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State Comptroller Report Offers County Correctional Facilities Solutions for Reducing Overtime Costs

A report released today by the Office of the State Comptroller (OSC) examines some of the factors that have led to high overtime costs for officers at adult county correctional facilities in New Jersey and offers solutions for minimizing such costs going forward.

New Jersey's county governments paid its county correction officers more than \$185 million for working 3.9 million hours of overtime from 2010 to 2012, OSC found. However, those costs varied greatly among the 21 correctional facilities. OSC's review found that while some facilities regularly incurred high overtime costs, in some cases higher than 20 percent of the facility's total expenditures, others kept overtime costs as low as two percent.

OSC's report highlights specific examples of best practices employed at facilities that kept overtime costs low as well as some of the oversight weaknesses that led overtime costs to spiral at other facilities. Overall, Cumberland, Mercer and Salem counties spent the highest percentage of their correctional facility expenditures on overtime, while Bergen, Cape May and Warren counties spent the least, OSC found.

In general, the facilities that were able to contain overtime costs did so through strong administrative and financial oversight and by taking proactive steps to analyze and anticipate staffing needs, OSC found.

The Warden at the Bergen County Jail, for example, told OSC that jail officials receive an overtime report from the county budget officer every two weeks. At the Cape May County Correctional Center, the Warden provides the Sheriff's Office with a monthly report that includes details on the use of overtime hours, a comparison to the

prior month and an explanation for any increase or decrease in overtime usage. At the Bergen and Cape May facilities, overtime costs accounted for less than 3.5 percent of the total expenditures.

By contrast, at the Mercer County Correction Center (MCCC), both the Warden and the Chief Financial Officer claimed that the other was responsible for monitoring overtime expenses. OSC also found that document retention and recordkeeping at the facility was so lax it made reviewing the use of overtime nearly impossible. For instance, written justification is required before an overtime shift can be authorized at MCCC, but when OSC requested to review such memos for a specific week, MCCC officials could only produce one of them.

The lack of oversight may have contributed to Mercer County spending more than 19 percent of its correctional facility expenditures on overtime costs during OSC's period of review, the report stated.

"What we found in this report is that, in some cases, the difference between high overtime costs and low overtime costs is as simple as making sure someone is in charge of the monitoring process," Acting State Comptroller Marc Larkins said. "We've offered a number of suggestions to county correctional facilities that we believe can result in significant savings of taxpayer dollars."

A key tool in preparing to fill staffing vacancies without resorting to overtime, OSC found, is the maintenance of a comprehensive and up-to-date staffing plan that allows facilities to react to staffing changes or patterns and determine the actual number of staff hours that need to be scheduled.

At Salem County Correctional Facility the Warden told OSC that a staffing analysis had not been performed since 2002. As a result, the staffing plan was based on decade-old data and could not account for the rise in inmate population that occurred after the closing of the Gloucester County Jail.

At MCCC, where there was no formal written staffing analysis, the facility spent nearly \$2.7 million in 2012 on overtime for special assignments, such as medical transports, construction details or one-on-one supervision. Special assignment staffing represented nearly 32 percent of its overtime expenses that year. The facility also was unprepared to handle patterns of sick leave abuse and long-term absences. The MCCC Warden reported that in 2012 there were 700 time and attendance violations at the facility for incidents such as failing to report to work or taking unauthorized leave. Neither the special assignments nor the sick leave abuse were factored into subsequent staffing plans.

OSC's report also recommends county correctional facilities:

- seek to make high-ranking officials ineligible to receive overtime and discourage the use of overtime for administrative tasks. In some counties, high-ranking officials whose duties are primarily administrative or managerial are not eligible for overtime. For example, the Bergen and Cape May county facilities prohibit overtime for captains. By contrast, captains at the Union County Jail are permitted to work overtime shifts for lower-ranking officers while still receiving pay at the captain rate. Union County also spent \$339,000 in 2011 and 2012 on “administrative overtime.”
- provide management with sufficient discretion to manage staffing decisions. OSC found that some facilities had little authority to deny leave requests for personal, compensatory or vacation time, even when minimum staffing was not met.
- consider the use of automated scheduling. One of the practices employed by facilities that kept costs low was the use of scheduling software, OSC found. At MCCC, correctional facility officials actually purchased a scheduling software system but have not used it. The county’s chief financial officer reported to OSC that he was not aware that MCCC had such software and that he had, in fact, been looking into purchasing scheduling software for the facility.

In total, OSC’s report offers nine recommendations for controlling overtime costs at county correctional facilities.

Click [here](#) to view the complete report.

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