

No Vacancies?

Osceola County Finds Keys to Attract and Retain Officer Staff

The recruitment and retention of staff in our jails always—or, at least for as long as I have been a jail manager—has been an issue of concern for managers. Not having enough staff to cover necessary posts, or not having the right staff to fill those posts, puts us in the troubling position of either reducing staff safety to unacceptable levels by leaving posts vacant or forcing tired, unhappy staff into those posts by mandating overtime. Neither option is a good one, and there are no other options when the jail must run.

We all have the responsibility to attract, hire, and retain a qualified staff in a relatively low-paying, relatively high-risk profession with relatively unpleasant working conditions and hours. It seems, from both my experience and my observations, that we attempt to do so by drawing attention to the external attractiveness of a job in our respective agencies. Jails are “spreading a wide net” in our recruiting processes, offering signing bonuses, trying to maintain pay parity with local law enforcement agencies and nearby corrections agencies, and making other efforts that have an outside focus. Despite these initiatives, jails continue to experience a high rate of position vacancies—16% in the Osceola County Corrections Department in 2005—and a national turnover rate that rose from 11.6% in 1994 to 16.6% in 2001 (Corrections Yearbook 2002, Camp, 2003). We jails have not changed our practices much, despite a great deal of discussion and expressed concern. This raises the question, “If we keep doing the same things, why should we expect the results to change?”

During the last 2 years, we in Osceola County have addressed recruitment and retention by using in-house staff and getting support from the county’s Human Resources Department. We have done pretty well. After having an average turnover rate of 15% per year from 2001 through 2005, in 2006 the turnover rate was down to 10%. And, although we will not make our goal of 5% in 2007 unless we have no resignations or terminations for the rest of the year, we do project a 7% turnover rate this year. In addition, during 2007 our vacancy rate has been below 3%—in August 2007, it was 1.5% (with 5 positions vacant out of 337), and all those vacancies were in-process for filling.

I’m not sure if our experiences will fit other agencies, or even if we can maintain the current levels of hiring and retention, but following are the things that we have found to work for us in Osceola County.

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Keys to Recruitment

Our experience suggests four actions that can help a jail to locate new hires.

Define what you are looking for. Jails need to be realistic in what we want; there are not a lot of super-heroes out there. We need to be rational—what are the qualities of a “good” employee, not a “great” employee? What qualities are absolutely unacceptable? We look for emotional stability, particularly an ability to control anger and impulsive behavior. We also look for someone who is dependable, someone we can count on to be there and be ready to work nearly all the time. We also see rationality as a critical factor—we want someone who has common sense and a demonstrated ability to make reasonable decisions nearly all the time. Although we certainly want good decision-making ability in a crisis, we also want good day-to-day decision-making. Lastly, and with at least a passing nod to the rehabilitative capacity in everyone, we want non-criminals. After that passing nod to the idea that criminals can be rehabilitated, we honestly do not believe we can hire someone whose past criminal associations could affect how the officer manages the offenders under his or her control and responsibility.

Look where your best hires are. Our experience has been that the best candidates for the jobs in the jail are those who live in the community served by the jail. Recruits from farther away have no community ties or involvement and little interest in becoming involved. Basically, if they are more than a local call away from the facility, they are probably too far away to be good candidates for a position. Our hope—and one that has, so far, been met—is that the applicants will come to us, based on what they hear from others about the job and our facility. Our staff have turned out to be our best recruiters, both through contacts with family and friends in the community, and through professional contacts they make at professional meetings and training programs. We encourage staff to participate in shared training and meetings/conferences, partly so they can spread the word about our agency and the jobs available there. This approach has been so successful that we have eliminated our recruiting budget for 2007-2008, and we anticipate filling all our vacancies through word-of-mouth recruitment.

Look within. Another practice has helped us both recruit staff for non-officer positions and develop a cadre of staff with the potential to become officers. In Florida, all Corrections Officers are, by statute, state-certified. Non-certified staff are mainly civilian technicians and corrections clerks, both of which are uniformed but non-certified. We actively encourage staff who have been hired into clerical and support positions to seek promotions to Corrections Officer, and we sponsor officer training only for staff who are already employees of the agency. This makes our clerical and support positions very attractive to job applicants, and it gives us a pool of potential Corrections Officers who already have a working knowledge of the jail and who have passed all the screening requirements. To date, we have been totally successful with every upward-movement Corrections Officer.

Keep in touch. We have found it very important to keep in touch with all qualified candidates for a position in the jail, even if no position exists at the time. A good candidate for us is a good candidate for others, and we do our best to keep those who are interested in a job with us up to date on their prospects. We take a proactive approach, with frequent contacts initiated by our staff.

Hiring Success

Two main strategies have improved our ability to hire the right people.

Screen. We have found that successful retention of staff depends a great deal on having the right staff to retain, so we set some fairly strict but reasonable standards, and we stick to them. Specifically, we require a minimum of high school graduation, with a college degree preferred, at least 2 years of solid work history, and, as indicated earlier, no criminal history. Candidates also interview with a panel of potential supervisors and potential co-workers, and the interview results provide an absolute ranking of hiring eligibility. Although there is always a final, obligatory interview with the Department Director, that is pretty much a formality. An applicant's actual position on our list of eligible candidates for a position is determined by the interview panel, subject to the results of two required tests.

Every candidate for any position in our agency must complete two pass/fail tests. The first is a polygraph test, administered by a private contractor who is not affiliated with the Corrections Department but who works mainly with law enforcement agencies. This test covers all aspects of a candidate's history, including undetected criminal activity. The polygraph operator discusses any questionable results with the candidate and provides a full report of the test. Per the operator, about 10% of interviewees actually lie on the test, and another 7% are disqualified for admitting some previously denied disqualifying behavior. The contractor also advises, incidentally, that a few tests (about 2%) are inconclusive, in that there is no reaction to any question in the test.

The second pass/fail test is a complete psychiatric review by an M.D. psychiatrist. We contract with a psychiatrist who does mainly law enforcement and Federal Aviation Administration assessments. The review looks for personality disorders, checks the candidate's current mental health status, and identifies any background history that may contribute to a candidate's current mental health status and character pathology. Specific areas of focus include anger management skills (or lack thereof), issues with authority, stress-coping capacity, and ability to deal with a "closed" environment. In addition, the evaluation attempts to predict, without complete success, a candidate's level of motivation and interest in the job. Written reports of both the psychiatric evaluation and the polygraph test are provided to us, and, upon request, to the candidate.

Hire to their goals. As indicated earlier, we find very few super-heroes in our candidate pool, and we have been most successful in hiring those candidates whose goals are within the agency's capacity to meet them. Goals we can meet are realistically limited to a stable income, stability of employment, a potential for entry into other law enforcement careers, and the probability of career advancement within the agency. During the hiring process we attempt, fairly successfully, to determine the identified goal or goals of each applicant, and, as part of our retention efforts, we provide employees the career path most appropriate to their goals. We know that some employees want to move up or out as soon as possible, while others will be most happy to remain in a comfortable line-level position through their entire career. We believe that we have opportunities and a place for both sets of aspirations.

Retention

Our efforts to retain staff have also been evolving. Most of our newer approaches have to do with relating to our staff in ways that support them as people who want to do their best. Following are our suggestions for keeping staff.

Communicate. One thing we have learned is that today's staff are not the staff that we—or at least I—grew up with. The militaristic model of management does not work well with younger staff, and retaining these staff requires us to keep in touch with them. We have learned to provide avenues for staff to communicate their ideas and concerns to management, and we have found ways to show that we, as managers and supervisors, have received, considered, and acted on those ideas and concerns. We have also learned that staff who stay with us for the long haul expect us to listen to them, to be there for them, and to explain to them what we do and why we do it in ways they understand. Today more than ever, retention of quality staff requires “managing by walking around” and clearly communicating both our expectations and the reasons for them.

Balance expectations and needs. Another thing our agency has dealt with is differentiating between how we senior managers expect staff to look and behave and how they need to look and behave to do their jobs. We looked objectively at every aspect of our employee performance requirements, and we found many things that were more a historical expectation than a valid need. One example is facial hair, which we had previously prohibited, but which we decided to allow because we could find no performance requirement related to facial hair.

Another very controversial issue was allowing staff to carry personal cell phones on the job. We had historically prohibited personal cell phones, as have most correctional facilities, because of valid concerns about inmate access. However, cell phones have been allowed in situations with supervisor approval for quite a while, and we found little information to indicate inmate access was occurring. We also found that many of our staff had family health or child care issues that warranted some type of fairly quick communication in case of an emergency, and we found our facility was unable to provide that communication when needed. In the end, we decided, although not unanimously, that allowing staff to carry cell phones on duty did not create a major security problem, and that it did alleviate staff concerns about off-the-job issues requiring communications with family members. Though cell phones have not been used inside for long, there have been no problems at all with the practice.

Another controversial issue was allowing staff some ability to adjust their work hours to accommodate temporary or unexpected family needs. Traditionally, correctional agencies have been firm about expectations that all staff be on-duty and on-time when scheduled, and very intolerant of personal life issues that interfere with those expectations. We followed that model until recently, and at times we lost qualified staff who had emergency problems—usually with non-health-related child care issues—that interfered with their ability to report to work as scheduled. We have revisited that standard and have found that, in almost every situation, we can make temporary schedule changes that will allow staff to both manage their emergency needs and fulfill the basic requirements of their job, even if those requirements include a post assignment.

Attend to staff safety. Given that our work is with individuals and groups who have a documented history of impulse and anger management problems and poor decision-making skills, staff safety and staff perceptions of that safety are major components of staff retention. We do everything we can to keep staff safe and to see that our staff are aware of what we are doing to keep them safe.

- We ensure that every staff member who is on duty and potentially in contact with inmates is carrying a radio, has rapid access to a telephone, and has rapid access to either a “panic button” or an internal communications “squawk box” that has a direct connection to the always-staffed Central Control Room.
- We ensure that every staff member with access to inmates is trained in the use of chemical agents and carries a chemical agent canister when on duty.
- We attempt to maintain remote video monitoring of every staff member, and we keep staff aware of both the monitoring and where the “blind spots” are in the monitoring system. As with the internal communications system, all video monitors are in the Central Control Room.
- We expect supervisors in the jail to maintain contact with the staff under their supervision and to make frequent and irregular visits to all posts. The purpose of these visits is not to check up on what staff are doing, but to let both staff and inmates know that supervisors are always nearby and able to respond quickly and effectively to any threat to staff safety.

Be fair. Although Osceola County Corrections does not have a union, we do make all shift and post assignments by bid. Eligibility for a shift and post are determined strictly and totally by seniority in the job classification. We do this because we believe this is the only way to demonstrate absolute fairness in determining such assignments. When this policy was initially implemented, we lost more than one very qualified staff member who had been placed in a “special assignment” due to legitimate qualifications, proficiency, and/or interest. In the end, however, we managed to retain most of the affected staff and to establish a consistent, easily-understood system of staff assignment.

We now have annual bids for every post except those that are single-person job classifications, such as the Department Director position, and we post and allow bids for any post vacated by termination or promotion during the year. We do, in addition, allow “shift swaps” between two staff members in the same job classification if both agree to the swap, but we expect staff doing the exchanges to fill the post of the co-worker involved with them in the exchange.

Use exit interviews to improve retention. We conduct exit interviews with every staff member leaving the department, whatever the reason for the termination. We share information from the interviews with supervisors and managers, and we clearly express our policy of no negative repercussions of any kind for anything said in an exit interview. We also have a clear policy of no negative actions against any supervisor or manager as a result of an exit interview. We have learned a great deal from these interviews about what we can do to retain staff.

We also have learned that there are some circumstances in which an employee will leave us no matter what we do to attempt retain him or her.

Additional Issues/Questions

I think we are doing a decent job of hiring and retaining quality staff, but there are a couple issues that we have not yet resolved to our satisfaction.

Hire-backs of resignations/terminations. A number of staff have left the Corrections Department and later asked to be considered for re-employment. Some left in good standing for personal or professional-advancement reasons, others left at our request, and still others failed to successfully complete their probationary period. We have looked hard at all three groups because they are already trained, they are experienced, and/or they have tried other employment and decided they were in a better place with us. On the other hand, re-hiring someone who left, especially someone who left in not-so-good standing, raises the possibility of a negligent hiring legal issue, perceptions of returning a “bad apple to the barrel,” and questions from other staff about management, selection, hiring, and, in some cases, disciplinary actions. We have—so far at least—leaned mainly to accepting back anyone who left in good standing and being very selective in returning anyone to the job that left it against his or her will. We have had fairly consistent success with the former, and total success with the latter. It must be noted, however, that we have returned very few formerly terminated staff, and those have been employees who left under somewhat questionable circumstances in the relatively distant past. In such cases, we subject the candidate to the entire standard hiring process, including the polygraph and psychiatric evaluations.

Balancing vacancies and overtime. We have not come to any final policy on how to handle the negative spiral of position vacancies that lead to increased overtime that leads to more vacancies due to staff burn-out. In the past, we have experienced high vacancies and difficulty recruiting applicants. This gave us the very unpleasant choice of either risking even more vacancies by mandating overtime for tired, burned-out staff, or risking the safety of on-duty staff by running the jail with vacant posts. We learned that staff generally will tell you what works best for them, if you ask them and listen to what they have to say. Our staff tended to prefer mandated overtime to short-staffing, as long as they were confident we were taking steps to bring staffing back up to a reasonable level.

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Final Thoughts

- Recruitment is looking for the right people in the right places.
- Retention involves hiring the right people, listening to them, and treating them as professionals.

Although no single thing we did was totally effective, the combination of things we did got us to the current point of nearly-full staffing and low turnover. I hope readers find something in what I have written that will be of value to them. ■