

Introduction

Kirsten Barber: Hi, and welcome to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. There are great people, programs and resources within the department. In each episode of the Safety Scoop, we'll share how NCDPS employees prevent, protect and prepare North Carolinians and help enhance safety in our state. We hope you'll listen along and learn something you may not have known about the largest state agency in North Carolina.

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Julia Jarema: Hi, I'm Julia.

Kirsten: And I'm Kirsten!

Julia: And you're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

Kirsten: NCDPS is the largest department in the North Carolina state government with some amazing programs and resources...

Julia: ...as well as phenomenal personnel and volunteers.

Kirsten: Listen along as we take you behind the scenes and dive into how the people, programs and resources within this department enhance the safety of the people of North Carolina—give you the scoop, if you will, of all things NCDPS.

Julia: NCDPS's mission is to safeguard the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. As you listen to this podcast, we hope you'll learn something you may not have known about the ways the people of NCDPS are working to keep our state safe.

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Season 1 Episode 5

Julia: Today on Safety Scoop, we're talking about prisons, and we'll talk with Todd Ishee, Commissioner of Prisons for North Carolina Department of Public Safety, whose primary mission is to protect North Carolina communities. Though new to North Carolina, Commissioner Ishee comes with 30 years of experience with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. He started his career as a correctional officer and quickly moved up through the uniformed ranks, eventually becoming a warden of a supermax prison, then Regional Director and

eventually Deputy Director of Ohio's Office of Reentry and Enterprise Development. He has authored numerous publications and best practices in prison and has been a consultant for states across the country. He also is a certified auditor for both the American Correctional Association and the US Department of Justice, and I've heard that his idea of a good day at the office is to spend the time visiting a prison. Welcome, Todd.

Kirsten: Thanks for joining us.

Commr. Todd Ishee: Thank you.

Julia: Give us an overview of North Carolina's prison system for those people who are not as familiar with our correction system. How many facilities are there, what types are there, where are they located and how many offenders do we have?

Commr. Ishee: Sure. Uh, currently, we're operating 52 prisons. We also have a transitional center for women, uh, located in Charlotte and two CRV centers. Uh...

Julia: And CRV stands for...?

Commr. Ishee: Confinement and Response to Violation

Julia: Okay, and can you tell us a little bit about what that is? How is that different from another prison?

Commr. Ishee: Sure. They service a unique population. These are our offenders that are being supervised in the community by our community correction staff and have some be-behavior issues, be it conditions or criminal behavior, and can be sent to the--the violation centers for a period of about 90 days for very intense programming. So, these are very intense program centers. Uh, we're very proud of them, and, uh, they--they do a very nice job in kind of turning folks around and getting them back on the right path.

Julia: They're transitional...

Commr. Ishee: Yes.

Julia: ...facilities, it sounds like. And talk a little bit you said--you mentioned those CRVs. Uh, what types of levels of prisons do we have in North Carolina?

Commr Ishee: Uh, we've got three levels: close custody, medium custody and minimum custody. They're spread throughout 43 counties and our--our average population kind of is fluctuating in-between 34 and 35,000.

Julia: Okay.

Kirsten: Can you go through some of the challenges our prison system is currently facing?

Commr. Ishee: Probably vacancies and staff retention is—is one of our most significant. Currently, we have a vacancy rate of—of just under 17% for our correctional officers. That number, uh, is down. Throughout the course of 2019, our staff have worked very, very hard to, uh, drive that down. We have been successful. We also are moving to publish a functional vacancy rate, and what that does is kind of better illustrates the on-duty staff that we—that we have or the duty-ready staff that we have for each warden at our facilities, and that number is about 28%. And what that does is it out of the original formula, it takes out staff that are on extended leave for military or health reasons, or they may be in training, so that's more of a kind of real-world number.

Julia: A more realistic picture, then?

Commr. Ishee: Yes, ma'am.

Julia: Okay. That makes sense. You mentioned the vacancy rate. Um, is that something that is unique to North Carolina?

Commr. Ishee: No, um, it's a—it's a challenge nationally. Uh, you know, I've had the good fortune of—of doing work in several jurisdictions. I also spend, uh, time with all of the correction division-level heads, uh, throughout the country four or five times a year, and it's—it's an issue that—that's facing our entire profession, and it's—it's a challenge, uh, and it's—it's a struggle to kind of keep up. Just working in the corrections field is not as—as popular as it was maybe 20 years ago. 20 years ago, we generally did not have trouble filling jobs, but east, west, north, south, we are all facing this, uh, significant challenge.

Julia: So, it's an industry-wide challenge, then, not just for our state. And some of the other challenges?

Commr. Ishee: Yeah, I, you know, violence. Violence toward, in particular, our staff is—is a major challenge. And you know, I'm happy to report that we are seeing decreases comparing 2018 to 2019 which—which we're very proud of, and our staff have—have worked very hard. This has been a focal point for a number of years now, and we are starting to see dividends on that where assault allegations are down about 21% in '19 from where they were in '18, so we're on the right path. I'm happy about that, but we also have a lot of work to do because our numbers are much higher than any of us would want or—or deem to be acceptable. So, that is going to be a major push for us in 2020 is to continue to drive that down and make our prison safer, so all our staff can go home in the same condition they are when they come to work.

Kirsten: And what about contraband? On our social channels, and we have a Flickr album, we do a, uh, "Not on My Watch" feature, and we've seen that our correctional officers throughout North Carolina are doing a fantastic job stopping different contraband items from coming into the facilities. Can you just talk about what's being done and how, uh, staff is meeting those challenges?

Commr. Ishee: Sure, and you know, we are, we're very proud of the Not on Our Watch. I think that's a really neat thing to recognize our staff. Contraband coming into prisons is a challenge that all of our staff face every day. Again, not unique to North Carolina. You know, when I go to the commissioner and director meetings, cell phones and drugs, uh, you name it. Drones is a—is a new challenge that didn't exist, uh, ten years ago. So, it's something that we—we work hard and focus on, but we battle it every day.

We have, as a system, done a lot of things. You know, we're putting up some—some high netting, extra cameras. We've got a lot of different strategies, but our staff are doing a great job. This battle is probably going to be being fought as long as we have prisons, uh, corrections professionals are going to fight that battle, but contraband certainly is...and what that does, sometimes leads to—to violence. You know, it's—it's a lot of that stuff is intertwined along with our security threat groups, so it's a major challenge for us, uh, but our staff do—do a really good job. There's probably not a day that goes by that I don't get a report from at least one of our prisons where we've had a major interdiction and—and—and intercepting contraband before it gets into the wrong hands.

Julia: Right, and I think Kirsten mentioned that, that it is a challenge, and we do have a lot that we tell people about and share, but there is a lot more that goes on every single day that our staff are catching.

Kirsten: And speaking on some of those additional security issues, is idleness a challenge at all in our prison system?

Commr. Ishee: It is. It is, and I've had the—the good fortune of visiting all of our prisons, and now I'm visiting a number of them for a second time. So, I, you know, I'm really getting a—a stronger sense of—of what's going on. Idleness is a challenge for us here in North Carolina, but again, it's—it's an industry challenge. You know, we've got high numbers of men and women that are incarcerated, we're at the—the mercy of the state budget, so idleness is a challenge. But, uh, you know, this year we are going to—to launch an initiative to continue to reduce that. We've got some great things in place. Correctional Enterprise is employing thousands of offenders which is great because not only are they not idle, they're learning a job skill and a work ethic, so we're very proud of that. But I think this year, we've got to be creative and continue to try to find meaningful things, kind of a, uh, a menu or a smorgasbord of opportunities that, uh, all the different men and women that are incarcerated can—can engage in and kind of get them thinking about something positive and productive, as opposed to something negative that usually turns into not-good stuff for our staff.

Julia: And I think that's something that maybe or perhaps our listeners don't realize is that most of the people in prisons will be actually out in our communities again at some point. And so, it is important that they have activities and skillsets to be able to join communities at what point when they're ready.

Commr. Ishee: Yes, I agree. You know, we, our—our first and foremost job is—is to protect the public, but second and very importantly is to prepare the—the men and women who are leaving our pri-prisons for a successful transition back into the community, and—and hopefully they do not reoffend, so...

Kirsten: Yeah.

Julia: In the past couple of years, there's been a lot of talk about improving North Carolina's correctional system, and you touched on a few things. And I know we've, uh, Department of Public Safety, has had a prison reform initiative. Tell us a little bit about some of those efforts and what's been done.

Commr. Ishee: Well, our—our staff have been working very hard, and we—and we just recently kind of closed out the Prison Reform Advisory Board. Uh, we've taken in their—their final report and recommendations which were about 30. Many of those we have implemented in totality or in part, and we have a number that we will continue to focus on that are more longer-term projects in, uh, in 2020. You know, some are going to require additional funding, uh, so we're going to have to present a package to the general assembly, uh, and hope that—that we are able to, um, secure funding to be able to put those remaining initiatives in place.

Julia: I know you have been very busy. Tell us a little bit about your visits to the prison facilities and what you learned from staff and what you heard from staff there.

Commr. Ishee: Sure. I guess, you know, to summarize the visits, uh, they've been great, and I have seen a lot of very good things. You know, I know our—our—our system has been somewhat criticized over the past several years. There is no such thing as a perfect prison system in my—my opinion and in my travels. I think we are doing a lot of very good things. We're doing some things that rise to the level of best practices nationally. We've got some challenges, and—and, you know, we're going to put together a plan to work on those. But you know, I've met great staff. I've met dedicated professionals. I'm very proud to, you know, be a part of this organization, and you know, I'm really very hopeful about our future. I think 2020 is going to be a—a great year for us. I think we're going to be able to continue to—to really just build on the foundation that's been set here in North Carolina and help us continue to grow and evolve and drive for greatness.

Kirsten: And in doing that tour of the 52 facilities, did you have any inspiration, or kind of what was your thought process behind doing that 'cause that was a very ambitious endeavor to do it in the time frame that you did it in.

Commr. Ishee: It was, yeah, but you know, it's—I—it's just really foundational and critical to me. You know, I'm a prison guy at heart. Those are my best days in the office, being out in the prisons as opposed to sitting in the office and meetings in Raleigh. Uh, but you know, it just allows me to just be connected, and you know, that's very important, that I see and interact with staff. If you don't, you—you sit behind the desk and you listen to what people tell you, and sometimes you get the facts, and sometimes you get slanted versions or—or... And I just, it's just important to

me, you know? I need to be able to see the offenders and see how things are being managed and talk to our staff, you know? I—I learned a ton just by interacting with the staff during the visits, and we've been able to make some changes. Although it's early, we've made some changes that I think have—have helped make, uh, the work situation better for our staff.

Kirsten: Alright.

Julia: We talked about some of the challenges that we see in our prison system, and you just touched on and mentioned some of the best practices...

Commr. Ishee: Mmm-hmm.

Julia: ...that we're doing. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that and talk about some of the best practices that you've seen? Because you've seen a number of different prison facilities and systems across the country...

Commr. Ishee: Mmm-hmm.

Julia: ...as you mentioned.

Commr. Ishee: Yeah. We—I'll tell you one that jumps out is—is the, uh, work release program. It's been in place for years and years here in the state of North Carolina. I can tell you that there are a lot of systems throughout the country that would love to have a fraction of what we have. But we've got thousands of men and women that are leaving prison every day and going out and working in the community or working as part of the construction program. That just, in terms of recidivism, jobs is one of the key factors that impacts that, and our men and women are learning job skills and work ethic and kind of living a—a—a real-world life during those work hours. And I think that just helps with a smoother transition from prison back home and into the communities. That—that's one that sticks out.

And you know, we've got a number of security operations that are—that are in place. Uh, we've got a couple prisons with a managed access system that eliminates cell phone use by inmates, and—and that's one of our major challenges. And unfortunately, cell phones find their way into our prisons, but there are few systems that have that type of—type of technology, and we're fortunate here in North Carolina to have two. You know, we've—we've been able to outfit our staff with stab vests which—which is critical. The vests have saved the health and—and possibly the life of—of some of our staff over the last couple years that have been attacked. So, there's a number of—of things that—that I think that we should all be very proud of. We're going to continue to ratchet that up because we don't want to see anybody get hurt, but the reality is—is—is our staff work—work in a dangerous profession. We've got to do everything we can to help—help make them as safe as possible.

Kirsten: So, as a certified auditor and consultant, you've seen dozens of different correction systems, programs and practices. Can you tell us a little bit about

some of those practices or programs that you think may be beneficial for North Carolina?

Commr. Ishee:

Sure. I think, uh, one that—one that comes to mind is, in my travels throughout North Carolina, salary is a major concern amongst our staff, and we are preparing to introduce a budget that includes a step pay plan for staff. And we're going to remain very hopeful that that is supported throughout the budget and legislative process, but I think that is going to go a long way in terms of recruitment, retention and—and just how—how our staff feel that their very valuable service to the state, it is recognized in the state saying that—that the work that our prison staff are doing is very important to the overall criminal justice system in our state.

You know, another one that comes to mind is quality assurance, and one of the hopes that I have is to introduce ACA accreditation, and—and have about a seven-year goal to—to have a prison system that is accredited fully by the American Correctional Association. Those audits are—are very comprehensive, they're rigorous but they also are widely recognized as the gold standard, uh, in the field of corrections. And—and that process is—is going to make us better, and that's why I'm committed to leading us through that—through the, uh, process. It touches every facet of prison operations. It's not just a security audit. It touches records and human resource and food service and healthcare, so it's a very A to Z process. We're going to be—we're going to be in a better place as—as a result of it. So, I'm very excited about that. There are a number of jurisdictions that do that—not all, but I hope that—that we are going to be one of the systems that—that one day is, you know, recognized as an accredited prison system.

Julia:

That's impressive. You've already mentioned a little bit of this, and we've talked about your travels as commissioner and what you've done so far. What's next? Where do we go from here? You've had time to get your feet wet and kind of get to know North Carolina and get to know the prison system in North Carolina. What's next for corrections in North Carolina?

Commr. Ishee:

Well, we—we're—we're in progress, uh, but I am really excited about this. In the fall, we held two strategic planning events and we had I think over 500 staff from all levels of—of our workforce. We had correction officers, we had nurses, we had educators, we had wardens, you name it. We had a nice cross-representation. Spent a whole day, and most of the day was dedicated toward, uh, focus groups and asking our staff, "What should we be doing? How can we do things better? How can we be safer?" We had literally thousands of data points and suggestions. We also had a lot of—lot of themes. So, what we've—what we're doing, we've kind of turned that into some core values and a—a new mission statement, a new vision statement, and by Aug—by April 1st, we hope to publish, uh, you know, our Strategic Plan for Prisons for the next five years. And it'll include really what everybody kind of—kind of said during the focus group.

People said we need our prisons to be safe. We need to drive that violence rate down. We need to work harder on recruitment and retention. So, we're—we

hope to put together a very comprehensive strategic plan that is really gonna guide us, I think, over our next five years. I'm really excited about it. I think it's going to allow us to remain focused, be less focused on the flavor of the month. Uh, sometimes in our business, that is—is attractive, but you know, I really want us to be responsive to what our staff are saying and—and be strategic. So, I think this is going to cap off of or kick off a really great start to 2020.

Kirsten: Is there anything that we've missed that you'd like to share with the people of North Carolina who may be interested or are just being introduced to the prison reform efforts?

Commr. Ishee: I'm very proud to be here. I've met great staff. We've got a great prison system. As I said, nothing is perfect in—in our profession, anywhere, but I'm hopeful. I think we've got all the key ingredients to continue to grow and evolve. I'm excited about our—our accreditation pursuit. I think that this is going to give our staff something to really be proud of, you know, kind of proud of—of being in that, uh, best-of-the-best category. So, I think we've got—we've got a lot of good things looking forward in the future.

Hopeful about the step pay plan. I think that's going to be a critical component that—that we work on every day. I've talked to many, many of our legislators and other key stakeholders, and I don't let any effort, any of those contacts go by without, uh, lobbying a little bit for a step pay plan. I think that's just going to be a key ingredient for us and, you know, I hope—hope that that works out. We've got our hands full. You know, the next—next two years is going to be busy for us as we get into the—the meat of the strategic plan. You know, I know we've got staff that are committed professionals, and I think are—are really going to get behind the plan because they made the plan. It's not something that Todd Ishee came in and said, “Hey, here's our plan. Now—now go do it.” This is a homemade plan. So, I think—I think things will be good.

Kirsten: Thank you, Commissioner Ishee, for your candor. And if anyone is interested in finding out more about our prison reform efforts, you can go to ncdps.gov and type “prison reform” in the search bar.

Julia: Thanks for joining us.

Conclusion

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Julia: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Safety Scoop. To learn more about NCDPS, go to ncdps.gov. Tune in next time on your favorite podcast app to hear more behind-the-scenes stories from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

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