



REPORT SUMMARY

CGL Companies was contracted to evaluate the safety and security needs of the Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC). This study came after the murders of two staff and hostage-taking at the Anamosa State Penitentiary and reflected IDOC's determination to improve security practices and agency performance.

Since this tragic incident, the Iowa Department of Corrections has focused its efforts on improving the safety and security of its facilities. Progress has been made, however, the lack of adequate staffing levels in certain facilities coupled with significant recruitment and retention issues have hampered the Department's efforts. Moreover, a national workforce shortage, global pandemic, and an increasing prison population has added additional strain to Iowa's prison system. All correctional systems throughout the country were experiencing impacts to normal operations due to the COVID -19 pandemic at the time of this review. The IDOC experienced similar operational impacts.

IDOC's Operational Improvements

Our on-site reviews found an agency focusing its efforts on addressing critical issues to improve safety and security. Several positive initiatives were observed:

- **Improving Safety and Security:** It is clear the agency has seriously responded to the March 2021 murders of correctional officer Robert McFarland and registered nurse Lorena Schulte, and hostage-taking of Lorie Matthes. Since then, a significant number of administrators have been replaced across the system. New policies have been developed to improve security practices. We found the administrators in place to be very competent and eager to improve operations. The agency is making strides in refining its security controls.
- **Re-initiation/Improvement of Compliance and Accountability System:** The re-implementation and improvement of the Security, Safety, audit processes that were postponed during the COVID-19 pandemic is a positive first step to improving accountability across the system and ensuring security practices are being followed.

- **Refine an Objective Process for Incarcerated Individual Work Assignments:** To ensure they are better matching incarcerated individuals' custody and behavior history/characteristics to work assignments, the agency has developed a work assignment screening process that will assess and classify incarcerated individuals for placement in job assignments. This process appears to better determine which incarcerated individuals are appropriate for assignments that have higher levels of independence or access to tools.
- **Unit Management:** In several facilities we found excellent implementations of unit management that were extremely effective in improving overall operations by being responsive to the needs of incarcerated individuals and the concerns of staff.
- **Recruitment:** The agency is taking creative efforts to improve the recruitment and retention of staff. To this end, the Department has recently added a statewide recruitment/retention specialist with responsibility for addressing this issue.
- **Engaged Leadership:** Agency and facility leadership is engaged and open to initiatives that will improve security and operations at their individual institutions.
- **Positive but Concerned Staff Across Organization:** Staff attitudes across the facility are generally good. Staff are understandably apprehensive regarding upcoming changes but remain largely positive.

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations:

- **System Crowding:** Unlike many correctional systems that are experiencing substantial reductions in inmate populations and corresponding levels of crowding, IDOC facility population levels far exceed capacity. As of December 13, 2021, the Department housed 8,106 inmates in facilities that had a capacity of 6,990 beds, a shortfall of 16 percent. This level of crowding exacerbates existing operational challenges in security, offender management, and service delivery, while placing significant additional pressure on custody staff. The additional workload and heightened tension created by crowding is a major factor in the Department's current staff recruitment and retention issues.
- **Custody Staffing:** The IDOC would benefit from bolstering staffing to meet current facility security requirements and the challenges of managing a modern correctional system. Existing staffing gaps create high levels of overtime that exacerbate the already difficult issue of staff retention.
- **Staff Supervision:** Supplementing the current supervision of custody staff would enhance the Department's ability to mentor, guide, and direct the activities of new staff, and ensure the consistent implementation of IDOC policies and initiatives. These additional positions would

assist in retaining staff and providing front-line staff with support and direction.

- **Recruitment and Retention:** Staffing has become the most serious issue that correctional systems across the country face. At issue is the inability to effectively recruit and retain custody and nursing staff. In addition to recent steps by the Department to improve the attractiveness of employment, we recommend expanded use of retention bonuses, expediting the hiring process, exploring the ability to expand the salary pay scale range progression, and improving current pre-service training practices to better support new staff.
- **Nurse Shortages:** Nursing vacancies are a critical issue at several facilities. We found a high number of nurse vacancies that have the potential to negatively impact standards of health care within IDOC. While recruitment and retention policies play a key role, the State of Iowa's continued authorization of time and one-half pay for registered nurse overtime, as adopted during the pandemic, would help address this issue.
- **Policy/Compliance System:** The demands placed on modern correctional systems require greater consistency and system oversight. National litigation regarding standards of care and housing practices, along with changing societal expectations have increased correctional system operational demands, necessitating coherent, coordinated, and consistent practices across the Department. IDOC has a very small central office. This small contingent is responsible for directing and monitoring the performance of a correctional system with over 8,000 inmates, 30,000 clients on community supervision, and 3,500 funded positions. Key to establishing an appropriate level of central office oversight is the need for a centralized policy/compliance unit that ensures new and revised policies accurately reflect agency needs/initiatives, are clearly communicated to the field, and are consistently implemented. A central office Policy/Compliance Unit should be created that is responsible for developing agency policies, ensuring their accurate communication and implementation, and evaluating system compliance to include providing facility scorecards for an overview of each facility's performance as well as tracking of their corrective action.
- **Security Controls:** IDOC should continue to focus efforts on improving operational control of tools and toxic chemicals, as well as better regulation of the movement of incarcerated individuals within its institutions. At each facility, we found varying levels of tool and toxic chemical control practices. To improve consistency of the control of toxic chemicals we recommend transitioning to a system of centralized storage and issuance of chemicals/toxics at each facility. To better facilitate offender movement, the IDOC should institute consistent inmate movement protocols.
- **Training Practices:** Staff training is vital for staff preparedness and can play a substantial role in retention. The Department has implemented a centralized training curriculum and academy with an instructor training in order to ensure consistency and fidelity of staff training. Further development of this centralized, more consistent structure will allow the Department to better

apply training staff expertise to the e-learning, instructor-led, and OJT components of the curriculum.

CGL acknowledges that every state's Department of Correction will face unique challenges to reformative operational changes. CGL trusts the IDOC and other stakeholders to consider the recommendations produced as part of this report, alongside the feasibility for adoption dependent on the correctional system's unique characteristics as well as fiscal, operational, and structural characteristics.