

Days ahead of coming BOP pay cuts, some employees already resigning

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The American Federation of Government Employees warned that BOP pay cuts will lead to feds leaving their jobs, exacerbating an already short-staffed workforce.



At the Federal Bureau of Prisons, 23,000 employees have about a week left before seeing significant cuts to their pay, after the BOP announced plans to reduce and in some cases fully remove retention-based incentives.

The American Federation of Government Employees, which represents over 30,000 BOP correctional officers and other agency staff members, raised alarms that the pay cuts will lead to employees leaving their jobs, exacerbating the already short-staffed workforce.

Retention pay incentives for BOP correctional officers and other staff members can add anywhere from a 10% to 25% boost to the employees' base pay rates. The agency plans to cut most employees' pay retention incentives in half. Incentives will be fully eliminated for some employees. The cuts are set to take place on March 23.

While stating that the agency understands the "critical" role of retention incentives, BOP spokesperson Donald Murphy said the decision was made in an effort to address a "significant" budget shortfall.

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"In response to ongoing budget constraints, the Federal Bureau of Prisons has made the difficult decision to greatly reduce, and in some cases, eliminate retention incentives across the agency," Murphy said by email. "This decision was not made lightly, and we recognize the financial hardship this may cause for employees who rely on those incentives. However, the current financial challenges necessitate this action to ensure the long-term stability of the agency and to maintain operations across the board."

As a result of BOP's announcement, some employees have already left their positions. At a federal medical center in Lexington, Kentucky, for example, several doctors and physician assistants have put in their resignation letters. Others plan to resign in the coming days.

Even more employees are expected to leave once the incentive cuts kick in, according to Brandy Moore White, president of AFGE's Council of Prisons Locals. Moore White said she has received hundreds of calls and messages from correctional officers who intend to leave once the pay incentives are cut.

"Officers are telling me, 'This is the only thing that's keeping me at the prison. If this goes away, or is reduced, I'm walking,'" Moore White said in an interview. "With all of the talk of reductions in force for the government, and we're already short-staffed, and now this on top of it — it's just a lot. People are scrambling, and it's very frustrating."

Correctional officers working at many federal prisons have been receiving approved recruitment and retention pay bonuses for several years. AFGE said the incentives help address "dangerous" levels of understaffing among employees who are "tremendously

underpaid.”

The value of an employee’s retention incentive depends on the prison’s locality — each is calculated slightly differently. But in many cases, it can mean a difference of hundreds of dollars per paycheck.

Using pay retention incentives can serve as a temporary pay fix, but keeping the incentives long-term is challenging. Agencies that use retention incentives must review the bonuses at least annually to determine if they are still needed, according to federal regulations. Agency officials are required to terminate retention incentives for employees when the conditions that warranted the incentives in the first place no longer apply.

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Moore White said she has always been “hesitant” about BOP’s use of pay retention incentives as a way to keep officers on board.

“I knew that the agency could take them at any moment,” she said.

BOP said it will continue to monitor the budget situation and adjust its financial strategy as needed.

“We deeply value the work our employees do every day, and this decision reflects our continued commitment to protecting jobs and minimizing the impact on our workforce,” Murphy, BOP’s spokesperson, said.

AFGE is calling on Congress to give BOP funding to be able to maintain the retention bonuses. But with the threat of a government shutdown looming, the prospects of any action on the officers’ pay are unclear.

At the same time, AFGE has been advocating for an entirely different pay structure for BOP officers, in an attempt to fix the pay challenges for the long-term. The union is working with members of Congress who have expressed interest, but so far there has not been much movement on any legislation.

The more than 34,000 correctional officers and staff members at BOP face near-countless workforce challenges, including significant and persistent understaffing. The Government Accountability Office once again named the management of the federal prison system as an item on its 2025 high-risk list, in part due to the workforce challenges at BOP.

“Despite recent success with recruiting, BOP still faces staffing shortages — estimating a deficit of more than 9,500 correctional officers and about 3,000 medical professionals,” GAO wrote in its high-risk list report. “It also needs to better manage its overall staffing

allocations.”

The use of overtime for BOP officers has increased annually since 2021, with a net increase of 43% since that year, GAO said. During 2024, that amounted to nearly 9 million overtime hours among correctional officers.

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Moore White raised concerns that the agency’s incentive cuts will intensify the current staffing crisis, and lead to further workforce turnover, burnout and instability. It also may not save costs, as officers would have to pick up more overtime hours to account for any feds who leave their jobs as a result of the pay cuts.

“When these people leave, it’s going to create vacancies that are going to have to be filled with overtime,” Moore White said. “It is incredibly hard to recruit individuals into the bureau because our pay really hasn’t kept up.”

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Drew Friedman

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