

Gary Hebl: Wisconsin's correctional program deserves better

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The road to Criminal Justice reform in Wisconsin is a long one, and it's made more difficult by the indifference the Walker Administration has shown towards Wisconsin's correctional facilities. Wisconsin should be a leader in how we manage our correctional facilities. Instead, there is no long term strategy in place, and this has created negative effects on both corrections workers as well as inmates.

Wisconsin currently has a critical shortage of correctional officers. In 2011, there were 88 vacancies. That number rose to 403 by 2015. The reason behind that is simple - [the starting pay is low](#), lagging behind neighboring states. Because of the shortage, many correctional officers are forced to work overtime, and report low morale and potentially violent conditions.

The [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported](#) that the state spent a record \$42 million last year on overtime. While much of that may be forced overtime, several workers made more than \$20,000 in overtime pay, including a correctional officer who made \$175,000 by choosing to work overtime. If we are spending this money anyway, it makes much more sense to use this money to increase pay to retain and hire more officers which will help ease the burden and increase morale.

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Part of the problem has to do with Act 10, which limits the ability of state correctional workers to negotiate over pay and benefits, as well as safety issues. It does not help that the majority party in the Wisconsin Legislature is [not willing to increase benefits or wages](#), either. They have held steadfast in keeping conditions,

benefits, and pay at current levels despite a worsening shortage. They are happy to give Foxconn four and a half billion dollars but they don't seem to think ensuring the safety of corrections officers and inmates by adequately staffing our correctional facilities is a priority.

This is a problem that is getting worse and there seems to be a fix hiding in plain sight. We must ensure that we are staffing our correctional facilities adequately, for the safety of our officers as well as the inmates. Once again, the majority party has no plan and seems to simply be hoping that a solution will fall into their lap, when what we need is a proactive approach to the problem.

-Hebl, D-Sun Prairie, represents the 46th Assembly District.