

President Towne Holds First Round Of Listening Tour With VSEA Corrections Members

June 5, 2021

Hello VSEA Corrections Family:

I took last week off and with VSEA Executive Director Steve Howard, made visits to all six correctional facilities and five Probation and Parole offices throughout the state, where we met with and listened to our Corrections' members comments, questions, and concerns. While I enjoyed seeing old friends and meeting so many new people, it was clear that there is much work that needs to be done. Now that the state is opening up more, I look forward to making it to the remainder of the worksites and to returning to visit shifts that I missed on this trip.

Ongoing communication, access to our members and member access to union leadership is critical. Every member of the VSEA needs to feel valued and heard regardless of unit or workplace.

Thank you to all who came in to speak with us. I learned a great deal from our conversations. I am in absolute awe of the work our members in Corrections are doing each and every day. You have my respect, my support, but—more important—you have my word that I will fight at every level of state government to make progress and demand that the issues that were raised get addressed.

The staffing crisis and the massive mandatory overtime were at the forefront of members' minds at every stop on our tour. You shared the impacts this crisis has had personally on your families and on your coworkers. I wanted to learn more from our members about what was causing the staff turnover and the challenges in recruitment. Here are just a few notes from my visits that I want to share with you:

Management, Central Office & Commissioner Baker

- Poor communication from Central Office with the field;
- All-time low staff morale: sick of pizza parties, promoting thin line early on in pandemic as solidarity gesture then banning it...etc;

- Management needs to do a better job of holding chronically underperforming staff accountable in order to preserve staff morale;
- Management needs to focus on increasing uniformity of treatment of staff;
- Standardize the hiring process;
- No more town meetings or empathetic messages from Central Office. Do something. Members articulated that they are no longer even logging in to watch;
- Central Office is totally disconnected from the rest of DOC. Lack of Central Office presence in facilities during pandemic mentioned multiple times;
- New background checks are slowing the hiring process down; this needs to be expedited;
- There were high hopes for Col. Baker at the start, but there is now a lack of confidence in him. Members shared they experienced a sense of relief when Col. Baker accepted this post thinking based on his previous experiences, he would be the one to finally make the structural changes needed in DOC. The sentiment is now that he is no different than any previous Commissioner; and
- The staff are feeling demoralized and are concerned about the Facebook posts made by the equity consultant working for DOC.

Offenders

- The need to begin to hold offenders accountable without interference from Central Office. There are too many policies. Where are policies coming from? Who creates them? Does DOC even know their own policies?

Continued...



Offenders (*continued*)

- A feeling that offenders have more power and authority than the COs, and that COs are reprimanded for using authority. Sentiment spoken of throughout each facility visited. CO's do not feel empowered or supported in their jobs. Offenders have the ability to make accusations about CO's and CO's feel that management will side with Offender regardless of if claim is founded or not.

Field

- Inadequate and constantly changing training on OMS. Computer system is not intuitive, time-consuming, cumbersome, and difficult to use.
- A need to increase staffing in the field in order to run a second shift. Noted that second shifts have not been run in over a year.

Facilities

- Keep personal relationships out of facilities;
- The new Guardian software does not allow staff to rebut supervisory feedback;
- Overwhelming amount of pressure coming from family to spend more time at home;
- The buildings need to be air-conditioned. Noted that Springfield has a massive HVAC system on the roof; how difficult would it be to install air conditioning?;
- The yards need to be adjusted for staff comfort in summer and winter. It was indicated that there is no shade to protect CO's from the sun and no shelter to protect them from the winter elements in Newport;
- The lack of hazard pay is not about money; it is about the acknowledgment of sacrifices made, and value and respect of the workforce and their families;
- A concern about the many physical plant and technology failures. Many critical concerns reported and the delay in the current system to address them; and

Facilities (*continued*)

- Mental health support for COs needs improvement—EAP is not adequate.

It is my intention to continue this conversation with your Corrections Executive Committee and to determine next steps, including a dialogue with your Commissioner. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. My email is aimeetowne@gmail.com, my cell phone is **802-793-4754**.

In Solidarity,
Aimee Towne
VSEA President

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