



SHERIFF DENITA R. BALL

DATE: May 18, 2026

File # 26-472

TO: Committee on Finance

FROM: Brian M. Barkow, Chief Deputy, Office of the Sheriff
Rosario Estrada, Fiscal Administrator, Office of the Sheriff

RE: 2026 Operational Underfunding and Overtime Informational Report

This report is submitted consistently with the guidance of Section 56.02(1) of the Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances. This ordinance states that, “whenever such person has reason to know or believe that a net deficit of at least one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) or whenever an overtime deficit of at least one million dollars (\$1,000,000) will occur or is projected to occur for the division of county government under the supervision of that person” a written report shall be submitted.

The Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office is projecting an overall deficit of \$4,481,763, which includes a projected overtime deficit of \$7,561,412. Several critical factors have contributed to this financial shortfall as we strive to maintain public safety and fulfill our mandated responsibilities:

1. Staffing

The Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office (MCSO) is budgeted for 288 Deputy Sheriff positions in 2026, which includes the addition of 10 new Courts Deputy positions in the adopted budget. As of this report, 247 deputy positions are filled, leaving 41 vacancies. On the corrections side, MCSO is budgeted for 235 Correctional Officer positions, with 178 currently filled and 57 vacant. Staffing levels within these two classifications continue to significantly impact overtime utilization and operational coverage requirements.

Additionally, deputies and correctional officers are utilizing increased amounts of accrued compensatory leave compared to prior years, including vacation, FMLA, sick leave, personal leave, holiday leave, and military leave. Because MCSO is responsible for statutorily mandated, around-the-clock public safety functions, these responsibilities cannot be delayed, rescheduled, or reduced without impacting operational and public safety needs. As a result, staffing coverage must continue to be maintained during employee absences to meet required service levels.

Staff turnover and mandatory training requirements continue to impact operational staffing availability. The recruitment and hiring process for Deputy Sheriffs requires several months,

followed by approximately 12 months of academy and field training before a deputy is fully deployable. During this training period, staffing requirements and operational coverage needs remain unchanged.

The Correctional Officer training pipeline presents similar operational impacts. Newly hired Correctional Officers are required to complete 10 weeks of initial training before independently staffing operational posts within the jail. Additional specialty training requirements and the state-mandated 24 hours of annual in-service training continue to impact staffing availability and operational scheduling needs. While staffing allocations and operational funding levels have increased over time, the Sheriff's Office continues to experience operational underfunding, as available resources have not kept pace with increasing staffing demands, training requirements, and personnel costs associated with maintaining mandated public safety services.

This ongoing gap between operational demands and available funding continues to place significant pressure on overtime expenditures and overall staffing operations. Long-term reduction in overtime expenditures will require funding and staffing resources that more accurately reflect the actual cost of maintaining required public safety operations and mandated service levels.

While vacancy rates for Correctional Officers have improved significantly, largely due to recent wage increases that have strengthened recruitment and retention efforts, Deputy Sheriff vacancy rates have increased slightly due to retirements and resignations, trends that continue to impact law enforcement agencies statewide and nationally. Although MCSO typically begins with applicant pools of approximately 130–150 candidates, state-mandated physical readiness testing, background investigations, and interview requirements significantly reduce the number of qualified applicants eligible for hire.

These workforce challenges continue to be influenced by the long-term effects of the prior 13-year hiring freeze for deputy positions. Within the next five to six years, a significant number of deputies hired prior to the freeze are expected to retire, creating additional operational staffing pressures across multiple ranks. With an approximate 18-month timeline required to fully replace a retiring deputy—including recruitment, academy training, and field training, operational staffing demands and required service levels are expected to continue impacting overtime utilization.

2. Wage Increases

By state law, Milwaukee County must collectively bargain deputy sheriffs' and deputy sheriff sergeants' wages with the Milwaukee Deputy Sheriff's Association (MDSA). Between 2016 and 2024, through settlement agreements and/or arbitration awards, deputy sheriff wages increased by \$10.81 per hour, representing a 47.1% increase in 2025 and 2026 MDSA Contract has not been settled yet. These wage increases were necessary to remain competitive within the current law enforcement labor market and to support recruitment and retention efforts.

As wage rates have increased, the overall cost associated with maintaining required staffing levels and mandated public safety operations has also increased, including overtime incurred within the ranks of Deputy Sheriff, Sergeant, and Lieutenant. While MCSO continues to

evaluate and implement operational strategies to manage overtime utilization, wage growth, staffing demands, and personnel-related operational costs have continued to outpace available staffing resources and operational funding levels. As a result, operational mitigation efforts alone are not sufficient to fully offset the increasing costs associated with maintaining mandated service levels.

Deputy Sheriff: 17BZ

	2016	2024*	Increase	Increase
Step 1	22.97	\$33.78	\$10.81	47.10%

*2024 Pay rate as of 5/18/26

Likewise, Correctional Officers have received substantial wage increases over the same time period. For example, the hourly rate for Correctional Officers increased by \$13.30 between 2016 and 2026, representing a 75.52% increase. Similar to deputy wage increases, these adjustments have contributed to higher overtime expenditures, including overtime incurred within the ranks of CO Sergeant and CO Lieutenant. However, the 2026 Adopted Budget included an overtime increase of only \$175,279 for Correctional Officers, CO Sergeants, and CO Lieutenants, which does not fully reflect the actual cost of maintaining mandated staffing levels and operational needs. As a result, the ongoing challenges are more reflective of operational underfunding than excessive overtime usage.

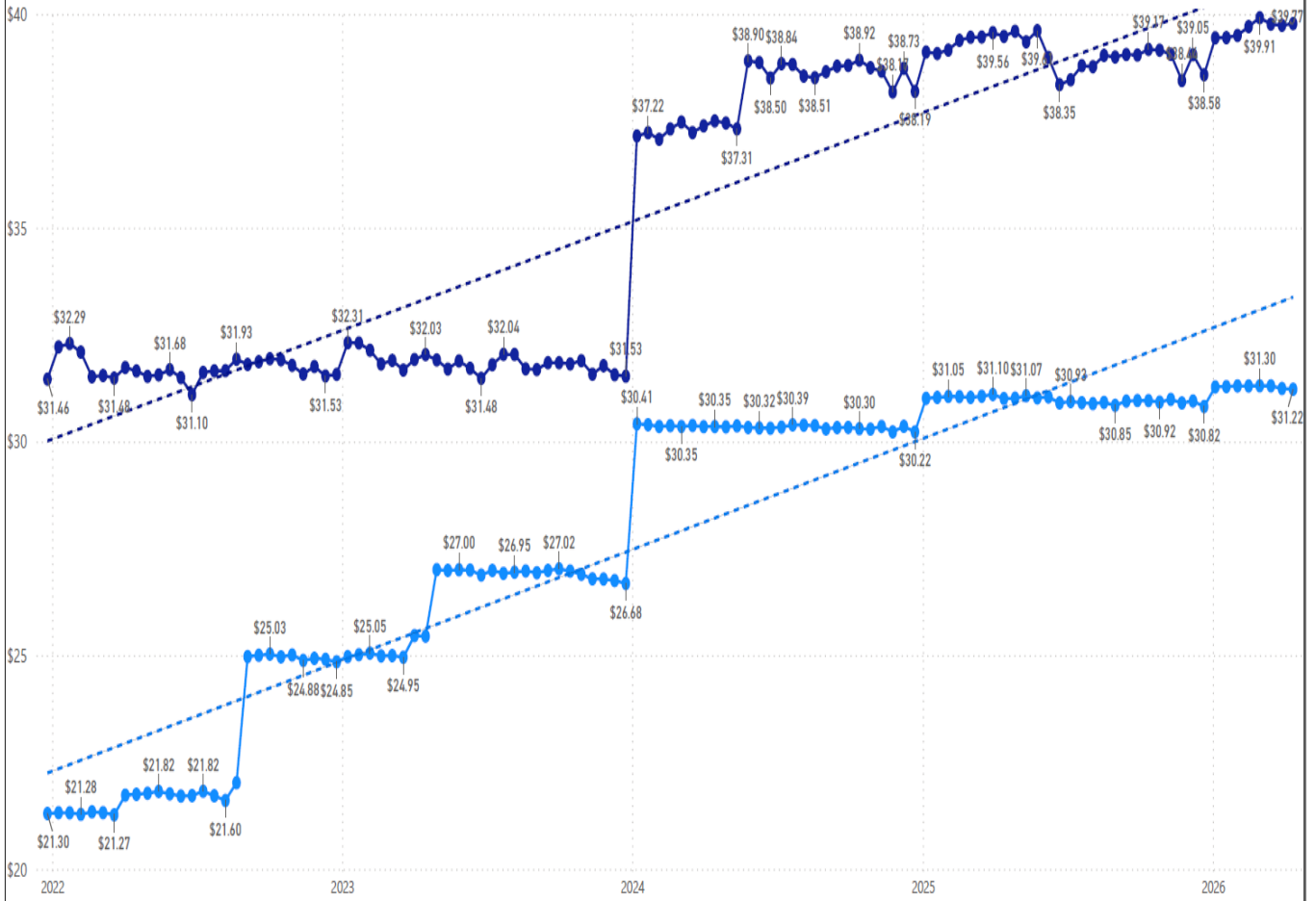
CO: NRC1

Step 1	2016	2026	Increase	% Increase
	\$17.61	\$30.91	\$13.30	75.52%

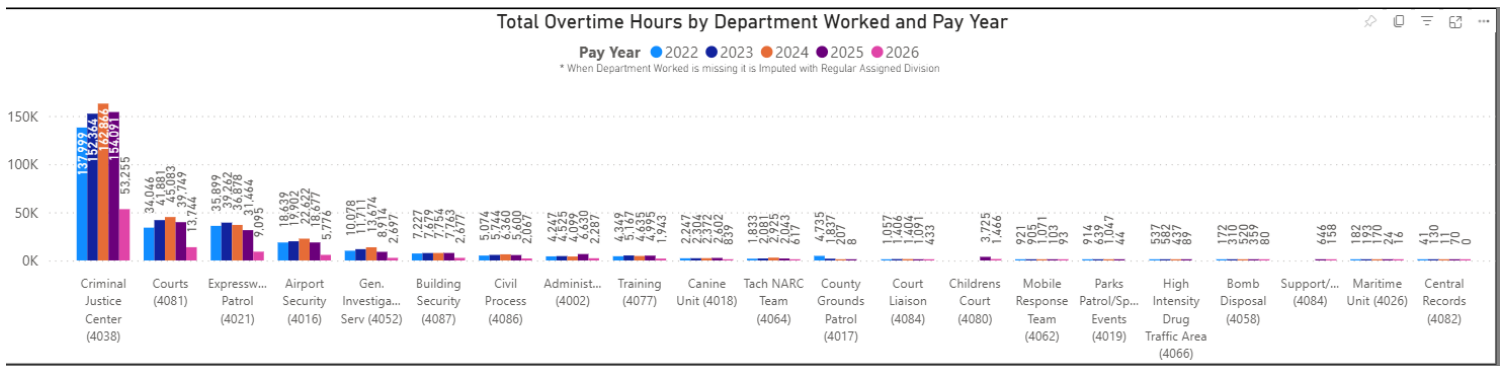
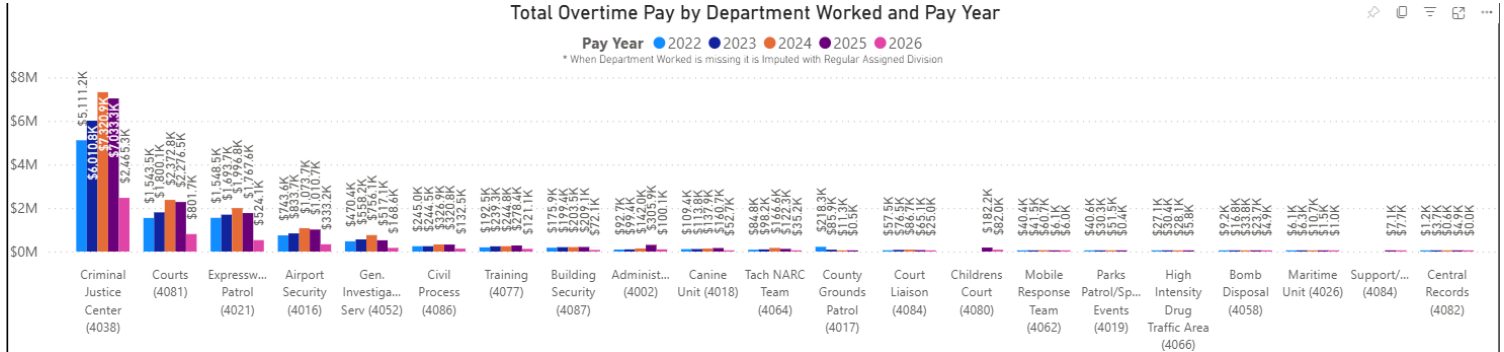
Wage increases continue to be a major factor impacting the actual cost of overtime operations. While the 2026 adopted budget included an overtime increase of \$1,304,768, the increase represents only a portion of the actual cost growth associated with negotiated wage increases and ongoing operational staffing requirements. The gap between operational cost increases and budgeted staffing resources continues to place significant pressure on overtime expenditures necessary to maintain mandated public safety operations.

Average Regular Pay Rate by Pay Period (Start Date) and Job Title

Job Title ● Correctional Officer I ● Deputy Sheriff I



3. Overtime Assessment



Most overtime is worked at the Criminal Justice Facility followed by Courts and Patrol divisions.

Total Overtime Pay and Hours Utilized for Hospital Watch Duties

Pay Year	Total Overtime Pay	Total Overtime Hours
2022	\$194,045	4,214.97
2023	\$312,436	6,817.75
2024	\$429,172	7,772.76
2025	\$431,800	7,511.54
*2026	\$134,476	2,292.83
Total	\$1,501,929	28,609.85

*2026 is Year-to Date Including Pay Periods 1-9

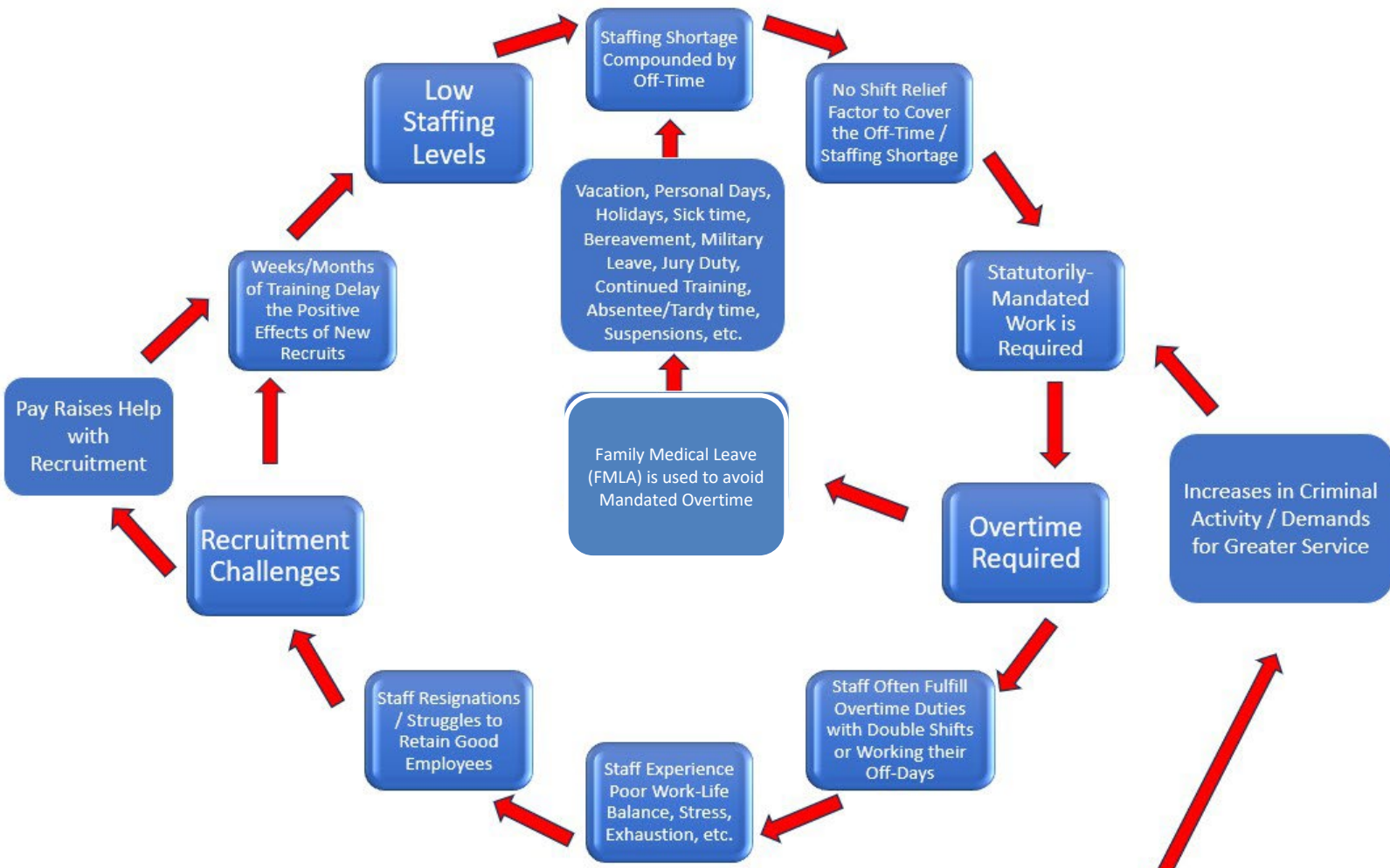
1. Hospital watch overtime continues to be an example of a mandated operational responsibility

for MCSO without dedicated staffing allocations or budgeted FTE positions assigned specifically for these duties. Due to the unpredictable frequency and duration of hospital watch assignments, staff coverage must primarily be maintained on overtime in order to ensure continuous custody and public safety responsibilities. As reflected in the chart above, the operational costs associated with maintaining custody of occupants requiring medical treatment beyond the capabilities of the MCJ and Wellpath continue to occur frequently and place additional pressure on overtime expenditures.

The change in the overtime payout policy for FLSA Exempt and Non-Exempt employees is also expected to increase overtime expenditures. Under the revised policy, overtime accrued during the calendar year and not utilized must be paid out within the same year earned, eliminating the prior ability to defer these costs into future fiscal periods. While MDSA members are not included in this policy change, the revised payout structure will continue to impact operational personnel expenditures.

MCSO continues to evaluate operational staffing strategies in an effort to balance staffing coverage requirements, employee leave utilization, recruitment, retention, and overtime utilization while maintaining mandated public safety operations. However, ongoing staffing shortages, increasing personnel costs, and operational service demands continue to place pressure on staffing resources and overtime expenditures necessary to maintain required service levels. These challenges continue to reflect operational underfunding, as available staffing and budgetary resources have not kept pace with the actual demands required to sustain mandated public safety operations.

Recruitment and retention efforts continue to be impacted by the operational demands associated with maintaining mandated public safety operations. Extended staffing hours, mandatory coverage requirements, and increasing competition among law enforcement agencies for qualified candidates continue to create challenges in attracting and retaining personnel necessary to sustain operational staffing levels.



The MCSO overtime/staffing issues are multidimensional and cyclical in nature

The courts mandate 1-2 bailiffs per courtroom, and attempts to reduce court case backlogs means that deputies are often pulled from Patrol/Airport/etc. to cover the mandated bailiff positions

Increasing the time occupants spend outside of their cells improves the wellbeing of occupants but also creates a greater need for more staffing

Recent activity (e.g. = crime, reckless driving, park incidents, etc.) is resulting in:

- More demand for freeway patrol
- Demand for Parks unit expansion
- Criminal investigations work
- Greater jail population
- More court cases

The Sheriff's Office have many responsibilities that are often overlooked:

- 24/7 Jail Operations
- 24/7 Freeway Patrol
- 24/7 Airport Security
- Courthouse/Safety Building Security
- Criminal Investigations
- Seasonal Expansion of Parks Patrol
- Civil Service/Serving Court Papers
- Warrant Arrests
- 24/7 Hospital Watches (which are not budgeted)

Options Currently in Process of being implemented to Reduce OT Deficit

- a. **MCSO:** The 2026 adopted budget included 9.0 additional Bailiff positions for the Courts Division. Due to the length of the recruitment, hiring, academy, and certification process, the full operational impact of these positions is not expected to be realized for approximately 18 months from hire date to full deployment.

- b. MCSO is also in the process of implementing online Sheriff Sales. Currently, one deputy is required to attend Sheriff Sales in person, with staffing needs varying based on weekly sales volume. Transitioning these functions online is expected to reduce staffing coverage requirements and operational backfill needs associated with these assignments.

Conclusion

MCSO continues to actively pursue operational improvements and staffing strategies aimed at reducing overtime utilization while maintaining mandated public safety services. Recruitment initiatives, staffing adjustments, process improvements, and operational efficiencies continue to be evaluated and implemented across the agency in an effort to address ongoing staffing and operational challenges.

While the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office continues to implement operational strategies intended to reduce overtime and improve efficiency, these efforts alone cannot fully offset the ongoing increases in personnel costs, wage rates, training requirements, and mandated staffing demands.

As noted in the Five-Year Financial Forecast 2026–2030 prepared by the Office of the Comptroller, review of historical operating hours within the Sheriff's Office indicates that overtime deficits are more likely the result of structural underfunding rather than excessive overtime usage. Despite increased salaries and staffing levels across the County over the past several years, overtime challenges have continued to increase as operational demands and mandated service levels remain high.

Long-term reduction in overtime expenditures will require operational funding and staffing resources that more accurately align with the actual cost of maintaining required public safety operations and mandated service levels.