County commission to get monthly staffing reports for detention facility

After hearing concerns, Citrus County's board of commissioners will start getting regular updates on whether the county's privately run jail and prison is being adequately staffed. Starting with the board's March 22 meeting, county staff will provide commissioners each month with the Citrus County Detention Facility's latest staffing report. County Administrator Randy Oliver said Thursday, Feb. 24, there's not enough time "to analyze the staffing" from Feb. 1-28 before the March 1 deadline to post the agenda for the commission's March 8 meeting. After the county began fining CoreCivic for contractually failing to fill the required posts at the detention facility in Lecanto, Commissioner Jeff Kinnard asked Oliver during Tuesday's board meeting to present those staffing figures to commissioners each month. "That's something that should be addressed on a monthly basis at a board meeting as to whether or not they're in compliance with the contract," he said. "It's a straight-forward question, and it needs to be answered publicly." CoreCivic spokesman Ryan Gustin told the Chronicle "our senior leaders are in regular communication with Citrus County officials and will be addressing their concerns directly." "Both public and private correctional facilities in Florida, and throughout the country, have faced similar staffing challenges," he said. "Even as we focus on addressing these challenges, we work hard to meet our daily staffing patterns, which are designed to ensure the safety of the facility." On Feb. 15, the county levied a $77,500 assessment against CoreCivic's purchasing requests from the county for failing to improve staffing and organizational issues dating back to March 2021. This assessment accounted for a daily fine of $2,500 for just throughout the month of January 2022 because the county gave CoreCivic a grace period to address its staff shortage. "CoreCivic has been trying to work to correct it," Oliver told commissioners Tuesday, "and, in my opinion, they didn't make significant enough progress, and that's why I took the action." Bret Touchton told commissioners he quit working for CoreCivic at the detention facility in November 2020 after 21 years because the company's corporate office in Tennessee ignored his repeated pleas for more and better-treated employees. "I know what they're doing, and it's wrong," said Touchton, adding he was the facility's chief of security for three years up until his departure. "It's time for them to wake up and do their job the way it's supposed to be done." Kinnard thanked Touchton for broaching the subject. "That sounds like something we definitely need to be paying attention to," the commissioner said. "It has obviously brought to the surface an issue that's been going on at our county jail." Warden, three others 'no longer employed' at county detention facility Oliver told commissioners the closure of two state prisons decreased the weekly transfer rate of convicted inmates, creating a backlog at local jails. "That's put additional pressure on the system," he said, "as well as a number of other things." Oliver told commissioners questions have also been asked on whether the county's current contract with CoreCivic mandates a good standard of staffing requirements. Oliver said Matrix Consulting Group - a California-based firm with "a significant amount corrections experience" - helped develop the agreement, which was approved in July 2020 to expire in September 2030. Commissioners on Tuesday pulled a vote on whether to approve a separate and updated contract between the county, CoreCivic and the U.S. Virgin Islands to keep housing inmates from the U.S. territory at the county detention facility. Kinnard said he heard the facility's population of U.S. Virgin Island inmates was being transferred elsewhere. "Does that bring them into compliance with what they're supposed to be doing out there, staffing-wise?" he asked Oliver. "Until we go in and audit, I don't know," Oliver replied. "But yes, they told me they were going to be moving those inmates out for the time being." Gustin said "no decision has been made" on the transfer of the U.S. Virgin Island inmates. Managed since 1995 by CoreCivic - formerly Corrections Corporation of America - the Citrus County Detention Facility can house up to 760 inmates, who are either in local, federal or U.S. Virgin Island custody. U.S. Virgin Island inmates are serving sentences longer than a year. Oliver told commissioners in a Feb. 18 email CoreCivic "brought in a number of temporary/potentially permanent corrections officers, already certified," to alleviate staffing issues. CoreCivic informed Oliver then it had 94 percent of the detention facility staffed. Touchton cautioned commissioners about believing CoreCivic was staffing the facility with qualified employees. "They're playing you, and they're not doing the right thing. ... It's Band-Aids and duct tape," he said. "They should not be allowed to house additional inmates in that facility until they prove they have a full staff of certified correctional officers." Oliver said a CoreCivic executive informed him someone with correctional experience from outside the state can receive reciprocity from Florida to practice their profession in the state. Oliver told the Chronicle Thursday the county relies on the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) to approve a corrections officer and their certifications before they "can work in a safety-sensitive position." The FDLE had yet to respond to a Chronicle reporter's request for comment. According to
Oliver and the county’s contract with CoreCivic, not all positions at the county detention facility require a certified corrections officer. "It is up to the contractor (CoreCivic)," Oliver said, "to hire qualified and professional employees that can fulfill the terms of the contract."