**Letter to Civil Service Commission**

Hello, my name is Sergeant Brian Boman with the Thurston County Sheriff's Department, Corrections Bureau, and Union President for AFSCME Council 2 Local 618-CD. I am here today to speak on behalf of Local 618-CD members and several non-union employees in the Corrections Bureau on the issue of lowering the hiring age of Correction Deputies, from 21 to 18 years of age. Local 618-CD members and several non-union members in Corrections are opposed to changing the hiring age from 21 to 18. We have submitted to the Civil Service a series of articles ranging from agencies that have changed, wanted to change, or refused to change the hiring age, along with articles on brain development studies in adolescents. We have provided a summary sheet highlighting the areas of concerns. In all the articles that were provided on agencies, the main reason for lowering the hiring age was to “**fill vacancies**.” Correction officers work in an environment with daily manipulation attempts, acts of violence and work with severely mentally ill offenders, not to mention that Correction officers have a higher than national average for death, suicide, PTSD, Depression along with other mental health and physical health issues. Putting individuals in this environment at an age under 21 who don’t have the life experiences or haven’t fully developed portions of the brain, can cause them (and has been proven in studies) to act impulsively, misread or misinterpret social cues and emotions, get into accidents, get involved in fights, and engage in dangerous or risky behaviors that will put staff and inmates at risk. The County and agency are potentially at risk of an increase in grievances, internal investigations, L&I claims and potential lawsuits against the County.

Proponents of lowering the minimum age for corrections deputies attempt to equate serving in the military with serving in law enforcement. Military life is extremely structured, and every aspect of a new soldier’s day is planned and dictated to include when to eat, when to sleep, what to wear, etc. and they are never considered “off duty.”  Soldiers are taught to follow orders and do what they are told. This extends past basic training, through their job tech schools, and into their everyday life. They are government property and can be disciplined for far more “life decisions” than a corrections deputy. Corrections is far removed from that structure. The military understands the developing brain and the structure required to mold young soldiers. The Sheriff’s Office does not offer this structure and is not comparable. If anything, under the current Sheriff’s administration, staff have been directed to move away from the paramilitary organizational structure we once had and into a far less structured environment.

The request to lower the hiring age is being made to “**widen the applicant pool**.” In the December Civil Service monthly activity report on December 13, 2023, a new eligibility list with 13 candidates was created on top of the 11 additional names remaining from the November list. There are also 132 candidates on the candidate roster. When you look at these numbers it isn’t a widen the pool situation, it’s a failing retention and background process situation. (Please refer to our statistics sheet provided)

You must also look at the issue of an individual under the age of 21 carrying a firearm for work related duties. If an individual under the age of 21 does not carry a firearm, then they will be limited on work duties and positions of work. They will not be able to conduct work related duties as a Court Deputy, Transport Deputy, Medical Deputy, or Options Deputy, thus changing the duties for a certain group of employees, (18- to 20-year-olds) which may cause this to be a new job classification. By this group of employees (18- to 20-year-olds) being limited in areas you may have increased staff numbers but are limiting the number of staff able to work specific areas causing more work-related duties on staff over the age of 21, and staff over 21 working more mandatory overtime for these specific areas.

 Sheriff Department administration in the first attempt to bring this agenda item to the Civil Service board stated, **“State law requires that fully commissioned deputy sheriffs be 21, this does not however, apply to correction deputies.”** When I asked a Sheriff Department administrator to direct me to the state law that states this, I received a response of, **“I am told after further research that police officers can be 18 years of age however, they can only carry a sidearm while on-duty.”** The Sheriff Departments administration seems to avoid making this a department wide change. With the large amount of deputy vacancies in the Patrol Bureau, “widening the applicant pool” department wide would seem to be an option if the board is in favor of the change.

Undersheriff Pearsall in the most recent letter stated to the board that a few weeks ago the union no longer opposed this change. This is untrue, Local 618-CD has opposed this change from the start and it was conveyed to Sheriff Department administration that we understand this change may pass and if so, the union wants to negotiate what hiring someone under the age of 21 will look like.

 Undersheriff Pearsall in his letter provided an article by Corrections 1 pointing out departments in different states that have lowered the hiring age to help fill vacant positions. In this article all 7 states mentioned are right to work states meaning the employees voices may be limited on what they think is best. In these 7 states the average median income is $41,324.29 per year and these states potentially have different and lower hiring standards. The local provided an article by Corrections 1 that indicates in 2023 only 17% of respondents selected 18 as a hiring age. More than half (59%) of respondents chose 21 years of age, while 21% selected older than 21 and 3% selected not sure. It is our belief that while some departments are lowing the hiring age to “widen the pool” a larger number of law enforcement agencies disagree with such changes.

I would like to refer to the statistic sheet we provided on candidate’s eligibility. If you look at the number of candidates in 2022 verses 2023 it has increased, but the percentages of reasons for them being removed from the eligibility list hasn’t really changed. The highest percentages of removal from the list in both years are self-removal and failure to respond. I believe this would indicate that most candidates are moving on to other job opportunities before our agency gets to them.

Lastly, I would also point out the increase in vacancies in 2022 vs 2023. In 2023 we had an increase in overall vacancies, an increase in employees leaving for different agencies, an increase in bureau transfers from corrections to patrol which contributed to the high number of vacancies, and an increase in terminations (1 has been reinstated.) Again, this isn’t a “widen the applicant pool” issue, it’s a retention issue and background issue within the department. Changing the hiring age will not change the retention or background issues. We have eligible candidates, getting to these candidates faster and through the process and having ways to retain these candidates to make Corrections a career and not just a steppingstone to Patrol and/or other agencies offering more money.

I want to thank you all for letting me voice the concerns of Local 618-CD and several non-union members in the Corrections Bureau. We believe lowering the age will be dangerous to staff, inmates, the agency, and the County.

Thank you for your time and consideration.