



Stories from The Inside – Press Roundtable

Wednesday, June 20, 2018

Stories from AFGE Council of Prison Locals members on their experiences with augmentation

"I'm 5-feet-2-inches, and the first time I was augmented, I was assigned to the special housing unit (SHU). Most people relate SHU to 'The Hole' as they have seen it on TV. It's when you take people out of the regular housing unit because they did something wrong and are being disciplined for their actions.

In SHU, they hand me a 6-foot-3-inch, muscled-up man, handcuffed, to escort downstairs by myself. I kept thinking it would be extremely easy for this man to overpower me and throw me down or over the stairs. I've also been augmented to places where people exposed themselves to me and threatened me. Due to staffing issues, it took a lieutenant 20 minutes to get to me to relieve me of the post.

Non-custody workers don't have a problem being augmented to custody. But our workload and program requirements don't stop. You have all these standards and accreditations that must be met, and you can't miss them. So anytime you're not getting patient care done, meeting requirements to provide programming for inmates or not able to keep proper or up-to-date records, it causes problems for every department.

I currently work in the facilities department, and daily maintenance must be done. Any time we're pulled for augmentation, it pulls us away from our regular duties. They never decrease the regular duties. No one minds being augmented, but we fall behind and can't get things done."

Brandy Moore
FCC Forrest City
National Secretary Treasurer
AFGE/CPL33

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"I started working in the Bureau of Prisons in 1991, so I've seen augmentation in various forms. But without a doubt, since 2013 they started going heavy with it. It's back with a vengeance now.

We've been augmenting about 8 or 9 people a day at FCI Schuylkill. We have about 120 correctional officers, but we're 15 down since the Trump hiring freeze. Even though that freeze was lifted, regional directors aren't hiring because there's not enough money to fund the salaries.

I was augmented last week. I'm comfortable doing it, but I work in the satellite camp and the FCI inmates don't know who I am. And since I'm not a CO, I wear civilian clothes. When the inmates see you, they think it's substitute teacher day. From the moment I walk in, they judge me and assume they can get away with more. The uniform is a commanding presence. When you're out and see uniformed officers, you act differently. It's a perception thing.

Augmenting non-custody staff means everyone is a rookie every day. Staff can work the post and get by, but security suffers because the post is not our regular job and things get missed. It can be as simple as not knowing who lives in your housing unit and letting the wrong inmates enter on a move. Those inmates move drugs, cellphones, and commit assaults.

One of the factors that contributed to Jose Rivera's murder in 2008 was the large number of staff working that had less than three years of experience. Inexperience with the post and the inmates enable the inmates to push limits and get away with things that raise the inherent hazards of a correctional environment."

Patricia Manbeck
Local 3020 President
FCI Schuylkill
Case Manager

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"The men and women who stand guard at Oakdale are already facing an uphill battle with staffing deficiencies and augmentation, and now we're being told that we must be placed in further danger by the Warden – without any real explanation as to why. After years of following procedure when taking inmates out of the prison, we're being told that we must now do so with fewer guards now—and no weapons can be brought along for protection. It's horrifying to see our colleagues' safety jeopardized by this reckless new policy, and it's putting the general public at risk now too.

Our officers are well-trained professionals who have been doing their duty for years. But now, their lives are being placed in peril by severe understaffing and a lack of protection as they try to do their jobs.

Even though we've had agreements in the past with administration officials to have three officers escort inmates on medical trips, we're being told to do so with two now. It's problematic and has to change before something bad happens."

Ronald Morris and Corey Trammel
AFGE Local 1007 and 3957 Presidents
FCI Oakdale

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"I feel that the administration is setting our agency up for failure. As violence and recidivism rises, our staff struggles to meet accreditation requirements, and we will be blamed for these failures. Then, the Administration will point to this as an excuse to contract out our law enforcement role to the private prison industry."

Brian Shoemaker
AFGE Local 1405 President
USP Lee

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"I've been with the bureau for 11 years. I'm a teacher. My son and husband also work in the prison, so we're a little more invested in it than most. I've been active with the union since I came on board.

Augmentation has been ongoing at FCI Big Spring. Originally, we had an MOU in place so that they could augment only for high volume training. And with that, it threw the door wide open for the BOP, and it snowballed. It turned into what it was never intended to be – which was replacing our correctional officers.

We're around 80% staffed. However, that's only if we are all in our own positions, no one is off work or on leave of any kind, overtime is paid out for Correctional posts and there is zero augmentation. If you asked the BOP, they'd say we're around 85%, all the while there may be 11 augmented staffers moved into Correctional posts for the day, causing that percentage to be way lower. They're playing a numbers game. Its false advertising. It's frustrating because it's hard to explain exactly how that game is played so that it's fully understood.

At our best, we are staffed with one staff or emergency responder to 12 inmates. At our worst, it's one staff or emergency responder to 135 inmates. We're nowhere near the one staff to four inmate ratio proven to be safe. They don't truly report how our emergency responders are diminished through the practice of augmentation.

Historically, at FCI Big Spring there have never been major assaults or attacks on a staff or correctional officers behind our fence until this past May. We've had officers hurt being in the way during an inmate fight. We've been accidentally run over or in the way, during inmate on inmate fights, but never targeted like we are now. I wrestled with an inmate a few weeks ago over drugs he had in his possession—I had never had an inmate attempt to get into an altercation with me over a search or seizure prior to this.

The level of emboldened that the Bureau has allowed the inmates to feel is mind blowing in comparison to years past. I equate it to the agency playing flag football all the while knowing the inmates are playing pro-tackle. The game has changed. The attitude of the inmates changed. In response to that, the Agency then lowered our staffing and increased how many people are out of place daily. That makes zero sense. Inmates know when someone is not a regular correctional officer. We cannot man our fence lines adequately or keep an eye on contraband, gang activity or drug use behind our walls.

It's wild to watch. And it's frightening to me - I have family and friends who live near the prison, and they are being put in harm's way. We all are."

Paula Chavez
FCI Big Spring
Local 3809

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"I've been here since August 1999. I started as a secretary, then transferred to the business office, and transferred again to be a case manager. Before when we were augmented, it was only during annual refresher trainings. It was once a year, and we would be augmented so the COs could go to training. That would be it.

Sometime around 2015, they started augmenting us every day. All non-custody staff was augmented every day. We went from once a month to once every couple of weeks. I've worked at various posts – units, visiting room, outside perimeter.

Because I'm not custody staff, I don't have experience working in these areas. When I worked in the visiting room, I would go there and then I would have to have the people who are working there show me what to do, which takes away from their own work time. It's difficult, because it's not something you're used to doing and the people who are working there have to constantly stop their job to teach you.

You can't get your work done until you get back to your office. Inmates aren't programming as much as they used to, and you can't assist them because you're constantly being pulled away from doing your duties. You're always playing catch up.

When they put the women, who are not COs, on a unit, we're dressed business casual. When we come onto a unit, the inmates know we're not custody staff. They're in your face. They surround and crowd you and harass you. They walk around half naked, they're posing. You're trying to do your job.

In the beginning I had a hard time because I came to work dressed nicely, and a few times I got caught augmented in a skirt and heels. There are a lot of rounds and shakedowns you have to do in the unit, you have to go upstairs. The first two times I was in a skirt and heels, that was it. I didn't come to work dressed like that anymore.

Our biggest worry is that when more non-custody staff are augmented, fewer staffers are available to respond when there is an emergency. It's bad enough when a body alarm is activated, and we have to wait anywhere from 1 to 5 minutes for an elevator to show up to take us to where the emergency is happening. But when our first responders, who are non-custody staff, are unavailable to respond, we are more afraid than ever for our safety.

Since May 1, 2018, MDC Brooklyn has eliminated approximately 63 positions. We went from 83% staffed to 92% staff when those positions were eliminated. If we are 92% staffed, why are we augmenting more non-custody staff on a daily basis than ever. We augment anywhere from 4 non-custody staff to 15 non-custody staff per day.

It's also tough, because at MDC Brooklyn we have a huge issue with MS-13 and the Bloods. There's some sort of war happening between the two groups, and we've now had to separate the groups into different housing units. But because I don't work the units on a regular basis, I don't know who belongs to which group. When I'm patrolling around, I know the MS-13 is in one place and the Bloods are in another, but I don't know who is who, and who I should be wary of. I'm walking around, trying to do my job and trying to be safe, but I don't have that experience."

June Bencibi
Local 2005
MDC Brooklyn