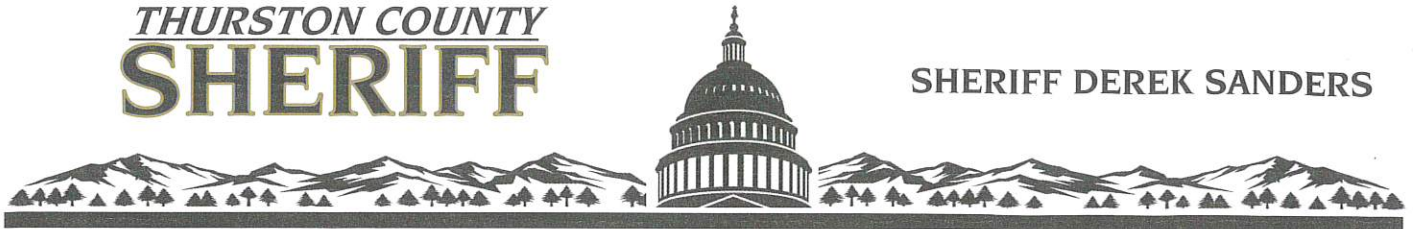


THURSTON COUNTY SHERIFF

SHERIFF DEREK SANDERS



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RECEIVED

November 21, 2023

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Chief Civil Service Examiner Wayne Jones
Thurston County Civil Service
3000 Pacific Avenue SE
Olympia WA 98501

THURSTON COUNTY
HUMAN RESOURCES

Dear Mr. Jones:

This letter is to officially ask that the Thurston County Civil Service Board change the minimum age requirement from twenty-one (21) years of age to eighteen (18) years of age for the **Corrections Deputy** classification.

Other law enforcement agencies across the state and nation are using the younger age for their hiring standards as well. Lowering the age requirement should give us wider applicant pool to choose from as well as helping with retention. We are finding that we are losing otherwise qualified applicants due to our 21 years of age standard. State law allows for hiring of Corrections Deputies at the age of 18.

I've attached an October 2023 article from **Corrections 1**. In the article it highlights how lowering the age requirement for Corrections Officers is helping with staffing shortages in South Carolina. It also states that Florida, Tennessee, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, and Arizona have also lowered their age requirement to 18.

The Corrections union had originally opposed the idea of lowering the age. Then, a few weeks ago conveyed that they were no longer going to oppose it. And now, the union has once again indicated that they will oppose moving forward with lowering the age.

We view the unions opposition as a "Labor Management" issue, that our Office will work through with them. It should not be a concern for the Civil Service Board to consider in making their decision.

"OUT OF MANY, WE ARE ONE"



Mr. Wayne Jones
November 21, 2023
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Thank you for your consideration, please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Dave Pearsall
Undersheriff

DP/kk

cc: Sheriff Derek Sanders
Chief Carla Carter, Support Services Bureau
Chief Trevor Davis, Corrections Bureau
Chief Ruben Mancillas, Field Operations Bureau
Chief Heidi Thomsen, Financial Operations Bureau

Lowering age requirement for COs helping with staffing shortages in S.C.

By lowering the age requirement to age 18 for COs, the J. Reuben Long Detention Center has under 20 openings; last year, the jail was facing 50 open positions.

Oct 25, 2023

By Terri Richardson
The Sun News (Myrtle Beach, S.C.)

MYRTLE BEACH, S.C. — Chesney Higginbotham knows it's her age that sets her apart from many of the corrections officers at the J. Reuben Long Detention Center.

Higginbotham was a teenager when she was hired at the detention center last year — taking advantage of a state law that lowered the requirement age for correctional officers in South Carolina from 21 to 18.



Horry County Sheriff's Office

The focus of the law, passed in May 2022, was to help deal with the hiring pressures felt by law enforcement across the state.

However, South Carolina isn't alone in its efforts to tap into a wider applicant pool.

Other states, including Florida, Tennessee, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico and Arizona, have lowered their corrections requirements to age 18. And state legislatures are continuing to explore the idea. A proposal to drop the age requirement was presented to the Ohio state legislature this year.

It has been a huge benefit to the Horry County Sheriff's Office, which has used it as a recruiting tool to help with its staffing shortages.

This is the first time in six years that the detention center has under 20 openings, according to spokesperson Brennan Cavanagh. Last year, the jail was facing 50 open positions.

Higginbotham, now 20, is just one of those under the age of 21 hired to help fill the gap. Since the new age requirement went into effect, 15 corrections officers under the age of 21 have been hired at the detention center, Cavanagh said.

The detention center is the only law enforcement in Horry County to be able to hire officers under the age of 21, she said. The lowering of the age requirement has removed the competitiveness with other agencies and opened up a whole new demographic, she said.

OFFICERS 'WORN OUT' BECAUSE OF STAFFING SHORTAGES

The Sheriff's Department has pushed the lower age requirement by reaching out to high schools, JROTC groups and career fairs, as well as hosting hiring events.

The department has even used its TikTok page as a marketing tool for hiring since 80% of the social media's users are between the ages of 16 and 34, Cavanagh said. At a recent hiring fair, more than half of the attendees said they found out about the event through TikTok, she said.

When the bill to lower the age limit was first being discussed, there was hesitation from some officials, who questioned how someone so young could be in charge of grown adults, especially those who have been charged with serious crimes, Cavanagh said.

But the attitude and maturity of the younger officers have not been an issue, Cavanagh said. "We have 35 year olds that come in and we don't think they are mature enough," she said.

The age of the officers, who don't carry guns, are not disclosed to the inmates, she said.

The new law has been welcomed by older corrections officers, who, because of staffing shortages, had been pulling mandatory overtime to meet the officer-to-inmate ratio required by law at the detention center, Cavanagh said. "Our officers were worn out," she said.

Since the age overhaul, the "internal environment" has improved, Cavanagh said.

There are currently 176 corrections officers who oversee the inmate population at the detention center, which was at 819 as of Oct. 13. That staff number doesn't include supervisors, Cavanagh said.

It appears that staffing will continue to be an issue for correctional facilities across the country as the number of correctional officers and bailiffs is projected to decline by 7% in the next 10 years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The agency reports that there will be more than 30,000 openings for these positions each year over the next decade.

Many of those openings come as officers retire or leave the job.

"It's a tough environment," Cavanagh said. "You're essentially holed up with inmates for 12 hours a day."

But for many of the young officers, who receive months of on-the-job training, they have long-term goals of going to college and making a career in the criminal justice system, including police work or crime scene investigation, Cavanagh said. Becoming a corrections officer at age 18 allows them to get a jump start on the experience until they turn 21, which is the required age to become a police officer, she said.

JOB OFFERS HEAD START IN LIFE FOR TEENS

Higginbotham had hoped to wear a different uniform after graduating high school. She had plans to join the military, but when a medical condition ended that dream, Higginbotham wasn't sure what she was going to do.

She didn't have the money for college and working at a job paying \$12 an hour wasn't going to pay the bills.

It wasn't until a friend who worked in the Horry County Sheriff's Department told Higginbotham about an opening for a correctional officer that things started to fall into place.

Now, after more than a year, Higginbotham has her own place and has bought a vehicle. She also goes to her alma mater, Aynor High School, to talk to students about the opportunity to become a corrections officer.

It's something she decided to do on her own, adding that if the opportunity had been there when she was in high school, "I would've definitely chosen this path."

"It gives you a head start on life," Higginbotham said.

The starting salary for correction officers in Horry County is \$49,093, plus overtime, Cavanagh said. The average annual wage for correctional officers and jailers in the U.S. was \$49,610 in May 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"It's been life-changing for some of them," Cavanagh said about the younger hires.

Higginbotham believes she has matured since starting the job. "It has taught me ... how to deal with people."

She tries to be mindful of the inmates' situation, adding that the jail process "mentally destroys you." Trying to understand what the inmate is going through helps her to de-escalate situations. It also has turned her into an "unlicensed therapist," Higginbotham said.

But the job is not easy, and it "is not for everybody," she said.

Logan Newton, who was working at Walmart before he was hired in September 2022, admits that he wasn't sure about the job when he first started.

"I was scared. I was so scared," Newton said about his first day on the job.

The 20-year-old Loris resident has had to deal with how inmates talk to him and the disrespect often shown to officers.

But he has learned to not let it affect him and instead works to create a rapport with the inmates he oversees. That includes changing his mindset that not all of the people are bad, "they just made bad choices," Newton said.

The job also has helped him work on his personal growth and communication skills.

And while he never considered a career in law enforcement, Newton plans to remain a corrections officer.

"This is something that was made for me," he said.