

September 15, 2017

The Lincoln County Board of Commissioners met for a special session on September 15, 2017, in the Lincoln County Courthouse, Libby, Montana. Present were Commissioner Cole, Commissioner Bennett, Commissioner Peck, County Administrator Darren Coldwell and Deputy Clerk and Recorder Chris Nelson.

10:00 AM **Detention Staff:** Present were Sheriff Deputy Jessica Vanderhoef, Sheriff Roby Bowe, Undersheriff Brandon Huff, Sheriff Secretary Charity Ginther, HR Director Dallas Bowe, and detention officers Debra Davis-Burrell, Kris Bowers, Tyler White, James Derryberry, Adam Anderson, Deana Cornell, and Justin Stufflebean.

Sheriff Bowe discussed that there has been a communication breakdown between administration and the detention staff. Bowe said he would like to use the meeting to hear from the staff to help come up with solutions. Commissioner Cole said just looking at the high turnover in detention makes it clear they need to make efforts to improve the conditions down there. Sheriff Bowe explained to the staff that there have been discussions between the sheriff's administration and the commissioners about improvements for the staff and solutions to the actual detention facility but feels those discussions have not been adequately parlayed to detention. Commissioner Peck said what the detention staff does is critical and it is unfortunate the high number of inmates they have had to deal with. Commissioner Peck said the board needs to help more and hopes hearing from the staff will clarify the issues. Jessica said the issue is a crisis. If detention were fully staffed they would have 13 but they only have 9 at this time. Of those 9 employees, half are new, one is in the academy and one is out with an inmate caused injury. Staff safety is #1 and current issues are putting that in jeopardy. Due to low wages, lack of staffing and high numbers of prisoners, the staff is feeling defeated and are forced to make decisions without optimal options. James Derryberry said he recently stepped down as sergeant as he wasn't comfortable making the decisions he had to make. James continued saying that due to being understaffed he was forced to schedule detention staff on solo shifts and to decrease the high turnover he would recommend lifting the probationary wage and ask that the detention officers get the additional \$2 an hour he is getting.

Detention officer Kris Bowers thanked the commissioners for meeting. Kris said she is currently the most senior officer in detention and there are only four officers total who have been on the job for a year or more. Kris said she understood the county was in a financial crunch but with a depressed economy and the lack of jobs, the jail population will only increase. Due to the stress and danger of the job, she had put in her verbal notification that she will be quitting which will cause her to lose the things she has worked so hard for over 20 years. Looking at the wages angers her and is directly linked to the lack of quality applicants. To help decrease the jail population, the county should look into putting the nonviolent inmates on house arrest. This would also save the county on medical costs as those on house arrest would have to pay their own medical costs. Jessica said that at about 45 days in jail, inmates end up going to the doctor and being put on meds. Deanna said their department has lost many good officers that couldn't get raises. She said they had previously had a good, experienced team but over time many hit their breaking point and left to find safer, better paying jobs. Jessica has done an amazing job complimenting her on always being available and coming to help in detention. She ended by saying that it is hard to put into words how much is expected from them and that sometimes it feels as if they are being taken advantage of and how even a small raise would help.

Commissioner Peck said they have begun working on significant changes to their pay and are looking at getting rid of the probationary period pay wage. He said they are also looking at ways to increase safety and working conditions.

Commissioner Cole added they have been working on the issues for months but said it helps greatly to hear directly from the detention staff.

Adam Anderson said that the changing schedule, due to understaffing, is hard for him as a single dad to find someone to watch his son. He said he has had to work solo shifts where they regularly have to pass out meds, meals, deal with court appearances of inmates, visitation and get them showered while constantly being screamed at.

Deanna said she has had zero training since the academy because they are so understaffed and cannot afford to lose anyone while they get further training.

James said making improvements to the wages would dramatically help the retention of current officers and attract better applicants.

Undersheriff Brandon Huff said he sees three issue; facilities, staffing and inmate population. The inmate population will continue to grow and they can't change that. The staffing problem is due to low wages. A change in wages would allow them to keep current staff and attract new applicants. Brandon said they will look into the issue of house arrest for nonviolent offenders as a short term fix of keeping the jail population down. Currently, even if a new jail was built or a remodel allowed for more cells, the detention office could not staff it. Therefore, he feels that addressing the staffing issue needs to be dealt with first or a new facility will not matter.

Kris thanked Jessica for everything she does and told the commissioners that the detention department needs hope that things will change. She also thanked the commissioners for meeting with them and their work in getting cameras, radios and Tasers.

Mary Burrell said they are often taken away from their regular detention duties for new bookings, filling in while a dispatcher is on break or dealing with someone coming in for 24-7 program.

Commissioner Peck thanked the detention staff for meeting with them and recommended the formation of a core group that would meet regularly to keep things moving forward. Brandon agreed and said they could have a group put together by Tuesday.

Darren said the county is looking at a \$1 to \$1.50 per hour increase then possibly another raise as people receive training. They want to see employees rewarded for training as well as having incentive to train. All of the discussions have been preliminary and they are working on what the pay matrix would be.

**LINCOLN COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

---

Mike Cole, Chairman

**ATTEST:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Chris Nelson, Deputy Clerk of the Board