

# The Retention of Correctional Personnel: A Problem for Today

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## *Abstract*

*Retention of correctional officers is essential for balance, diversity and the various skills they bring into an organization. The retention of officers can have a direct relationship between success and failure of an organization. Previous research in corrections states the issues to be both organizational and economical as the basis for retention issues. I have researched updated material concerning retention issues and completed interviews with former officers to address issues on why they left in order to prevent reoccurrences in the future. A survey was completed with current officers to address concerns and goals to increase future retention. From that a comprehensive plan has been designed to improve retention. Factors in that plan will include education, mentoring, motivation and morale.*

## Introduction

Corrections retention is not an issue that is unique to any specific organization. In the last 25 years it has been researched, analyzed, and evaluated by various states and counties around the country due to the need to continually rehire and recruit officers. The issue is universal and one we all need to work on. The retention of correctional officers is essential for balance, diversity, and the various skills they bring into an organization. Their task is twofold; they are to ensure the public's protection while maintaining order in a closed environment. The retention of quality experienced officers can have a direct relationship between the success and failure of an organization and failure is not an option in our field of endeavor.

Experienced levels of current staff will be reviewed along with the completion of a survey to establish goals/points most important to officers. Interviews will be conducted with those separated from the division, approximately twenty. Various committees have been set up to work on and build a system by each other and for each other for unity, morale, and interaction. Various research materials will be utilized from agencies and organizations that have previously addressed the retention issues. Analysis of research will be utilized for use and implementation within the division if deemed beneficial. Attempts will be made to generate funds that can be utilized for merit.

When I first decided on this topic as a research paper I thought and believed the problem of officer retention to be a problem exclusive in my division. Since I have been involved in the senior leadership program and have had access to multiple agencies and their representation I have come to realize that

the retention of officers is universal throughout the state and not unique to my agency. The retention of experienced officers as well as newly trained officers is imperative to the success or failure of an organization and a continuous effort.

Today as in the past many divisions and agencies are facing a similar quandary on how to retain their officers. As previously stated the costs can be staggering from recruiting through training. The lack of retaining capable qualified officers can have a negative impact that can cripple an agency. There is no simple answer to this dilemma, departments have to do more with less and become creative to accomplish duties while taking on more. No money for staffing – none to be appropriated and none to be budgeted. A primary example of the cost of retention is as follows. To hire, outfit, educate and train a (C.O.T) correctional officer trainee is based upon the starting salary of \$26, 832 times half of that salary \$13, 416 for operation cost totaling \$40, 248. For each officer that leaves that is typically what it costs the country at the end of the year to balance the budget out of the general welfare fund. No monies are provided by the county to aid in retention in an attempt to reduce costs accrued year after year.

I believe that the issue to be identified is why people are leaving. What factors influence an individual to move on to another agency or another career? Once that is established we can begin to determine what can be done to stop others from following in the same path.

### Purpose

Over the years a large number of capable and qualified correctional officers have left the Volusia County Division of Corrections. There is no recorded or documented history as to why those individuals left the agency. No exit interviews on file to determine a pattern or if former officers left for career change or advancement opportunity elsewhere in the state.

I was hired on September 28, 1992 and my employee I.D. number is 353. To date the current employee number is 912 approximately 12 years later. That equates to a turnover rate of 46 officers a year for the last 12 years. That rate is unacceptable when you factor in salaries, the cost of training, academy training, benefits, uniforms and equipment time and again.

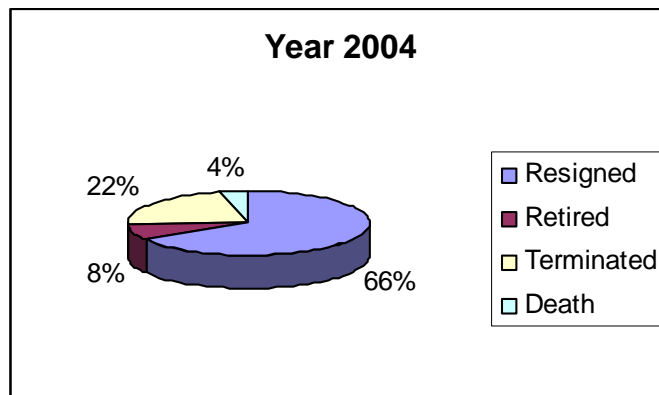
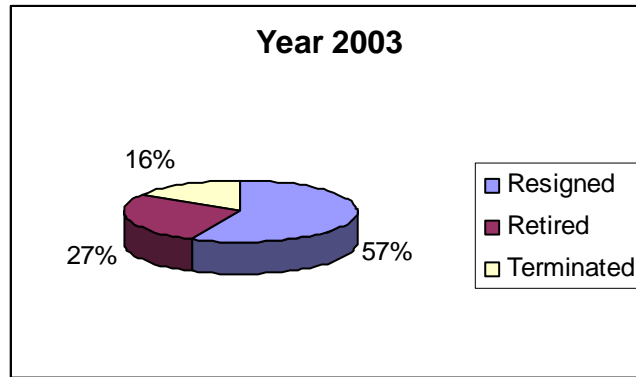
### Methods

Specific issues addressed by current officers citing morale, interaction, and communication with administration from the survey will be addressed. Issues addressed from interviews with former officers will be utilized to implement change to aid in officer retention. Research data collected will also be used to formulate a new strategy within the division to aid in the retention of officers. Articles researched such as correctional officer retention in Texas

published in corrections today (Castlebury, June 2002) state the vast majority of officers who leave the job do so within the first two years. The article also sites employee recognition as a factor. A mentoring program has also been initiated. Another article on correctional officer retention in Arkansas published by Corrections Management (Harrison, April 2001) also cite mentoring programs, officer concerns as priority issues for retention placing overall job satisfaction as a primary focal point to retention. Florida recruitment methods – retaining valuable employees published by corrections today (Rackleff, June 2002) they have also gone to a mentoring program citing that mentors develop leadership and supervisory skills and aid an individual seeking promotional opportunity non-traditional training systems published by the F.B.I. Law Enforcement Bulletin (Della, June 2004) cites a career development program as keys to success. All documented literature moves towards a goal of increased morale through the relationship between administration and the employee's. Mentoring by providing inexperienced officers with seasoned veterans that exemplify integrity, professionalism, and ethical behavior as the standard. Most important is a career development program for officers to ensure both the retention within the organization while creating the ability to meet both current and future needs. A program for development would foster growth and enhance employee loyalty.

#### Retention Issue and Personnel Action

The retention issue concerning personnel has only recently been documented and categorized for review by the division. I have researched personnel actions for both new hires and separations for January 2003 thru December 2003 and also January 2004 thru December 2004. For the entire 2003 year a total of 58 new officers were hired and a total of 44 were separated from employment. For the year 2004 a total of 43 new officers were hired and a total of 51 were separated. The total number of officers leaving the division is offset by retirees, termination, due to policy violations or suspended probation. With that breakdown now known the retention total is actually lower then first believed. The fact that more officers are resigning then are retiring or being terminated is the actual retention issue. Of those that resigned the issue is to find out if they could have been retained and what possible means could be utilized to retain them.



Former officers that have left the division were contacted (approximately 20) for interviews on why they separated. Of those contacted all were receptive to interview. Twelve former officers all under 30 years of age left to accept positions with various agencies as a police officer or deputy. All stated the ultimate goal was to get to the road and used corrections as a stepping stone to achieve that goal. Only 4 of the 12 interviewed stated they were satisfied with their careers in corrections and would not have left unless the opportunity presented itself. The remaining 8 stated they would not have made a career in our Division as their intent was always to leave once the opportunity presented itself. Four former officers left this agency for employment in surrounding counties in corrections, simply for higher salary and benefits package. All stated that had the salary and benefits package within our division been better they would not have left. Two former officers interviewed had achieved college degrees separated to pursue careers that paralleled their educational background. The remaining two officers interviewed both currently have careers outside of law enforcement and left shortly after starting their employment (within 6 months) due to the environment. Both stated stress, fear, and the unknown just wasn't worth what the job required and expected from them.

The survey conducted with staff went out to all four assigned shifts. This totaled 240 surveys disbursed and 127 returned, just over 50%. Officers were requested to list in order of importance those problems which could be identified and remedies they would institute. Salary and benefits were of primary concern which is usual but were most notably not the top complaint but were rated 4<sup>th</sup> overall. The number one complaint of officers was communication difficulties with the administration. Officers felt a detachment from top administrators citing lack of interaction and communication which builds a feeling of mistrust. The second issue was respect; the officers do not believe they have the respect of the current administration. The third issue was officer morale. Most stated there isn't any. With just those issues noted there seems to be enough criteria established for change to be in order.

Research data accumulated not surprisingly addresses the same concerns from around the country, as within my division. All accumulated data and information will be analyzed and utilized for implementation. A comprehensive plan will be formatted to improve retention based on the findings. The criteria will include educational factors, salary incentives, morale and motivation, and a mentoring program.

## Results

### *Career Development*

Currently within the division there are multiple projects underway for development such as computer upgrades, and policy reviews yearly. Outside vendors and contractors are reviewed for implementation of 3 and 5 year plans to upgrade systems and services. Set-up and re-model existing utilities such as lighting, plumbing to save money and be cost effective to the taxpayers while meeting the needs of the county. Through all this the division has no current plan to develop an officer's career path. The only career development link that can be accessed is the fact that invariably some officers move through the ranks by written exam for promotion until such time as they are ready for retirement. In today's market for quality qualified individuals hiring them and getting them on board is not nearly enough. Once started, trained, and established a career path needs to be established to meet the needs of the individual as well as the division. Career development programs have been utilized in the private business sectors to improve and motivate employee performance as well as the requirements of the business corporation. Most notably business entities are product or consumer products related and are service competitive to create sales, contracts, and continued service to create a profit and expand to continue the profit margin via sales and product use. This same development varied can be utilized to improve public protection and the individuals retained.

Officers can be motivated to achieve and excel. Their desires might be different but they still need to be addressed within the division. All resources that are available to the employee should be brought to the forefront. Implementation of a career development program will be started by the staff development department. A path established for one on one interviews with officers for planning on career advancement, special training promotion, maximizing salary incentive programs that are available along with educational packages that are available for college degree.

In addition to career development the personnel division will be instituting an exit interview process so that an informational pool will be established for review.

### *Benefits*

Currently the only step or progression raise within the division is for a senior officer position at 6 years of employment for a salary increase of 5%. The only requirement is the time frame while completing two salary incentive courses and a management class. Currently there are 86 officers that are classified as senior with an average service time of 13.75 years of experience with the division obviously and apparently a good foundation. There are also 120 officers with a combined average service time of 4.00 years experience. This is where the problem starts that is when we typically tend to lose our officers to other agencies or for some personal reasons. I believe if we can target this group and have them stay through their fourth year of service and into the fifth we can and will be able to keep them thus increasing the retention level. This is a key area our division should focus on. Money has always been a short term fix and motivation factor for most people. In order to keep your officers you have to be competitive, this is an area in which that can be accomplished.

Currently, for example, officer A at 6 years of employment is earning 16.93 hourly, Officer B at 4 years of employment is earning 13.95 hourly. At those two levels there is a difference of \$6,063.28 a year in salary. Multiply that by the 120 officers that would be eligible for senior officer status if it were reduced from 6 years to 4 years that would create two specific changes. First and most notably it would save the county \$799,593.60 by giving the salary increase at 4 years as opposed to 6. Second it would raise officer salary earlier getting them into their fourth year without possibly leaving for surrounding areas. The senior officer requirement can also be raised from two classes to a total of six as the basic requirement requiring officers to continue their education towards a career path within this division.

Example: If an officer utilized salary incentive and reaches the \$120.00 monthly benefit in the first five years that will give them an additional salary increase over 25 years of \$36,000.00 and at 30 years it would be \$37,200.00. These monies accrued would also go toward the Florida Retirement System and raise the pension allotment. It is an opportunity to be explored and utilized.

These two benefits if implemented would establish an individual's career path in the first five years of employment setting goals consistent for both the officers and administration. An educated pool of professionals would be in place to take on the ever changing dynamics of the correctional setting. Experience levels would be at an all time high and a dynamic work force in place to meet the needs of the community while preparing for its own future.

### *Officer Morale*

In order to raise morale you must first address what the problem is, if any and build a platform which can be built on over time. To address this issue the division has instituted an employee-management committee which meets once a month. The Director of Corrections along with both assistant directors hold an open meeting for uniformed staff to have a question and answer session regarding anything from training to implementation of policy, assigned duties, benefits, issues of staff importance, and projected 3 year and 5 year plans of the administration for the division. If nothing else comes from these initial meetings at least an open dialogue has been developed between uniformed officers and the division's administration. This was one of the main concerns of officers in the survey that was completed. Officer complaints were of no interaction with the administration and no dissemination of information. These meetings have addressed these concerns and have yielded a positive turnout. Officers are now meeting one week prior to the scheduled meeting to set-up and plan out issues of importance for discussion. The reception by the administration has also been positive due to the turnout and to actually inform as a group what plans are being made and what concerns are being addressed.

To further address the issue of morale and promote unity among officers we recently held the 1<sup>st</sup> annual corrections ball. This was designed and set-up to actually have two formal gatherings, one for Alpha/Bravo and one for Charlie/Delta Shifts. This was required for the obvious reasons of the security of the institution=somebody has to work and all officers should have the opportunity to attend. Committees were set up and information was passed between shifts, raffles held and eventually it all came together. A total of 117 officers with guests attended out of 240 officers. I would have liked for the numbers to have been higher but the event was a success as all who attended had a good time. Plans are underway for the second annual ball. Different officers have expressed interest in the planning stages along with those who spearheaded the first outing. The purpose was to involve officers, have a good time, and to mingle with those you might not have associated with except for a working relationship. This was accomplished, with any luck we can have officers talking about future plans as opposed to talking about leaving, time will tell.

In addition to the formal ball, mid-shift outings are being planned. This is left up to the officers as to what they want to do and will be addressed each shift.

## Conclusion

After review and research I personally believe that my division can benefit from some of the initial proposals such as mentoring and a career development program. Our officers that are currently at 4 years of service or less can greatly benefit from such a format and this will undoubtedly assist in retaining our most valuable resource – our officers. This isn't a concrete solution to the retention issue but it is a start, a foundation which can be built upon and added to as time goes by. Time will be needed to use as a gauge for improvement and to properly assess if officers are staying or continuing to leave. That will be the final evaluation of changes proposed. As we implement change, improvements can be added as required, new idea's offered and tried for the benefit of both the officer's and the administration. We can only strive to improve our agency and those within it to achieve the desired result and maintain public protection.

Captain Thomas McAllister has been employed with the Volusia County Division of Corrections since 1992. He is the Operations Captain at the Volusia County Branch since his promotion from the Custody Lieutenant's post in January of 2005. He is currently pursuing his Associates Degree in Criminal Justice.



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## Outline Research Questions

- I.** Identify the problem and issues of maintaining officers
  - A.** Why are they leaving, where are they going, and what can be done to stop or reverse this ongoing dilemma?
  - B.** Establish a format for officer retention by survey of current officers. Contact former officers for interview to build analysis for retention.
  - C.** Utilize research material available from various sources such as the American Journal of Criminal Justice, Corrections Management Quarterly and Correction Alert.
  
- II.** Once causes can be identified, establish a format to maintain officers
  - A.** Define all literature
  - B.** Display the findings from interviews and surveys
  - C.** Determine what you need to do and how you will state it
  - D.** Analyze the effects – would it have made a difference or not?
  
- III.** Research will determine why individuals left, where they went and why. The methodology used will be case study along with qualitative interviews and hard data from research.
  
- IV.** A comprehensive plan will be formatted to improve retention based on findings. The criteria unknown at this time will most likely include educational factors, salary incentives, morale and motivation a mentoring program.