hours since I have started. I've missed family events, time with my kids, and friends. I barely sleep on my days off because that's when I have to schedule all my appointments and get all my errands done. I've had to reschedule appointments due to forces/pre forces. Between shifts I am getting anywhere from 2-6 hours of sleep and that's it. I haven't eaten a healthy meal in months. Some days I go all day without eating more than a handful of goldfish and chugging a bottle of Gatorade. I am not meeting the health requirements I need for a healthy pregnancy and lifestyle. The high vacancy rates have caused us to suffer mentally and physically. Every direct care personnel is over worked. 2-6 16 hour shifts in a row week after week is draining on the body and mind. We become short tempered with our patients. Charting gets missed amongst many other things. We are less vigilant causing a more dangerous workplace. Our patients are already aggressive. Our bodies are physically tired and our reaction time is slowed due to the lack of sleep and the excessive worked hours. The high vacancy rates have brought the national guard in to help us. But they only received a fraction of the training we have and are not always prepared to face what we face everyday. Just the other day, being a 17 week pregnant ; 4'11" woman, I had to do a 1 man take down on a psychotic patient alone while a guard stood by watching me struggle as this patient fought for her life to get out of my hold. The guardsman froze up. They didn't know what to do. I could have lost my babies. The patient could have attacked so many people and gotten hurt herself. The state needs a better solution for our mental health patients. We are in a crisis at Winnebago. We have no help from the counties in our state. The people sent to help us aren't going to be here forever. Some of the hospitals from around the state are being told to send us all of their Covid positive patients seeking psychiatric care regardless of the severity of their psychiatric needs. Many of these patients don't belong here. Our Covid population at Winnebago fluctuates so much. We are constantly opening and closing units. Our admissions at Winnebago surpasses every single mental health institute and hospital in the nation by a landslide. Our staff are getting severe injuries everyday. Then we have our hire ups telling us to hurry up and heal and get back on the floor? The injured staff are barely healed before they come back. And as soon as they do come back they get reinjured because the injury hasn't had enough time to properly heal. Some of our staff are in administrative leave and have been for months. When I say months I mean 2-8+ months. There is not enough substantial evidence to keep these people at bay. They are good workers and have not been ok'd to return to work. We are tired. We are shedding blood, tears, and sweat for our patients and each other day in and day out. It feels nobody hears our voices. Our screams for help are muffled by all of our superiors.

Pang Yang

To the Joint Committee on Employment Relations,

Please take a moment to consider the way that security has been gutted at Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution due to the staffing crisis. This is a crisis that has been building for years and the legislature has ignored the fact that we are no longer operating in the best interests of the state – Towers are routinely closed along with other critical security positions being collapsed such as transportation, maintenance, school and patrols. When looking at the weekly schedules- hired/ ordered overtime has commonly reached 249 jobs, that's 8 hour posts. That means that multiple officers are being forced to work doubles every day of the week as well as being ordered to come in on their days off. Hopefully this puts things a bit more into perspective on the realness of our staff shortage. By the grace of God it is truly amazing that nothing has happened, no one has gotten hurt. The remaining staff are doing their best to maintain the security and safety of Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution! Sadly, they have had to shift their concern from protecting the public right now, our main concern has to be to just protect ourselves! Management's answer has been to go ahead and form more committees, but if the people in charge were truly listening they would not need any committees at all!! This started with the ACT 10 gamble that proved to be a losing bet and it is the tax payers- us- that are taking the biggest hit. We have some of the brightest people in the right places and others who fill jobs just to get to the next step on the career ladder. Our "leaders" , the real people in charge, THE WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE needs to start taking charge and stop the drain of experienced staff or you will never be able to recruit new staff. When senior staff like myself propose solutions, the Warden said to me "Why don't you become the person in charge then?" Well now, I simply told him "Warden, that would never happen, I would have to fire to many people!"- No response just go back to work. Work your doubles, your days off and find some of your friends to come and work here. The Department of Corrections is hurting, staff are burnt out, they're done- exhausted. Management can claim they are about retention but all we hear about is how can we get new staff? It goes deeper than just throwing money at employees- but that is a good place to start. You have the opportunity to start today with raising pay to a level that may attract new staff, but more importantly, you need to stop the exodus of senior experienced staff that are leaving every day. I will be joining that queue because I can no longer ask my family to sacrifice the way that they have for the past few years. But I will always care about my co-workers and my conscience would not let me sleep at night if I did not at least make the effort to try to help them. I am begging you all to please get your heads out of the sand and start FIXING the problem in the DOC and to do it before we have a death, disturbance, escape with innocent victims harmed or other catastrophe.

Sgt Steven Tripler Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution.