

AGENCY STATEMENT ON STATE AUDITOR'S OFFICE PERFORMANCE AUDIT REGARDING SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS AND AUDIT FINDINGS

TUMWATER – Steve Sinclair, Assistant Secretary of Prisons for the Washington Department of Corrections today released the following statement regarding state audit findings related to staff safety and security.

"The Department of Corrections appreciates the State Auditor's Office performance audit and the involvement of contractual auditors. The agency strives to continually improve its staff safety and security practices, and is always interested in opportunities to enhance the safety of our state's prisons. Corrections appreciates that the SAO's report noted the department is a national leader when it comes to staff safety.

"Some of the items identified by the SAO have already been implemented in agency policy, staff position descriptions or in the strategic deployment process.

"Specifically, security cameras have been added and will continue to be added as funding becomes available. As noted by the auditors, the department was budgeted \$33 million in the 2013-15 and 2015-17 biennia to continue its camera installation and other safety initiatives. Corrections reviews its policies on a regular basis to determine where updates are needed and has a process for initiating urgent policy reviews when emergent issues arise.

"Corrections recognizes opportunities to improve, as noted in the audit, and many of the other recommendations are under consideration by agency leadership. For example, the agency will conduct an analysis to determine the feasibility of changes to the staffing model, and will work toward the development of policies and procedures on conducting staff searches.

"The department would like to emphasize progress has been made since the time the audit was conducted. For example, the SAO's 2014 survey of prison staff, which had a 21 percent response rate, found that less than half of respondents felt safer in 2014 than they did in 2011. However, a fall 2015 state survey, which received a 79 percent prison staff response rate, found that 53 percent of those who responded believe that security practices have improved in state prisons.

"Corrections employees perform their duties with professionalism and pride. They believe in improving public safety and in working together for safe communities. They are mindful, too, that staff safety requires constant on-the-job awareness and discipline.

"As noted in the report, experts from the Criminal Justice Institute (CJI) hired by the SAO found that Corrections' 'approach to staff safety is innovative and unique among correctional agencies.' They were not aware of any other state developing such an advanced and comprehensive group of initiatives focused on improving staff safety. They believe the Department's staff safety initiatives are all based on good correctional practices, have likely improved the safety and security of prison staff, and – if fully and consistently implemented – will continue to reduce the risk of harm to staff."