County fines detention facility manager for staff shortage

A staff shortage at the Citrus County Detention Facility prompted county officials to start fining the company managing the local jail and prison. In a Feb. 15 letter to acting Warden Jerry Wardlow, County Administrator Randy Oliver said the county began to issue CoreCivic an assessment of $2,500 a day, per month, for contractually failing to fill the "required fixed posts" at the county detention facility in Lecanto.

"We realize that these are challenging times for staffing and that changes will be incremental in nature," Oliver wrote, "however, we need to see positive progress." These assessments, unless waived, are credited against CoreCivic's purchasing requests to the county, according to the contract between the county and CoreCivic. Oliver said in his letter the levied assessments accounted for the month of January, when CoreCivic's latest staffing report reflected "a continuous decline in staffing levels compared to prior month's levels." In a Feb. 18 email to county commissioners, Oliver said CoreCivic has accrued an assessment of $77,500 to be deducted from its invoice. Oliver told commissioners CoreCivic reacted to the assessment "and perhaps other facts" by sending a pair of executives from its corporate office in Tennessee. "More importantly," Oliver said, "they have brought in a number of temporary/potentially permanent corrections officers, already certified, to address those issues." Oliver said CoreCivic has 94 percent of the detention facility staffed, but the county is working to verify that before the commission's meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 22. A CoreCivic spokesperson was reached for comment Monday, Feb. 21, but they could not provide the Chronicle with a response by Tuesday's print deadline. Oliver told Wardlow the "staffing and organizational issues" at the facility dated back to March 2021, prior to Wardlow's transfer to the detention facility. CoreCivic named Wardlow acting warden earlier in February after Mike Quinn lost the job as a result of a CoreCivic investigation into the Nov. 2 death of inmate Valerie Bogle. Oliver told Wardlow the county first informed Quinn in May about the staffing shortfalls. "At the time, the county advised CoreCivic that although all required fixed posts were not filled," Oliver wrote, "fees would not be assessed, allowing CoreCivic a grace period to address the issue." Oliver said he sent another email to Quinn in August, continuing to express concerns about staffing, along with the delay in the county getting monthly status reports about the facility. "This information is necessary to ensure contract compliance," Oliver wrote. "The expectation was that these issues would be addressed and corrected." In November, the county sent another notice to Quinn about how the September staffing report showed no improvement since March. "In that letter, the county insisted that all required fixed posts be filled by Jan. 1, 2022," Oliver wrote, "or the county would begin to assess fines per the contract." According to the county-CoreCivic contract, which was approved in July 2020 to exist until September 2030, CoreCivic agreed to have at least 12 day posts, eight night posts and 13 40-hour-a-week posts filled. When the detention facility has all its housing units open, CoreCivic must fill 25 day posts, 20 night posts and 13 40-hour-a-week posts. Oliver told Wardlow the county expects "the addition of at least two positions per month until the staffing levels provided for in the contract are achieved." Otherwise, he said, the county's assessment against CoreCivic would increase. "The fines will be reevaluated on a monthly basis with increasing penalties if continued progress toward contractually required staffing is not made," Oliver wrote. "This could potentially include a $2,500 per day penalty per day per shift per post as set forth in the contract." In his letter to commissioners, Oliver said state and federal correctional institutions are also dealing with staffing issues. Oliver said the Florida Department of Corrections closed two of its facilities, which also decreased the rate of how many inmates could be transferred to prisons from local jails. 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. Commissioners will vote Tuesday on whether to approve an updated contract between the county, CoreCivic and the U.S. Virgin Islands to keep housing inmates from the U.S. territory. Oliver informed commissioners about a handful of recent inspections the county detention facility underwent by outside agencies: A U.S. Marshals Service inspection from April 27 was "satisfactory." There was 100 percent compliance found during a March 28 inspection by the American Correction Association, and also during a Nov. 4 Florida Model Jail Inspection. A U.S. Virgin Islands site visit from December also reported no concerns, Oliver said.