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Sweltering heat worsens Texas' prison staffing crisis

Incarcerated people should not be forced to endure life-threatening temperatures that have been shown to increase violence and deaths behind bars.

By Andy Potter, Matthew Charles, For the Express-News
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Summer has come and gone, although the blistering heat continues, and many Texas prisons still lack adequate air conditioning. State lawmakers must address a humanitarian crisis for inmates and corrections officers.

Lola Gomez/TNS

As extreme heat continued across the U.S. throughout summer and now into fall, prisons have become increasingly dangerous due to their lack of air conditioning.

[This is exemplified in Texas](#), where advocates are claiming conditions violate the cruel and unusual punishment clause of the U.S. Constitution and asking a federal judge to require that the nation's largest state prison system be fully air conditioned.

Incarcerated people should not be forced to endure life-threatening temperatures, which have been shown to increase violence and deaths behind bars. These inhumane conditions also affect the correctional staff in the state prison system.

Like most states, Texas is facing a severe staffing shortage that is only made worse by the conditions behind bars. The number of [full-time staff working in Texas prisons has fallen by more than 10% since 2019](#), and about [one-quarter of correctional officer positions are vacant](#).

The pandemic and other economic conditions helped fuel this trend, but the lack of air conditioning and inability to provide safe working conditions make recruiting harder for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Our organizations, One Voice United and FAMM, recently launched the [Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign](#) to call attention to these issues.

As two leading organizations representing correctional staff, and incarcerated people and their families, we are asking Texas lawmakers to protect the lives of our constituencies. While we have typically been pitted against one another in debates about safety and justice, we know firsthand that the health and wellness of our colleagues, friends and loved ones are intertwined.

Years of chronic neglect and failure to modernize correctional facilities have put lives at risk and are making it far harder to solve the twin problems of understaffing and overcrowding. The staffing shortage is happening when Texas can least afford it. [The prison population is rising again after nearly a decade of declines. It grew by more than any other state from 2021 to 2022.](#)

Now, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, under the leadership of Executive Director Bryan Collier, has taken commendable steps to alleviate the impacts of extreme heat on staff and vulnerable populations, including cooling the Wallace Pack geriatric Unit. The Texas Legislature should step in and provide the funding needed to fully address this pressing problem.

There are some who believe tax dollars should not be spent to provide relief for incarcerated people. That's not only shortsighted but immoral. In our system of justice, the punishment should be the loss of freedom, not the conditions of confinement. With temperatures exceeding 120 degrees on some summer days, there is no relief for incarcerated people or those in uniform.

As a result of understaffing, staff are being mandated to work three to five 16-hour shifts every week in these conditions. These are the men and women who protect our communities and our families when they go behind those walls. They do their jobs in full gear every day.

Providing air-conditioned offices isn't a solution for corrections officers. Staff must circulate throughout the facilities. A correctional officer's job is based on observation, interaction and communication, none of which are possible if they are not on the blocks and in the yards.

Studies leave no doubt that when temperatures go up, fuses shorten and violent incidents follow. This contributes to a vicious cycle of low morale and high staff turnover that exacerbates existing challenges and make it nearly impossible for the corrections system to carry out its mission to reduce reoffending through rehabilitation and protect public safety.

Unless policymakers act, the conditions behind bars will further deteriorate and there will be more violence, trauma and deaths among correctional staff and incarcerated people. No matter whether your loved one works or lives in a correctional facility, it is inhumane to put these men and women through this. It must be remedied, and it can be.

Andy Potter is executive director and founder of One Voice United, a national campaign to give correctional officers and staff a voice in conversations about corrections and the criminal justice system. Matthew Charles is a senior policy adviser for FAMM.