

Rightsizing the New York City Department of Correction While Helping a Struggling Workforce

Interviews with current and former New York City Department of Correction (DOC) officers confirm how difficult it is to work in corrections and that many officers stay at DOC simply because they feel they have no other viable career options. To help this struggling workforce while combating jail overspending, city leaders must urgently invest in career transition support for corrections officers.

Background

With more corrections officers than people in detention, New York City's jails are excessively overstaffed compared to the national average of one officer for every four people in jail.¹ Overstaffing means overspending: driven by personnel costs, New York City's jails cost billions.²

Especially given the plans to close Rikers Island and replace it with a lower-capacity borough-based jail system, DOC needs to bring its uniformed staffing levels in line with its jail population.³ Last year, DOC's uniformed workforce outnumbered the jail population by about 400, and overstaffing will only become more wasteful as the jail population shrinks.⁴ Rightsizing DOC's workforce will reduce jail spending and enable greater investments in housing, health, and other programs and services that improve safety and keep people out of jail in the first place.⁵

At the same time, rightsizing DOC's workforce must not have a negative impact on officers who already feel they have few paths to financial security. By providing proper career transition support, city leaders can decrease jail spending while improving the lives of New Yorkers—primarily New Yorkers of color—who work in corrections because they feel they have no other options.⁶

To understand the reality of working for DOC and how best to support career transitions for New York City's corrections officers, The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 current and former New York City corrections officers.⁷ Vera's interviews confirm how difficult it is to be a corrections officer and that many officers stay at DOC simply because they feel they have no other viable career options. To help this struggling workforce while combating jail overspending, city leaders must urgently invest in career transition support for corrections officers. Beyond reining in DOC's budget and improving officers' well-being, doing so will also help New York's economy by filling gaps in the municipal and private workforces.⁸

Officers join DOC for the salary, benefits, and pension—and often feel trapped by them

When asked why they joined DOC, every officer Vera interviewed responded that they were motivated by the salary, benefits, job security, and path to early retirement, while only two mentioned wanting to serve their community. The majority of participants were encouraged to apply to DOC by family or friends who worked in corrections and spoke highly of the salary and benefits. More than half of participants took multiple uniformed city tests—including for DOC, the New York City Fire Department (FDNY), the New York City Police

Department (NYPD), and the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY)—and ended up at DOC simply because DOC called them first.

The DOC salary, benefits, and pension allow officers a path to financial stability. However, pathways like this, that do not require a college degree, are so rare, and career services that would enable transition are so inaccessible, that officers routinely feel trapped in the job. One officer lamented, “You feel like you are bound to this job because you’ve made a certain amount of money. What else can I do?” Another said he wanted to find a different job but “didn’t know what else to do to make the kind of money I was making.” For many, the promise of retirement at a young age keeps them coming to work despite the job’s physical, mental, and personal costs. One officer said, “I never liked the job, but . . . I stayed there for my pension.”

Harmful working conditions take a toll on officers’ health

Nearly all participants said the job reduced their physical and mental health. “We make good money,” said one officer. “But you pay for it. . . . When people retire, they don’t even make it two years.” Research shows that the life expectancy for corrections officers is 16 years shorter than the United States average.⁹

Many participants blamed their intense work schedule for bad eating habits, lack of physical activity, poor sleep hygiene, stress, anxiety, trouble attending medical appointments, and difficulty balancing work and home lives. “You’re doing constant overtime,” remarked one officer. “It takes a toll on the body.” Participants said that poor sanitation, frequent physical altercations, and instances of sexual assault created an unsafe and traumatizing work environment. Of course, these same conditions harm incarcerated people, too.¹⁰

Every participant said that the long hours and unpredictable overtime make life outside work challenging, particularly for officers with children. “They were taking [my daughter] to the hospital,” said one officer, “and they didn’t tell me till my shift was over because they didn’t want me to ask to leave early.”

The combination of poor working conditions and a lack of management support after traumatic incidents drove several interviewees to leave DOC before retirement despite their original intentions to stay. Some officers said they reached their breaking point when they were pressured to return to work after injury before they were medically ready. Others remembered situations in which management urged them to ignore symptoms of trauma, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder and return to their posts.

These physical and mental stressors are exacerbated by DOC’s culture. When asked about their least favorite parts of the job, nearly half of participants complained of a workplace dominated by favoritism, where well-connected officers receive posts with better working conditions or hours. For example, one officer observed that “if you were in the control room, it was because you had a very good rapport with whatever captain was there.” Another said, “It’s who you know. . . . It’s always been that way.”

Given all these issues, Vera asked officers if they would recommend the job to friends or family. Although several retired officers said they would have recommended it 10 or 15 years ago because of the quality of life enabled by a DOC salary and pension, most participants said they would not today because of the job’s stress and perceived unsafety. A few said that they would recommend it only to someone with no other options. “Can’t say there’s much you enjoy about the job,” said one officer. “There’s not much enjoyment other than you got a job, basically.”

Officers struggle to identify their transferrable skills

Vera also asked officers about skills they might transfer to other lines of work. Interviewees struggled to identify skills they had developed at DOC, with some saying they could not think of any skills that would be useful outside of a security setting. The skill participants most often referenced was interpersonal communication, followed by listening, de-escalating tense situations, and cultivating strong situational awareness.

After DOC, officers mostly pursue security-related jobs, though their interests are diverse

Most of the corrections officers Vera interviewed feel that they are only qualified to go into security-related jobs. “I was very doubtful of my professional value outside of correction,” one officer remarked. As a result, nearly two-thirds of officers said that when colleagues leave DOC, they mostly go to NYPD, become officers in the court system, or move elsewhere and work for a different corrections department.

In addition to NYPD, many officers said that to work better hours in better conditions while maintaining their pensions, colleagues joined DSNY, FDNY, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, or, less commonly, 911 dispatch or the New York City Department of Education. Outside of city government, some officers mentioned colleagues leaving to work for UPS or to become truck drivers.

Despite feeling confined to security positions, the officers Vera spoke to have a range of career interests including film production, hospitality, education, and real estate. One participant said she wants to become a librarian. Another said she dreams of finishing her degree and opening a daycare center. Often, the barrier to pursuing these alternative career paths is not a lack of motivation, but rather a lack of self-confidence and time. “Most of us in corrections,” observed one officer, “we don’t know what our skillset [is] and really what our résumé would look like externally.” A retired officer said, “Right now if I was working as a correction officer, I wouldn’t necessarily have the time to really dedicate myself to building that skill set in my day-to-day.” There were some exceptions; for example, one interviewee received his commercial driver’s license while at DOC to prepare for a next career, and another became a notary public.

New Yorkers need more career options than corrections

Corrections is one of too few well-paid career opportunities for New Yorkers without postsecondary degrees. Providing career transition services to current officers will help DOC rightsize its uniformed workforce, saving public funds while helping officers find new opportunities that do not place such a burden on their health and home lives. Facilitating career transitions will also help fill vacancies in city government, which is facing significant workforce shortages, as well as the private sector, which is anticipating significant growth in the next several years.¹¹

To that end, Vera also spoke with five New York City–based workforce development experts to identify best practices. There was clear consensus among the experts, with each recommending that city leaders take the following steps to support a transitioning correctional workforce:

- **Create talent profiles.** Start by identifying typical corrections officer skill sets to create a set of talent profiles that represent the majority of the workforce. One workforce development expert acknowledged that “it’s pretty unreasonable to take someone who’s been a correction officer for a very long time and say, ‘What do you want to be?’” Instead, the expert recommended beginning the process with the question, “What are some of the core competencies of a correction officer?”
- **Map out new career pathways.** Map current experiences and skill sets onto new career pathways both within and outside the municipal workforce, bearing in mind the changing talent needs of New York City’s public sector and private economy. One expert listed tech, construction, health care, retail, and hospitality as the top sectors with growing workforce needs, and he recommended convening sector experts to compile “a specific set of recommendations” to align corrections officer experiences and qualifications with job descriptions in these sectors.
- **Tailor support services for officers.** Ensure adequate support for career transitions, including intensive career coaching, financial support, and childcare, to enable opportunities to reskill and upskill. One expert warned that a transition program should not “even bother [offering] an

education program without the advising” and that providing officers access to career coaches is essential. Another expert recommended “a combination of one-on-one and group coursework that makes sure that at the end of the training you have a résumé, you have a LinkedIn.”

- **Mobilize service providers.** Identify key service providers who can provide targeted career coaching, training, and other support to help corrections officers transition from their current roles to new ones. Two workforce development experts pointed to the private sector as a potential partner to create talent profiles and career paths. They also identified Workforce1 as a service provider with the expertise and connections to help provide tailored career advising and training to officers in transition.¹²

Overall, the workforce development experts pointed out that the city needs to allow transitioning officers adequate time to explore new opportunities, upskill themselves, and find satisfying new employment. It is therefore essential that city leaders fund workforce transition programs now, before the closure of Rikers Island, to allow officers enough time to prepare for the next phases of their careers.

Of course, DOC still will need to retain and recruit officers to staff its jails. Officers who begin or continue to work in the jails will need more support than they currently receive. Improved training, particularly when it comes to interacting with people with mental illness; enhanced access to mental health support; equitable processes for assigning officers to posts and overtime; and ongoing feedback mechanisms for leadership to hear directly from officers will help DOC ensure that it is supporting officers’ physical and mental well-being, which, in turn, will help improve jail conditions for incarcerated people.

© 2024 Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they’re fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn’t determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera’s headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit [vera.org](https://www.vera.org). For more information about this brief, contact Benjamin Heller, senior program associate, at bheller@vera.org.

Endnotes

- ¹ New York City Comptroller Brad Lander, “Department of Correction (DOC) Dashboard” accessed February 26, 2024, <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/services/for-the-public/department-of-correction-doc/dashboard/>; and Zhen Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2022 – Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022), 16, <https://perma.cc/4YBY-UJGC>.
- ² Vera Institute of Justice, *A Look Inside the FY 2025 DOC Budget: Mayor Adams Continues to Invest in Incarceration over Communities* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2024), <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/A-Look-Inside-the-FY-2025-New-York-City-Department-of-Correction-Budget.pdf>.
- ³ Benjamin Heller, *Why New York City Needs a Blueprint to Rightsize the Department of Correction* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2022), <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/rightsize-nyc-department-of-correction.pdf>.
- ⁴ Lander, “Department of Correction (DOC) Dashboard,” accessed February 26, 2024.
- ⁵ Vera Institute of Justice, *A Look Inside the FY 2025 DOC Budget*, 2024. For evidence of the effectiveness of supervised release, see Melanie Skemer, Cindy Redcross, and Howard Bloom, *Pursuing Pretrial Justice Through an Alternative to Bail: Findings from an Evaluation of New York City’s Supervised Release Program* (New York: MDRC, 2020), <https://perma.cc/9WAR-TQ3Y>; for evidence of the effectiveness of reentry services, see Emilee Green, “An Overview of Evidence-Based Practices and Programs in Prison Reentry,” Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, December 19, 2019, <https://perma.cc/68C6-G9A3>; and for evidence of the effectiveness of summer youth employment, see Judd B. Kessler, Sarah Tahamont, Alexander Gelber, and Adam Isen, *The Effects of Youth Employment on Crime: Evidence from New York City Lotteries* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2021), <https://perma.cc/VJ32-MRYN>.
- ⁶ New York City Department of Correction, *New York City Department of Correction Uniformed Personnel Demographic Data* (New York: New York City Department of Correction, 2023), <https://perma.cc/A4P2-TUF5>; and Vera Institute of Justice, *The Prison Experience for Corrections Staff* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), <https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/examining-prisons-today/the-prison-experience-for-corrections-staff>.
- ⁷ From August 2023 to January 2024, Vera conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with 30 current and former New York City corrections officers. To aid in recruitment, Vera collaborated with consultants who had spent decades working on Rikers Island and had the trust of officers. Recruited through a combination of purposive, quota, and snowball sampling, the study sample

represents DOC's majority Black (n=14) and Latinx (n=14) workforce, overrepresents women (n=19) relative to men (n=11), and includes on-the-job officers (n=8), retirees (n=13), and officers who resigned before qualifying for full pensions (n=9). Following a robust informed consent process, interviews were conducted via videoconference and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Participants currently employed by the City of New York, at DOC or any other municipal agency, received no compensation; all other participants received a \$50 gift card for their time.

- ⁸ Chris Sommerfeldt, "NYC Expands Job Search Options to Include Private Sector Employees," *New York Daily News*, March 27, 2024, updated March 27, 2024, <https://www.nydailynews.com/2024/03/27/adams-admin-expands-job-search-options-to-now-include-nyc-private-sector-employers/>.
- ⁹ Vera Institute of Justice, *The Prison Experience for Corrections Staff* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2018), <https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/examining-prisons-today/the-prison-experience-for-corrections-staff#:~:text=Researchers%20have%20only%20recently%20begun,and%20those%20in%20the%20military>.
- ¹⁰ Graham Rayman, "Rikers Island, NYC Jails Plagued with Bugs, Mice, Cleanliness Violations, Says Federal Court Monitor," *New York Daily News*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.nydailynews.com/2024/02/29/rikers-island-nyc-jails-plagued-with-bugs-mice-cleanliness-violations-says-federal-court-monitor/>; Jan Ransom and Bianca Pallaro, "Beyond the Violence at Rikers, Decades of Mismanagement and Dysfunction," *New York Times*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/nyregion/rikers-island-correction-officers.html>; and Jessy Edwards and Samantha Max, "Late-Night Sex Assaults. Invasive Searches. The 700+ Women Alleging Abuse at Rikers," *Gothamist*, March 26, 2024, <https://gothamist.com/news/late-night-sex-assaults-invasive-searches-the-700-women-alleging-abuse-at-rikers>.
- ¹¹ New York City Comptroller Brad Lander, *Title Vacant: Addressing Critical Vacancies in NYC Government Agencies* (New York: New York City Comptroller Brad Lander, 2022), <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Title-Vacant-Addressing-Critical-Vacancies-in-NYC-Government-Agencies.pdf>; and New York State Department of Labor, *New York City Significant Industries: A Report to the Workforce Development System* (Albany: New York State Department of Labor, 2021), 8, <https://perma.cc/SG4A-W3CZ>.
- ¹² New York City Department of Small Business Services, *Virtual Workforce1 Career Center System* (New York: New York City Department of Small Business Services, 2024), <https://www.nyc.gov/site/sbs/careers/virtual-wf1cc.page>.