



# SHERIFF DUSTIN D. HEUERMAN

## CHAMPAIGN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

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204 E. Main Street  
Urbana, Illinois 61801-2702  
(217) 384-1204

County Board Members:

I wanted to bring to your attention an increasingly concerning issue at the Sheriff's Office, particularly in the corrections division. We are currently experiencing critical levels of staffing in the jails. We have seen an increase in employee turnover in multiple divisions at the Sheriff's Office, but none as concerning as we are currently seeing in corrections. This turnover is due to multiple circumstances aggravated by COVID protocols, including current criminal justice climate, pay, seeking alternative employment goals, and mental/physical safety concerns (many of the inmates currently in the jails are accused of violent crimes and/or have mental health issues). Many of these things are out of our control.

It is projected that by the end of July, the corrections division will be short 10 correctional officers, the highest number of vacancies we have ever experienced. To help put things into perspective, that is one-fifth of our front-line correctional officers. Lieutenants, the Captain, and the Chief Deputy have all stepped in to help fill the void, however that cannot be maintained for very long.

We currently only have 2 correctional officer candidates on the eligibility list and are working to get them evaluated for open positions as soon as possible. The time from interviewing a candidate until a correctional officer is ready to work on his/her own is approximately five months, not including time at the training academy. Recruitment, training, and equipment also cost the county significant amounts of money.

Our staffing shortage has caused us to postpone crucial training for our officers, as well as postpone anticipated dates to get inmate programs up and running again after COVID-19. Overtime for officers is at an all-time high, resulting in increased stress, decreased mental health, and increased opportunity for mistakes to be made in operations – mistakes that could lead to lawsuits, or worse, injury to staff and inmates. We are at the point of exploring using other Sheriff's Office divisions, including the patrol division, to fulfill our legally obligated responsibilities of the corrections division. This, in turn, could jeopardize the work of the other divisions, potentially jeopardizing public safety in our county. We are left with few other options.

We are temporarily relocating 60 inmates to another county in September due to a HVAC project at the Satellite jail, and quite frankly, I'm not sure I can justify bringing those inmates back to the county in a timely manner due to staffing concerns. This cost is estimated at \$55/inmate/day and the closest facility I can find so far to take 60 inmates for this time period is Ogle County, IL. This equates to \$69,300 for the three-week period, \$99,000 if the inmates stay an entire month, and approximately \$99,000/month after that. We also must consider the costs of transporting these inmates to and from court hearings and appointments and the distance housed away from relatives. In my opinion as both your Sheriff and a taxpayer in Champaign County, this is not the best way to be spending county resources but there may be no alternative.

Here are a few of the things I would like to highlight for you:

- **Multiple employees have left citing safety concerns at the downtown jail and the work environment in which they face.** Many of the inmates we have in custody are accused of serious, violent crimes and/or are struggling with mental health issues. The jail is still under strict COVID-19 protocols from the CDC and IDPH and the Department of Corrections and Department of Human Services are not accepting inmates remanded to their custody in a timely manner. In one case an inmate had smeared feces all over his cell. In another case, an inmate yelled and kicked his cell door for hours at a time. At least two correctional officers have been attacked by inmates at the downtown jail within the last year and several other correctional officers have been present when doors at the downtown jail unexpectedly unsecured due to equipment malfunction. Their swift actions on numerous occasions have prevented inmates from escaping. These are only a few examples of the environment in which my correctional officers are required to work.

Employees have started talking about filing Union grievances due to safety concerns but have not yet done so because of their respect for their administration. I am doing all I can under my control to mitigate these issues and provide a healthy and safe work environment for my employees, but I need your help to do more, as much of it is out of my control.

- **Multiple inmates have voiced intentions of filing grievances and civil lawsuits against the county if conditions at the downtown jail aren't improved.** These are legitimate concerns and those of you who were brave enough to tour the downtown jail have seen this firsthand. Maintaining safety and security at the downtown jail is getting increasingly expensive to keep at even minimum standards. I'm happy to chat with each of you, one-on-one, about this but do not want to go into specifics in this letter (and I have voiced these to you recently if you participated in the jail tour).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

I realize investing any additional funds into criminal justice needs can be a controversial topic. However, I believe the time has come for action by the County Board before there are devastating consequences. *This is a time to show your support for the employees who work for Champaign County as well as your commitment to providing safe and adequate facilities for both those employees and inmates in custody.*

Based on my professional experience and knowledge of the Sheriff's Office, its facilities, and its employees, here are some recommendations I encourage the Board to act on immediately:

1. **Enact a sign-on bonus.** An example would be \$5,000 for new correctional officers - \$2,500 upon successful completion of field training and \$2,500 after fulfilling their three-year contract with the Sheriff's Office. If you notice, many businesses in the county, and the nation, are offering sign-on bonuses to try to recruit and retain quality employees. When fast-food jobs may pay \$15/hour or more, it is difficult to find employees willing to make little more than that in a much more hostile and security/safety-driven environment. It costs tens of thousands of dollars in training, equipment and manpower to get a new correctional officer ready to work independently. This sign-on bonus will help to not only recruit quality employees but also retain them.
2. **Provide a firm commitment to closing the downtown jail along with a realistic timeline to do so.** The conversation around closing the downtown jail has been going on for almost a decade, if not

longer. Much of the conversation in the past has focused on a *need* and *want* to close the downtown jail and consolidate facilities, but rarely have I heard a conversation on the *obligation* of the County Board to do so. Knowing this is a controversial topic, I wanted to share with you some things you might find useful in justifying your decision to close the downtown jail.

As you are likely aware as a County Board member, the Illinois County Jail Act states, “There shall be kept and maintained in good and sufficient condition and repair, one or more jail facilities for use of each county within this State” (730 ILCS 125/1). Additionally, the County Board has an absolute duty to provide a suitable jail (*Burke on behalf of Citizens and Taxpayers v. County of Hamilton*, 194 Ill.App.3d 437, 440). Lastly, per the Counties Code (55 ILCS 5/5-1106), “It shall be the duty of the county board of each county to ‘erect or otherwise provide when necessary, and the finances of the county will justify it, and keep in repair, a suitable courthouse, jail, and other necessary county buildings, and to provide proper rooms and offices for the accommodation of the county board, State’s attorney, county clerk, county treasurer, recorder and sheriff, and to provide suitable furniture therefor’ and ‘to provide reasonable and necessary expenses for the use of the county board, county clerk, county treasurer, recorder, sheriff, coroner, State’s attorney, superintendent of schools, judges and clerks of courts, and supervisor of assessment.’”

Every one of you with whom I have spoken has agreed that closing the downtown jail needs to happen and is overdue. However, there has not yet been a formal plan for accomplishing this. The mental health and safety of both employees and inmates is at stake if immediate action is not taken.

3. **Continue to evaluate correctional officer salaries.** While salaries may be in line with correctional officers in comparable counties, is it equitable to Champaign County industry and the alternative careers it provides? We must do better at recruiting and retaining employees at the Sheriff’s Office and Champaign County. My ability to do this within my means only goes so far – I need your support here, too.

To close, thank you for making it this far in my letter. I have spoken with many of you individually and at various county board meetings, but I felt it my obligation to express the true urgency for action. I am also open to other ideas that you might have to help recruit and retain employees, as well as provide safe and secure facilities for our employees and inmates. I continue to work within my means and resources to explore innovative solutions to the issues addressed in this letter, but need your support to get over this hump and help do better for the employees who have dedicated so much time and energy to Champaign County.

As always, I’m open to answer any questions you might have. If you haven’t had a chance to tour the jail or do a ride-along yet, I encourage you to do so.

Respectfully,

*Dustin D. Heuerman*

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Champaign County Sheriff