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Staff Shortages Prompting More Community Work Centers Closings, Other Changes at MDOC

JACKSON – Chronic staffing shortages are prompting the Mississippi Department of Corrections to consider closing three more Community Work Centers.

Community Work Centers in Bolivar, Yazoo and Jackson counties could be closed starting in January, bringing to five the number of such closings in one year. Employees from those facilities would go to other locations in the system.

The agency also is having trouble staffing the three state prisons and retaining adequate staff for its probation and parole offices.

“When I was appointed corrections commissioner by Gov. (Phil) Bryant, I said my priority was increasing the abysmal pay of corrections employees,” Corrections Commissioner Marshall Fisher said. “These people do jobs that no one else will do. If we don’t increase wages that leads to retaining staff, there is no question that we will pay a price.”

Lawmakers in the 2015 session granted Fisher’s request for exemption from the state Personnel Board so he could reorganize MDOC. However, he has since been unable to fund and sustain a pay raise for employees as a result of making changes because of a glitch in the exemption legislation.

After getting a state attorney general’s opinion that doesn’t clear up the intent of the legislation, Fisher said he intends to go back before the Legislature to ask that the law be amended. Meanwhile, he is asking the attorney general to reconsider the opinion.

“I’ve got a public safety issue,” Fisher said. “We’ve got to pay these people a livable wage. I have asked for help from the leadership and have received commitments to support us.”

In requesting that the law be amended, Fisher said he also intends to seek another year of exemption from state personnel rules.

“I have not used this legislation to conduct mass dismissals of people as some accused me of wanting to do,” Fisher said. “I need the authority to run the agency as I see fit in order to make

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sure we are adequately and efficiently performing our mission of maintaining public safety.”

As current conditions exist, Fisher said, the agency is seriously understaffed in key areas and pay is likely a primary factor.

The average pay for a corrections officer is \$25,968.72. Most of the corrections officers are women, many of whom are single parents. The agency’s turnover rate for corrections officer is 47 percent.

The average pay for a probation/parole agent is \$32,520.02. There is a 21 percent vacancy rate for parole/probation agents.

“We are looking at other changes, too,” Fisher said. For example, MDOC is consolidating some units and changing the mission of others.

The agency closed the Alcorn County Community Work Center in November and the Jefferson County Community Work Center in May.

“It is difficult to look my people in the eyes and tell them that because of some technical language, they cannot get much deserved compensation,” Fisher said. “Everybody matters or nobody matters. These people matter.”

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