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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Agency Leadership, State HR Backtrack on Pandemic Recognition Payment for Corrections Workers

Dept. of Corrections employees take action after management gave themselves the \$1000 Recognition and Retention Lump Sum that was meant for frontline workers.

Over 400 Dept. of Corrections (DOC) workers have signed a [petition](#) calling on DOC management and the Office of Financial Management to respect their contract.

DOC workers represented by AFSCME Council 28, the Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE) plan to file a lawsuit, an unfair labor practice complaint with the Public Employment Relations Commission, grievances, and engage in escalating public actions in order to attain what they bargained for.

Even before pandemic-related staffing shortages and working with the threat of COVID-19, corrections workers in Washington suffered high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Too many reached their breaking point over the last several years and left the profession, turned to substance abuse, or worse. Correctional officers are twice as likely to take their own lives as police officers and the general population.¹

This crisis was the context in which DOC and other state workers represented by WFSE bargained their 2023-2025 collective bargaining agreement. A key provision in that agreement was a \$1000 lump sum payment "in recognition of the service state employees have provided the citizens of Washington throughout the COVID pandemic."

Per the agreement, the payment was scheduled to arrive in July 2023 for workers in the WFSE General Government contract, which includes DOC workers, so long as they were employed on or before July 1, 2022 and remained employed July 1, 2023.

¹ "CORRECTIONAL OFFICER WELLNESS AND SAFETY LITERATURE REVIEW," U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs Diagnostic Center, Jaime Brower, Psy.D., ABPP July 2013
<https://nicic.gov/resources/nic-library/all-library-items/correctional-officer-wellness-and-safety-literature-review>

But on June 7, 2023, DOC management sent an email stating that all DOC employees, including themselves, would receive the lump sum payment in recognition of their pandemic service, but not those represented by WFSE.

“If DOC management who worked from home are getting this bonus, the folks who worked on the frontlines of the pandemic should get it,” said WFSE President Mike Yestramski, a psychiatric social worker at Western State Hospital. “That’s who it was meant for. The contract language clearly spells this out.”

“We work hard, long hours in dangerous and unsafe environments,” said Karolyn Brash, a DOC Community Corrections Officer represented by WFSE. “I work in a two-person outstation in a remote area where cell phone reception is a bonus when I can find it. I can’t speak for everyone but I know I have earned the bonus that is being denied to me.”

The stakes are high for workers in Washington state, for the public sector at large, and for the viability of some of DOC’s most innovative and promising programs.

To make the public sector a desirable choice for employment, management must be seen as honest and fighting for its employees, not fighting against them.

“It disappoints me that my employer doesn’t truly value us,” said Deborah Chavira, a WFSE-represented Secretary Supervisor at DOC. “According to them, we employees are their greatest asset. I do not feel valued or appreciated by the highest level of management. Their refusal to pay this one-time lump sum provides evidence of this.”

DOC’s mission is to “improve public safety by positively changing lives.” WFSE DOC members accomplish this with life-changing programs at Reentry Centers, Work Release facilities, and out in the community where they supervise an active caseload of around 18,000 individuals.

They help formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrate into the community, develop life skills, find employment and become good neighbors, all of which provide a relief valve for crowded state prisons and move Washington away from mass incarceration.

They are building the kind of corrections system that Washingtonians, the leadership in our state, and the leadership at DOC should be proud of.

Many WFSE-represented DOC staff, like Corrections and Custody Officer Brian Parks, are working in DOC’s [Amend](#) program, which is based on the Norwegian model of “normalization, progression and dynamic security” to improve the health of both inmates and staff.

“We actually play volleyball with them,” Brian said. “We eat with them. We have coffee time with them. They’ve learned that if these guys are talking with us, imagine how people outside will talk with us. It makes it a great transition for them. It’s not scary, because getting out can be scary for some of them. We tell them, ‘It’s OK, we’re here to work with you.’ It seems to be working

pretty well. We need the funding to keep this maintained instead of going through the cycle we tend to do in this state. We go through programs and then we abandon them. If we're serious about wanting to actually help everybody in the way we are, we need this funding. It's going to a great cause. That's the reason we're here. To affect people's lives and to make our communities safer."

The core of innovative programs like Amend is developing trust and understanding between corrections staff and those under their supervision.

"How can inmates expect honesty from the state when the state has dishonest intentions towards its employees?" wondered David Sprouffske, a WFSE-represented Corrections and Custody Officer.

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[AFSCME Council 28 \(The Washington Federation of State Employees\)](#) represents nearly 47,000 state and other public service workers in Washington state. WFSE members care for the most vulnerable, keep us safe, protect our environment and so much more. That's why people who work in public service never stop. This isn't just a job; it's a calling. The work matters because it means something to make a community better.