

BOP slashes retention bonuses, impacting thousands of correctional officers

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FILE - A sign for the Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Prisons is displayed in the Brooklyn borough of New York, July 6, 2020. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Mark Lennihan/AP

WASHINGTON — Thousands of federal prison employees will soon see significant reductions in their paychecks as the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) moves to reduce retention incentives due to budget constraints.

Roughly 23,000 BOP employees were informed that their retention pay would be significantly reduced or eliminated entirely, with some workers seeing a pay decrease of up to 25%, according to Government Executive. This change is set to take effect on March 23, 2025.

Retention incentives have been a critical tool for maintaining staffing levels at understaffed facilities. According to Forbes, the BOP has been operating under a continuing resolution, which has left the agency struggling to cover increasing fixed costs.

“This action is being taken as part of an effort to address a significant budget shortfall,” BOP spokesman Donald Murphy said. “The agency understands the critical role retention incentives play in supporting our dedicated employees, some of whom receive incentives as high as 35% of their salary. This decision was not made lightly, and we recognize the financial hardship this may cause for employees who rely on those incentives.”

Union condemns retention pay cuts

The Council of Prison Locals has strongly criticized the decision, emphasizing the severe impact it will have on staff morale and safety.

In a statement, the union expressed deep concern, noting that many BOP employees work tirelessly under dangerous and understaffed conditions.

“These men and women go above and beyond every day to keep our institutions safe. Our members are working in extremely difficult and understaffed conditions. Removing or reducing retention pay is not just a financial blow, it’s a blow to morale,” the union stated. “This decision is shortsighted and will only exacerbate the staffing crisis, leading to even more turnover, burnout and instability in addition to additional funding to fill overtime for the vacant positions.”

The union also warned that reducing retention pay will further increase staffing shortages, making it even harder to recruit and retain employees.

“This decision will have far-reaching consequences for the dedicated employees who remain in one of the most difficult, high-risk jobs in the country. These professionals work long hours under strenuous conditions, often with inadequate staffing levels. The BOP has relied on retention incentives to help make up for the hardships they face. This has been the only mechanism to recruit and retain individuals over the last year.”

The union ended the statement with a call on Congress to reverse the decision.

“We are calling on Congress to provide funding to the BOP so they can reverse this decision immediately and take meaningful action to support our dedicated staff. Retention pay is not just a financial reward; it is a recognition of the tough, essential work these professionals perform daily. The Council of Prison Locals is committed to working with lawmakers, the public and BOP leadership to restore retention pay and ensure that correctional officers and staff are provided with the resources and compensation they deserve.”

Employee reactions

At some facilities, the impact of the decision was felt immediately. Forbes reports that Aaron McGlothlin, president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 1237, described the moment staff at the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) Mendota learned of the cuts.

“People ended up just leaving and going home, because they were sick to their stomachs. [I’ve] already had five correctional officers tell me that they’re going to leave. We could lose a minimum of 10% at our already understaffed facility,” McGlothlin told Government Executive.

The cuts come amid significant turmoil within BOP leadership. According to Forbes, Acting Director William Lathrop announced his retirement just weeks after the firing of former Director Colette Peters. Associate Deputy Director Kathleen Toomey testified before Congress, explaining that despite a 7.2% increase in salaries due to mandatory pay raises, the agency received no additional funding and spent \$229 million on retention incentives in 2024 alone.

BOP institutions impacted by retention bonus cuts

Forbes reports that the decision to end retention bonuses was not entirely unexpected, as union leadership had long cautioned that the incentive was a temporary measure.

“It seems like the blows just keep coming,” Council of Prison Locals President Brandy Moore White wrote in a message to regional presidents. “I was just notified that all institutions will be informed today that retention bonuses will be cut by 50% in Pay Period 6, except for those that were at 95% staffing in Pay Period 1 for correctional officers or overall — only seven institutions.”

The seven institutions that will lose their retention bonuses entirely are:

- Metropolitan Detention Center Los Angeles
- Federal Correctional Institution Mendota
- United States Penitentiary Atwater
- Federal Detention Center Miami
- Federal Correctional Institution Otisville
- Federal Correctional Institution Pekin
- Federal Correctional Institution Sheridan

Impact on BOP operations

Forbes states that the elimination of retention bonuses is expected to exacerbate staffing shortages that have plagued the agency for years.

“Retention bonuses were hard-fought. Even though they didn’t lead to a massive turnaround in staffing, they helped stabilize the workforce,” McGlothlin told Forbes.

Some prisons are already struggling to maintain daily operations. At FCI Mendota, staffing shortages have forced employees to take on additional responsibilities, including preparing meals for inmates at an adjacent facility, according to Forbes.

“Meal timing is inconsistent,” McGlothlin told Forbes. “The inmates are frustrated, and so is the staff.”

The pay cuts have sparked concern among lawmakers, with Rep. Grace Meng (D-N.Y.) stating during a House Appropriations Committee hearing, “This is a cruel cut to the paychecks of a lot of hard-working men and women who protect our public safety every day. And as a result of these changes, I’m afraid that you’ll see more staff quit, forcing the remaining staff to work more overtime and be augmented, and will no doubt eat up a lot of the savings from ending retention bonuses, where in an extremely tight budget environment, that may get even tighter if the administration continues the practice of impounding funds.”

“This is not strategic cost-saving,” said Jon Zumkehr, President of AFGE Local 4070 (FCI Thomson - Illinois). “This is blind slashing of essential funding that will cost taxpayers more in the long run. The overtime costs alone to cover vacant positions, combined with increased recruitment expenses, will far exceed any immediate savings.”

The BOP’s budget challenges have also drawn criticism for how funds have been allocated. According to Forbes, John Kostelnik, Western Regional Vice President, pointed to millions spent on Senior Executive Staff bonuses and unnecessary regional offices while frontline staff face cuts.

“Staff in the BOP are underpaid and overworked,” Kostelnik said. “The agency cannot retain staff because their pay has not kept up with the demands or the increased dangers. Meanwhile, they continue to waste millions maintaining regional offices that serve little purpose.”

Share your story

Are you a federal prison worker affected by these changes? We want to hear from you. Share your experience and how these cuts are impacting your job and daily life. Email us at editor@corrections1.com to tell your story.

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Sarah Roebuck is the news editor for Police1, Corrections1, FireRescue1 and EMS1, leading daily news coverage. With nearly a decade of digital journalism experience, she has been recognized for her expertise in digital media, including being sourced in Broadcast News in the Digital Age.

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