

AFSCME Corrections United

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VMOs Help Corrections Officers Win a Voice on the Job

Many public employees are earning just above poverty level,” says CO Brian Blackledge, a member of Ohio Civil Service Employees Association (OCSEA)/AFSCME Local 11. “Some are on Food Stamps. Most cannot afford health care insurance to cover their families so they are forced to be on Medicaid. Many of these employees have to work two jobs just

to make ends meet. On top of all that, harassment, discrimination and favoritism are rampant. I saw these things in Kentucky first hand as a volunteer member organizer (VMO). I visited workers at their homes and at their jobs and listened to their concerns.”

These work conditions, as described by Blackledge, prompted other COs to help workers fight for a stronger voice

on the job. For more than a year now, 18 VMOs from Alaska, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Ohio have been signing up new members in Colorado, Kansas and Kentucky as they prepare for contract negotiations in the coming weeks.

KENTUCKY. To bolster the organizing efforts, 25 AFSCME members participated in a VMO blitz last summer. During the weeklong effort,

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Thor Swift



Mark Cavanah



Family Photo

VMOs, from left, Brian Blackledge; Jeremy Noelle of Local 779 (Illinois Council 31) visiting with CO Marcus Spalding of the Kentucky State Penitentiary; and Jessica Johnson.

COs in Puerto Rico Sign First Contract

Puerto Rico’s Alianza Correccional Unida (SPU/AFSCME Local 3500) signed its first contract on June 27, 2008. The agreement – which covers the 6,400 COs and other corrections workers – includes monthly salary increases of \$125 in 2008, \$135 in 2009 and \$150 in 2010 – for a total of \$9,540 over three years. In addition,

members will receive Christmas bonuses of \$1,200 in 2008 and \$1,300 in 2009. Next year, they will also receive a \$500 contract ratification bonus.

Per the agreement with the island’s Administration of Corrections, members started receiving \$140 a month in medical benefits last July. Their

medical plan will increase by \$10 a month next year. The settlement also includes language for a more expedient grievance procedure plus guarantees two consecutive days off per week and overtime pay.

Local 3500 held an assembly on Aug. 16 and elected its new board. They are Jorge Pagán Tricoche,

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they visited more than 100 homes and worksites of corrections officers across the state. As a result, close to a majority of the 2,300 COs in the bargaining unit signed on to join Kentucky Council 62. The next step is to elect a bargaining team and prepare for contract negotiations. Because of poor conditions in state prisons, safety is a top concern. Other issues include low pay, high health insurance premiums and understaffing.

“The workers here in Kentucky are ready for change,” says CO Jessica Johnson, a VMO from Minnesota Correctional Facility/Lino Lakes and a member of Local 2728 (Council 5). “The energy is surging among our sisters and brothers here. I have great hopes for them.” Johnson returned to Louisville in April after a two-week stint in February.

Facilitating the organizing drive was

an Executive Order signed this June by Gov. Steve Beshear (D), reinstating the right of state employees to have union representation. These same rights were revoked by former Gov. Ernie Fletcher (R) four years ago.

COLORADO. A partnership that includes AFSCME, the American Federation of Teachers and SEIU is organizing 31,000 state employees, 4,300 of whom are COs. “COWINS” (Colorado Workers for Innovations and New Solutions) was formed as a result of a November 2007 Executive Order signed by Gov. Bill Ritter (D) allowing state employees to form “partnership units” and negotiate “partnership agreements.”

The three unions operating as COWINS won recognition for all the bargaining units of Colorado state employees. Contract negotiations are expected to begin in November.

“We’ve needed this for a long time,” said CO John Barron, a member of AFSCME Local 935 and a VMO for COWINS at the Delta Correctional Facility. “We’ve got a voice now that we’ve never had before.”

KANSAS. More than 2,000 COs from eight corrections facilities were recognized in May 2007. The organizing drive here has drawn VMOs like Dan Sablack, a CO at Ohio’s Lorain Correctional Institution and a member of OCSEA. “For three months, I made house calls, leafleted at parking lots in the cold and rain, and organized meetings between members and the Kansas State Secretary of Corrections,” he recalls. “Organizing is an experience I would love to continue doing. Though it was a lot of work, the feeling you get when it all comes together makes it all worthwhile.” ●

NEWS BRIEFS

■ **PAY CUT WITHDRAWN.** Threatened with a court injunction by AFSCME, the director of the Nevada Department of Corrections recently withdrew a plan to end a 5-percent shift differential affecting 450 COs as a cost-saving measure.

“Correctional officers build their lives around working the swing and graveyard shifts – including babysitting and taking children to school,” said Dennis Mallory of AFSCME Local 4041. “They shouldn’t be losing the additional money they are paid for working at night.”

■ **LABOR DEPARTMENT LAWSUIT.** The U.S. Labor Department is suing the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) for overtime and record-keeping violations. In an investigation, the department found that community-corrections officers and other

employees across the state were not paid overtime. In addition, the DOC failed to maintain accurate time records for all hours worked. The Washington Federation of State Employees/Council 28, which represents about 1,500 DOC employees, has been working for years to ensure that corrections workers receive appropriate overtime pay.

■ **NEW UNION.** Approximately 45 COs employed by La Crosse County, Wis., have won the right to be represented by AFSCME Council 40. They were previously represented by the Wisconsin Professional Police Association.

■ **ARBITRATION, YES!** Corrections officers in Philadelphia are entitled to reach new agreements through an arbitration process. For years, these workers – who oversee adults and minors in custody – have

had to settle contracts through collective bargaining even though they – like police and firefighters – are public safety workers who are not permitted to strike. The Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board determined that the city has been engaging in an unfair labor practice by refusing arbitration with AFSCME Local 159 (Council 33).

■ **MEDAL OF VALOR.** Barry Drummond, a corrections officer at the Hartford (Conn.) Correctional Center, was awarded the “Medal of Valor” by the state for saving an inmate’s life. Drummond considers his heroic act a regular part of his duties. He broke up a fight last June between two inmates, one of whom pulled out a shank fashioned from a sharpened toothbrush. “This is what we do,” said Drummond, a member of AFSCME Local 387 (Council 4).

COs in Puerto Rico

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president; Wanda de Jesús, first vice president; Virgen Reyes, secretary; Sandro Concha, treasurer; and Regional Vice Presidents Juan González and María Santiago.

Puerto Rico's corrections officers and other corrections workers had won the right to have a voice at work five years ago. That election result was set aside by a very questionable decision of the Puerto Rico Public Employees Relations Board. A favorable court ruling finally paved the way for a new election in March 2006. ●



Jorge Pagán Tricoche

Jon Melegrito

Fighting MRSA

The serious outbreak of a potentially life-threatening bacterial disease in places where AFSCME members are employed, such as correctional institutions, is causing widespread alarm.

MRSA (Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) is the name of this staph infection, which is essentially a bacteria commonly found on the skin and in the nose of healthy people that has developed resistance to antibiotics. It is mainly spread by skin contact, but infected towels, clothing and other objects also spread it. In some cases, MRSA can be fatal if not detected and treated properly.

Since all corrections workers could end up in close proximity with infected individuals, officers and workers are at high risk. Last year, there was an outbreak at Vandalia Correctional Center in Illinois. One unwitting staff member took the staph infection home and ended up sickening two of his children. It was later determined that inmates had come into the Vandalia facility with MRSA-like symptoms.

PREVENTION & CONTROL. The first step to protecting yourself from MRSA is knowing what to look for: pimples, rashes or pus-filled boils, especially when warm, painful, red or swollen. Workers should take care to protect



MRSA infections are characterized by pimples, rashes, or pus-filled boils.

Diane Brown

their own skin, and cover any open sores or wounds to minimize risk. This includes frequent hand-washing and the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

At the state level, AFSCME is one of the groups lobbying legislators to pass strong measures dealing with MRSA outbreaks. One bill requires public health departments to bring state facilities into compliance with U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations. These new measures would force health departments to compile reports from state institutions about MRSA occurrences.

AFSCME is also pressuring departments of corrections to promptly address MRSA outbreaks. One proposal is to bring in experts to develop statewide prevention and control protocols. Meanwhile, AFSCME continues to step up efforts to help union members get more information about MRSA.

You can learn more about MRSA, and Federal Bureau of Prison recommendations regarding it, from AFSCME's website: afscme.org/issues/16735.cfm. ●



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Daniel Meehan: Corrections Officer of the Year

Daniel Meehan, a corrections sergeant at the Waupun Correctional Facility in Wisconsin, is this year's Corrections Officer of the Year.

A CO for 27 years, he has been a model of hard work, inspiring leadership and active commitment to the union and to his community. During his tenure, Meehan has mentored hundreds of young officers. As president of Local 18 (Council 24), he energized his co-workers to engage in political action, such as fighting anti-labor initiatives or budget battles in the state legislature.

When one of his co-workers was falsely accused with a felony charge, Meehan created a defense fund to defray his legal expenses and pushed for remedial legislation to address the statutory travesty of a "John Doe" investigation. Also, during a hostage crisis, Meehan assisted the warden and command staff at the Waupun facility to negotiate the safe release of the corrections officer who was being held.

"It takes a strong person to be a good corrections officer," said Marty Beil, executive director of Council 24. "The job is tough and often dangerous. Meehan is an outstanding officer and his extraordinary drive to organize and motivate his fellow corrections officers has produced real results for workers and safer communities." ●



Pres. Gerald W. McEntee (center, right) presented the CO of the Year Award to Daniel Meehan (right), seen here with his wife, Pam, and ACU National Chairman and International Vice Pres. Glenn Middleton.

Gonzalo Baeza