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FEDERAL CORRECTIONS IN FOCUS: OVERSIGHT OF THE BUREAU OF PRISONS

JOINT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE

JOINT WITH THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

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FEDERAL CORRECTIONS IN FOCUS: OVERSIGHT OF THE BUREAU OF PRISONS

Tuesday, May 6, 2025

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE

JOINT WITH THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

Washington, DC

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:14 a.m., in Room 2141, Rayburn House Office Building, the Hon. Jefferson Van Drew [Chair of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Van Drew, Biggs, Jordan, Moore, Onder, Schmidt, Gill, Tiffany, Kiley, Lee, Knott, Crockett, McBath, Raskin, Moskowitz, Johnson, Goldman, and Cohen.

Mr. VAN DREW. Good morning. The Oversight and Crime Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee will come to order. Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess at any time.

We welcome everyone to today's hearing on oversight of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The Chair now recognizes the gentleman from the great State of Kansas, Mr. Schmidt, to lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance. Please stay risen; we are going to have a moment of silence afterward.

ALL. I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Mr. VAN DREW. Moment of silence.

[Moment of silence.]

Mr. VAN DREW. I will now recognize myself for an opening statement.

I want to welcome everyone to today's joint hearing. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today, especially those who have served or are currently serving in our Federal correctional institutions and are working from the outside to support and enhance the Bureau of Prisons, which, God help us, it needs. I welcome those officers and employees from the Bureau of Prisons who join us in the gallery or watching from across the country.

This week marks National Corrections Officers Week. It's a time when we should honor the professionalism, the discipline, and the sacrifice of those who serve behind those walls. The men and women who staff our Federal prisons are law enforcement officers in every sense of the word. They walk the toughest beats in the United States of America. It is our duty to ensure that they have the tools, the training, and the leadership they need to do their jobs safely and effectively.

Let me be blunt. The Bureau of Prisons is not a system in need of some minor improvements. It is in need of a true reckoning.

That's not my opinion. It's a fact. The DOJ Inspector General has published over 100 reports since the early 2000s documenting the systemic failure of the Bureau of Prisons: Deteriorating facilities, chronic understaffing and failure to retain staff, low morale, breakdowns in safety, and resource mismanagement.

This hearing is an opportunity to begin that work in earnest that we need to do. It should not only be an apolitical exercise. It is a roadmap and an educational and constructive platform for the new Director of the Bureau of Prisons, Mr. William K. Marshall, III.

Director Marshall steps into this role at a pivotal and promising moment. With decades of public service in corrections, decades of experience, and he will be useful and helpful. Director Marshall now has the opportunity to chart a bold, credible, and accountable path into the future.

To frame today's discussion, I want to identify some of the specific challenges that require urgent attention.

First, staffing. The Bureau is currently operating with thousands of vacancies, including nearly 6,000 fewer staff than its authorized level. This is not sustainable to go in this direction.

As I've worked on this issue over the years, I've come to learn a lot about correctional officers, not just what they do, but what they endure. I'm going to give you some stats. I was in the State Senate, I was in the State legislature in the State of New Jersey for 16 years, and we had the prison gang task force. We went to every single prison in the State of New Jersey and to see what they had to put up with, what was going on, and the challenges they had. It was a real eye-opener for me. I have always had a special place in my heart for correctional officers.

We know their life span is shorter. Correctional officers, on average live to just 59 years old, nearly 20 years below the national average. I know their rates of suicide are higher. The rate is more than seven times the national average. I know they get sick more. Stress, sleep deprivation, and trauma drive higher rates of heart disease and high blood pressure. I know they get divorced more often. Their divorce rate outpaces nearly every other law enforcement official. I know they get paid less. In New Jersey, I know for a fact Federal correction officers make nearly—just about half of what their State counterparts earn. This job has a price. These men and women pay this price every day.

Second, physical infrastructure. From broken security doors to outdated HVAC systems, our institutions deteriorate daily. The Inspector General estimates a multibillion dollar backlog in critical repairs all across the 122 BOP institutions. Some of these prisons actually cost more now to maintain than they are actually worth.

That's a waste of taxpayer dollars, and real solutions are needed to ensure that government facilities are both safe and efficient.

Third, accountability and reform implementation. Congress recently passed the bipartisan Federal Prison Oversight Act, creating an independent ombudsman to handle complaints. That office has yet to be set up.

The Bureau has also been tasked with implementing the First Step Act to ensure public confidence in Federal detention. Thankfully, the Trump Administration has recognized the urgent need to course correct.

For example, under President Trump's leadership, the Bureau has reversed misguided policies from the previous administration, including restoring the principle that Federal inmates will be housed according to their biological sex and eliminating taxpayer-funded gender ideology in our prisons. It does not belong there.

Additionally, a new interagency agreement with DHS and ICE is helping to alleviate the border crisis by utilizing BOP facilities to house illegal immigrants. It's a prudent use of existing resources during unprecedented times.

There is a lot more progress to be made. Director Marshall and his team now have both the mandate and the responsibility of finishing the job.

When Federal prisons are mismanaged, it affects communities, victims, and law enforcement across the United States of America. I've seen it myself in my own district. South Jersey is home to FCI Fairton, where I've heard currently from officers and families on the ground who are deeply concerned about the future of the institution itself and maintaining professionalism and their profession.

Fairton is designed specifically, now, to house inmates who can't be placed in the general population for a variety of reasons. Gang dropouts would be in trouble if they were in the general population, sex offenders, and former law enforcement officials.

This facility is facing a wide range of issues. The chronic understaffing and rising inmate numbers have created an increasingly unsafe environment for everyone on the inside. These conditions put correctional officers at risk every single day of the week. What's happening at Fairton is not unique. It's symptomatic. It's a reflection of what's happening across the Federal system across the country.

We are committed to ensuring that the Bureau of Prisons operates with integrity, transparency, and respect for both its workforce and respect for the rule of law. To every correctional officer here listening today and around the country, your service matters. We see your sacrifice, and we will not let this opportunity pass without pushing for real and lasting change that reflects the seriousness of your issues and your job.

I'd like to say too, I believe that this is an area where on some issues, not on all, but on some issues where we can come together in a bipartisan way. There will be issues in which we disagree, but I do believe there are issues in which we come together.

I want to thank you for that. I will now recognize the Ranking Member—I want to make sure I get this right—the Ranking Member, yes, Ms. Crockett, for her opening statement.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you so much for your opening.

I think that we are living in a time in which the American people are hoping that we can agree on something, anything, in Congress. The fact is, the vast majority of your opening statement I could not disagree with. The question is, while we agree that there is a problem, let's hope that Congress can do what we are supposed to do, which is agree on a solution.

Today's hearing could not come at a timelier moment, with this being National Correctional Officers Week. Thank you to all our correctional officers.

Today, approximately 35,000 correctional officers and staff are under the control of the Bureau of Prisons. During the last 100-plus days of this administration, we've seen just how little Trump cares about the BOP staff's ability to do their job overseeing and protecting roughly 155,000 incarcerated people in our Federal prison system.

Having been a former public defender and civil rights attorney, I can tell you that I have seen the inside of a few prisons myself. I've seen the conditions these individuals are living in, I've seen the conditions that staff are working under, and based on my experience, I can tell you correctional officers' staff have one of the most difficult jobs, as well as the most dangerous. These jobs are now only getting harder.

Just 2½ months ago, Ms. Kathleen Toomey, the Deputy Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, testified before Congress that the Bureau had over 4,000 vacant positions that need to be filled. Yet, rather than doing anything to ensure adequate staffing and protect officers and inmates, Trump's Justice Department terminated the Bureau's incentive pay plan, effectively cutting Bureau officers' and other employees' pay anywhere between 10–25 percent. This plan, of course, helped to retain and recruit people for jobs within the BOP.

On March 27, 2025, Trump issued an Executive Order eliminating BOP's labor union, which is comprised of roughly 30,000 officers and staff. All this comes after U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) added the BOP to its 2025 high-risk list in January due to all the problems the BOP is facing.

The GAO highlighted BOP's quote,

> Long-standing staffing challenges present a serious threat to the safety of staff and incarcerated people. BOP also faces challenges with aging and deteriorating infrastructure, which, likewise, affects safety. It also needs improvements in planning for programs to prepare incarcerated persons for release. Better monitoring and evaluation are needed to improve management of the Federal prison system.

Does Trump take these issues and threats to safety seriously? Absolutely not. Instead, he made the deranged, delusional decision over the weekend to open Alcatraz as a prison that was literally shut down because it was too expensive and too impractical to run. Honestly, you can't make this stuff up.

Please tell me how any of this makes sense. Stripping Bureau employees of their collective bargaining rights; cutting pay and benefits at a time where the Bureau was ranked the worst place to work among all Federal subagencies and offices—and we have

more than 450 offices—having staff like prison teachers, cooks, nurses, and monitors being forced to serve as correctional officers because BOP has too few officers to actually do the job; wanting to place even more of a strain on the system by trying to house migrants and children in Bureau facilities. It's absolutely ridiculous.

Let me be clear. This isn't just a staff issue. It's a life or death issue. Reports by the Justice Department's Inspector General detailed how over a third of the inmate suicides that occurred between fiscal years 2014–2021, BOP staff didn't sufficiently conduct the required inmate rounds or counts to check on the inmates.

Let me tell you all something. Realizing this fact took me back. I don't know what it's like to be a family member and to receive that phone call about your loved one that you would imagine is in one of the safest places ever, regardless of why they are there, and to find out that they somehow committed suicide. I don't know what it's like to be that loved one, but I do know what it's like to be that attorney and to get that call, to get the call that one of my clients somehow has managed to, unfortunately, take his life. This is unacceptable, and who knows how many lives could be saved.

While all this is bad on its own, let's not forget about the fact that, in all of the 120 correctional institutions under the Bureau's control, each needs some kind of repair at any given time, like Seagoville Federal Correctional Institution in Texas, for example, which is close to my district. Six of the eight buildings housing inmates had broken air-conditioning units during the summer where temperatures in Texas facilities can reach up to 110 degrees, and at least one unit topped 149 degrees.

We need to get to the bottom of this and fix this organization before more and more deaths occur. Today's hearing is one of the few moments where actually I believe we can do something good in Congress, and I hope we do today, because at the end of the day, this is about doing what's right. It's about protecting employees, it's about protecting lives, it's about ensuring we give people a second chance at life.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to participating in this important discussion.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you. I will now recognize the Chair of the Crime Subcommittee, from the great State of Arizona, Andy Biggs.

Mr. BIGGS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I thank the Members of both Subcommittees for coming together this morning. I thank Chair Van Drew for his opening remarks. I thank the witnesses for being here and appreciate you; look forward to your testimony today.

Today's hearing is titled, "Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons." This hearing will serve as a robust continuation of the oversight this Committee conducted over BOP during the 118th Congress. I look forward to continuing that important work today.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons, BOP, is a component of the Department of Justice. BOP's mission is to protect society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prisons and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, cost-efficient, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abid-

ing citizens. It's critical that the BOP holds people accountable, while also preparing those who will reenter society.

This week we honor and celebrate National Correctional Officers Week and recognize correctional employees, the brave men and women who continue so much—excuse me—who contribute so much to public safety. Unfortunately, we know corrections officers continue to work difficult and demanding jobs between staffing shortages and crumbling infrastructure throughout its facilities.

The staff recruitment and retention remain a major challenge for BOP. While BOP has attempted initiatives to boost recruitment and retention, BOP still has thousands of vacancies, including nearly 6,000 fewer staff than its authorized level. It's no secret that morale is low, and that causes ripple effects across all the Bureau.

To those corrections officers listening or watching or are here today, we see you, we hear you, we appreciate you, we thank you, and we hope that this hearing can serve as a starting point that will lead to a better workplace with better conditions.

One of the ways to move toward a better BOP is to implement oversight and accountability. We've heard concerning allegations about the BOP misappropriating funds. We've seen this before; those at the top of government using taxpayer funds to benefit themselves. The BOP needs accountability and transparency through true fiscal responsibility, not turning a blind eye to all the existing issues.

Thankfully, there's hope and optimism with Director Marshall. We look forward to working with him to restore trust in the BOP and bring it back to its original mission.

The BOP is also charged with much of the implementation of the First Step Act. The First Step Act was signed into law by President Trump and seeks to reduce the size of the Federal prison population and reduce recidivism while still maintaining public safety.

The First Step Act required DOJ to develop a system for BOP to use to assess the risk of recidivism of Federal prisoners and to assign prisoners to evidence-based recidivism reduction programs. These programs include literacy programs, occupational education programs, trade skill programs, and substance use disorder programs.

This is why I said BOP needs to make sure they get this right. We cannot allow individuals to leave our prisons early unless we can ensure that they will not reoffend. The Crime Subcommittee has examined the implementation of the First Step Act on a bipartisan basis since its passage, and this oversight of BOP continues today with more urgency and focus than ever before.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses. Again, I thank you.

Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes the Ranking Member of the Crime Subcommittee, from the great State of Georgia, Lucy McBath.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. We really appreciate your time and your effort.

Mr. Chair, I thank you for having this hearing on the oversight of the Bureau of Prisons. While it's not been long since we last discussed this issue, the problems in our Federal prisons, many of

which are decades in the making, continue to demand our attention.

The many issues faced by the BOP are the result of year after year of extremely limited resources. At a time when the President and his allies in Congress are talking about radical cuts, it's critical that we take note of how a severely limited budget has already affected the health and safety of everyone who enters a the BOP facility.

There are more than 150,000 Federal inmates and more than 35,000 BOP staff members depending on us to give them the tools and resources that they need to keep everyone safe and even themselves. Far too often the BOP has not guaranteed the basic safety of everyone in its care.

These failures have often fallen especially hard on women in BOP custody, like those at Federal Corrections Institution, Dublin, California. For years, women at FCI Dublin faced horrific sexual abuse, including harassment, coerced sexual activity, and even rape. Inmates who tried to speak up faced harsh retaliation, and those responsible managed to cover up their conduct for years.

Seven correctional officers, including the prison's warden, have been sentenced as a result of the years of misconduct, but the abuse faced by their victims cannot be undone.

Last April, BOP abruptly shut down FCI Dublin, in some cases sending inmates far from their families and the lawmakers that were working to help them—excuse me—lawyers that were working to help them. Some reported being singled out and bullied at their new facilities, such as being denied soap, served worse food, and being forced to sleep on soiled beds, all because they were perceived as speaking out against the abuses that shut down FCI Dublin.

Earlier this year, a judge signed a consent decree that, among other things, requires the BOP to report on the medical and mental health of former Dublin inmates, ensure that they have access to rape crisis centers, review their disciplinary records, expunge all disciplinary actions that were actually retaliation, and limit the inappropriate use of solitary confinement potentially used to retaliate against them or isolate them so they might be subject to further abuse.

We must ensure that we do not allow an incident like this to ever, ever happen again. Safety is simply the bare minimum. The vast majority of imprisoned people will eventually be released and rejoin our communities. How they spend their time in prison has a profound effect on who they will be when they are released.

This was a basic premise of the First Step Act, a bipartisan bill that provided more opportunities for inmates to make the most of their time through evidence-based programs that reduce recidivism. These programs help inmates get the treatment for addiction, gain job skills, learn how to read, strengthen their family relationships, and learn how to resolve conflicts, inmates who put in their time and effort to improve themselves that they could earn an earlier release.

The First Step Act was a historic step toward providing better opportunities for rehabilitation that will ultimately benefit all our

communities, because more people will come out of prison prepared to make better choices and turn away from crime.

Despite challenges in implementation, that positive change is already happening. An analysis by the Council on Criminal Justice found that people who participated in the First Step Act programs and were released early were 55 percent less likely to commit another crime.

If this administration and congressional Republicans don't follow through by investing in the First Step Act, they'll be locking people up without any plan for them for the future. This country would be stuck in an old, failed policy in which prisons would be dangerous, hostile places for inmates and staff, and inmates would be released without any more skills and even less hope than what they came in with.

If we don't invest in the First Step Act, a bipartisan bill that's signed into law by President Trump, then we are setting people up to fail even before they're released from custody. It doesn't have to be this way.

The First Step Act can unlock a future with fewer people incarcerated, more people contributing to their communities, and safer places for all of us to live. We must invest in the First Step Act to be sure that it reaches its full potential.

Likewise, we must fund the Federal Prison Oversight Act, a bipartisan law that I was proud to lead, which was signed into law last year. This law will require the Department of Justice's Inspector General to assess the risk of problems at our BOP facilities, to inspect high-risk facilities more frequently, to provide recommendations to fix the problems, and to report its findings and recommendations to Congress and to the public. The law requires the BOP to respond to all inspection reports within 60 days with a corrective action plan.

This overhaul of BOP oversight can ensure the health and safety of everyone in BOP facilities and is especially important to uncover misconduct like what occurred at FCI Dublin, and to find it much earlier so that swift action can be taken to protect victims and discipline those who do not fulfill their duty to treat inmates with basic human and dignity—human dignity.

This law will only take effect—yes, once again—unless it is funded. We already have bipartisan agreement that this is the right action to take to address the BOP's problems. We must continue this bipartisanship in investing in better oversight of the BOP by providing funding that will make the Federal Prison Oversight Act actually a reality.

Together, I truly believe, I know that we cannot only improve the BOP but improve the lives of those who serve time in the facilities so they can choose to turn their lives around and contribute to their communities, which are all our communities.

I'd like to—I have a unanimous consent request I'd like to enter into the record.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you.

It's a unanimous consent to enter into the record a letter dated May 5, 2025, led by The Sentencing Project and signed by 12 other justice—

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you. Thank you so much for your time and your interest today. I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. I will now call on the Ranking Member of the Committee of the whole, from the great State of Maryland, Mr. Raskin.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you very kindly, Chair Van Drew. Welcome to our witnesses. Thanks to the Ranking Members, Ms. McBath and Ms. Crockett, as well.

I'm going to start with a couple of unanimous consent requests. One is to enter into the record an *Associated Press* article by Sarah Roebuck titled, "BOP slashes retention bonuses, impacting thousands of correctional officers.'"

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. RASKIN. Good. I don't mind if this comes out of my time, Mr. Chair. I just—because it leads into what I want to talk about.

The article "BOP slashes retention bonuses, impacting thousands of correctional officers." Roughly 23,000 were informed that their retention pay would be significantly reduced or eliminated entirely, with some workers seeing a pay decrease of up to 25 percent.

One other UC request to enter into the record, an article by Drew Friedman titled, "Days ahead of coming Bureau of Prison pay cuts, some employees are already resigning," *Federal News*.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you kindly.

Well, look, within his first 100 days, President Trump has made moves that I'm afraid will only exacerbate long-standing problems that interfere with the Bureau of Prisons' ability to safely incapacitate and rehabilitate its prisoners.

The President issued an Executive Order that rescinded the Biden Administration's prohibition on the BOP's continued use of private prisons, opening the door for a renewed reliance on private facilities where the Federal Government has little oversight and where inmates have been shown to be less safe and less able to access necessary medical care.

President Trump also unlawfully rescinded the collective bargaining rights of a huge number of Federal workers, more than a million Federal workers and Federal unions, including those representing the Bureau of Prison employees, essentially, stifling the voices of frontline officers during a period when their voices are very badly needed.

Once again, a Federal judge had to step in to block President Trump's Executive Order from taking effect after unions sued; one of now more than 130 court orders blocking the administration's violations of the law and the Constitution.

The administration also rescinded retention-based incentives for the BOP employees that amount to cuts, essentially, of around 25 percent of their pay rates. These cuts have triggered mass resignations among the BOP employees whose ranks were already stretched way too thin.

How can we expect to bolster the culture and the effectiveness of the BOP workforce if we slash their pay? Do any of us know of any institutions where that might work?

In the face of this mass resignation of correctional officers, the BOP will have to resort to even more, quote, "augmentation," which is the term describing use of employees other than correctional officers, people like nurses or teachers or cooks, to guard inmates, a stopgap measure which, obviously, undermines safety for everyone.

Facilities that are short-staffed rely also on facility-wide lockdowns more often and for longer periods of time. At the same time, because of this lack of resources, inmates do not have access to the treatment, medical care, and rehabilitative programming that Congress called for in the bipartisan First Step Act, which we're all so proud of.

Despite President Trump signing the First Step Act aimed at reducing the Federal prison population and aimed at reducing recidivism, the Bureau of Prisons also reduced the amount of time that inmates can spend in residential reentry centers from 18–19 months to a maximum of just 60 days, two months, citing budget constraints.

These residential reentry centers, or halfway houses, as they're colloquially known, perform a critical role in helping released inmates' transition back into communities across the country, providing housing, employment, substance and mental health treatment, professional counseling, and medical care. Drastically cutting the amount of time that people can actually use these services will certainly lead to a reduction in their efficacy and an increase in recidivism.

While the BOP has been forced to make devastating cuts that will affect not only employees and inmates but the safety of our communities, last week, the Judiciary Committee passed an $81 billion reconciliation bill to supercharge ICE, money that our colleagues voted to make available for arresting, detaining, and deporting, not just immigrants, but some U.S. citizens too.

Just two weeks ago, the Department of Justice terminated at least 365 public safety grants totaling in the hundreds of millions of dollars, cutting funds for law enforcement at the local level, opioid addiction treatment programs, programs promoting officer safety and wellness, programs for crime prevention, programs that support the victims of rape and sexual assault, and other violent crimes.

All of us, even apparently our Republican colleagues, were apparently blindsided by these deep cuts to existing programs that, as far as I can tell, came from a single DOGE employee.

During the Committee's consideration of reconciliation last week, I tried to restore funding to these critical grant programs through an amendment, which my colleagues failed to discuss and all voted to oppose.

I'm aware that our panel of witnesses has often worked together on criminal justice reform and to adjust the challenges facing the BOP. I look forward to hearing from you about these important issues.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you. Without objection, all other opening statements will be included in the record.

We are now going to proceed with the introduction of today's witnesses. Again, thank you all for being here. We do appreciate you.

Mr. Andy Potter. Mr. Potter is the Founder and Executive Director of One Voice United, an organization that advocates on behalf of corrections officers. He served for nearly 30 years as a correctional officer with the Michigan Department of Corrections.

Mr. Patrick Purtill. Mr. Purtill is the Executive Vice President and General Counsel of Unify.US, an organization that advocates for individual freedom, limited government, free enterprise, and American values. He is also the Charles Evans Hughes lecturer in politics and Codirector of the Washington Study Group at Colgate University.

Mr. Cody Wilde. Mr. Wilde is the Senior Vice President of correctional programs at the Prison Fellowship, an organization that works with prisoners, former prisoners, and their families. Mr. Wilde oversees Prison Fellowship correctional programming in approximately 1,200 prisons across all 50 States in the Union.

Mr. Kandia Milton. Mr. Milton is the Government Affairs Director at *Dream.Org*, an organization that advocates for criminal justice reform. He previously served as Deputy Mayor and Chief of Staff for the city of Detroit, Michigan.

We welcome our witnesses today. We thank them for appearing today. We will begin by swearing you in.

Would you please rise and raise your right hand.

Do you solemnly swear that under the penalty of perjury that the testimony you are about to give is true and correct to the best of your knowledge, information, and belief, so help you God.

OK. Thank you. Please be seated. Let the record reflect that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative.

Please know that your written testimony will be entered into the record in its entirety. Accordingly, we ask that you summarize your testimony in five minutes.

We will begin with Mr. Potter.

STATEMENT OF ANDY POTTER

Mr. POTTER. Mr. Chair, Ranking Members, and the distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Andy Potter, and I serve as the Founder and Executive Director of One Voice United, a national organization committed to lifting up the voices and expertise of corrections professionals and ensuring that they are a part of the national conversations that are shaping the future of corrections.

Before founding One Voice United, I spent nearly 30 years working inside the correctional facilities as an officer and later as a labor leader in Michigan. Those experiences, combined with years of traveling the country and listening to thousands of correctional officers and staff, have given me a deep appreciation for the work that they do, and the clear view of the systematic challenges that continue to impact corrections at every level.

Today, corrections as a profession is at a crossroads. From the county jails and State prisons to the Bureau of Prisons, we are seeing an unprecedented convergence of issues that threaten the overall mission and health of our corrections system across the United States. The chronic understaffing has forced employees to work ex-

hausting amounts of overtime, often leading to burnout, safety risk, and declining morale.

New recruits have become increasingly difficult to attract and even harder to retain, with many agencies losing a staggering number of good people within the first 18 months of service. It's a problem that touches every corner of our country and every layer of our system.

At the same time, the physical infrastructures inside many facilities continues to deteriorate, and employees and those incarcerated are asked to live and work in facilities that are not equipped for the demands of today's correctional environment. When conditions deteriorate such as they have, it sends a harmful message about the value we place on their safety and their well-being.

Compounding these issues is a deeper, more difficult challenge, the erosion of job satisfaction, and connection to a larger purpose. Increasingly, employees report that they feel isolated and disconnected from the mission of rehabilitation and more like expendable cogs in a machine. The result is a workforce that is overburdened physically, stretched to its breaking point mentally, and demoralized emotionally.

However, despite the seriousness of these challenges, I believe this is also a moment of tremendous opportunity. We have the chance right now through leadership, collaboration, and honest engagement to chart a better path forward for the corrections profession and the broader system that it serves.

A critical part of that effort must be investing in 21st century training and comprehensive employee wellness programs that are designed with the direct input of the employees themselves. They must be integrated into the culture of every department and facility, with consistent funding, evaluations, and leadership commitment.

Equally important is restoring the meaning and pride in corrections work. When employees are treated as stakeholders, when their expertise is valued and their voices are heard in the shaping of policies, it builds a sense of agency and purpose that cannot be replaced otherwise. Without that buy-in, even the best-intended reforms or culture change will struggle to take hold.

We believe in the power of collaboration between employees and those who might represent them, administrators, legislators, advocates, and communities to drive lasting change. No single entity can solve these changes alone.

In closing, if we're willing to truly engage with one another and lift up the real-world experiences of those who know this work best, then One Voice United stands ready to assist however we can.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak here today, and I'll stand ready for any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Potter follows:]

Statement of Andy Potter
Founder & Executive Director
One Voice United

Before the Joint Subcommittee on
Crime and Federal Government Surveillance & Subcommittee on Oversight
of the House Judiciary Committee

Committee Hearing on "Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons"

May 6, 2025

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Andy Potter, and I serve as the Founder and Executive Director of One Voice United, a national organization committed to lifting up the voices and expertise of corrections professionals and ensuring they are part of the national conversations shaping the future of corrections.

Before founding One Voice United, I spent nearly 30 years working inside a correctional facility as an officer and later as a labor leader in Michigan. Those experiences, combined with years of traveling the country and listening to thousands of correctional officers and staff, have given me a deep appreciation for the work they do, and a clear view of the systemic challenges that continue to impact corrections at every level

I also want to take a moment to recognize that this week marks forty-one years since the first National Corrections Officers Week was proclaimed — a time set aside each May to honor the service, sacrifices, and vital contributions of those who work behind the walls to keep our communities safe.

Today, corrections as a profession is at a crossroads. From county jails to the Bureau of Prisons, and every state system in between, we are seeing an unprecedented convergence of issues that threaten not just staffing levels, but the overall mission and health of our corrections systems. Chronic understaffing has forced employees to work exhausting amounts of overtime, often leading to burnout, safety risks, and declining morale. New recruits have become increasingly difficult to attract and even harder to retain, with many agencies losing a staggering number of good people within the first 18 months of service. In fact, a 2024 survey conducted by the

American Correctional Association Research Council, revealed that security officer vacancy rates reached a high of 55% and turnover rates among active staff were as high as 48%. It's a problem that touches every corner of our country and every layer of our system.

At the same time, the physical infrastructure inside many facilities continues to deteriorate, and the employees and those incarcerated, are asked to live and work in facilities that are not equipped for the demands of today's correctional environment, and are simply not conducive to safety and rehabilitation. When the conditions in which people work deteriorates, such as they have, it sends a damaging message about the value we place on their safety and well-being.

Compounding these issues is a deeper, more difficult challenge, the erosion of job satisfaction and connection to a larger purpose. Increasingly, staff report that they feel isolated and disconnected from the mission of rehabilitation and public service that once brought them into the field. They feel like expendable cogs in a machine rather than partners in a shared effort to keep our communities safe and offer second chances. The result is a workforce that is overburdened physically, stretched to its breaking point mentally, and demoralized emotionally.

Correctional officers face the highest rates of PTSD, suicide, divorce, and substance abuse of any public safety profession. These are people working every day in high-stress, high-risk environments, exposed to trauma and danger, yet often without meaningful wellness support or recognition of the issues they face.

However, despite the seriousness of these challenges, I believe this is also a moment of tremendous opportunity. Across the country, there is growing recognition that real, meaningful change is both necessary and possible. We have the chance right now, through leadership, collaboration, and honest engagement to chart a better path forward for the corrections profession and the broader system it serves.

A critical part of that effort must be investing in 21st Century training and comprehensive employee wellness programs that are designed with the direct input of employees themselves. True wellness initiatives can no longer be an afterthought or a box to check. They must be integrated into the culture of every department and facility, with consistent funding, evaluation, and leadership commitment.

Equally important is restoring meaning and pride in corrections work. When employees are treated as stakeholders, when their expertise is valued and their voices are heard in shaping policy, it builds a sense of agency and purpose that cannot be replicated otherwise. Front-line employees know better than anyone what's working and what isn't, and engaging them early and often will be critical to achieving any sustainable reform and culture change

Stakeholder engagement isn't just a good management practice, it can be the difference between success and failure. When the people asked to carry out a system's mission feel respected,

included, and invested in, they become partners in its success. Without that buy-in, even the best-intentioned reforms and culture change will struggle to take hold.

We believe in the power of collaboration between employees and those who might represent them, administrators, legislators, advocates, and communities to drive lasting change. No single department, union, or organization can solve these challenges alone. It will take a shared commitment, fueled by respect, transparency, and a willingness to listen to the people doing the job every day.

This is a pivotal time, but it is also a hopeful one. If we are willing to truly engage with one another and lift up the real-world experiences of those who know this work best, One Voice United stands ready to assist however we can. I am confident we can build a corrections system that is safer, stronger, and more effective for everyone it touches — corrections professionals, incarcerated individuals, families, and the communities we all serve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. I look forward to any questions you may have.


ONE VOICE UNITED
Blue Ribbon Commission Report
2022

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INTRODUCTION

FROM OVU FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ANDY POTTER

The OVU Blue Ribbon Commission Hearing on Correctional Officer Wellness is a prime example of One Voice United's approach and work at its best.

One Voice United's mission is to provide a platform for Correctional Officers and professional staff to have their voices heard and their concerns addressed in the ongoing debates over reforming our correctional system. Founded in 2016, OVU is dedicated to forging a path in which corrections staff and reform leaders can work together to transform our system of incarceration from a broken one that harms everyone it touches to a system that is rooted in human dignity. Our primary goals are grounded in seeking to bring a broad range of stakeholders together to create (from a system that was not designed for success for anyone) a new system that is sustainable, and more dignified, than the one that is currently doing so much damage to so many people.

This first-of-its-kind Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) was designed to shed light on the deadly wellness crisis that is sweeping through our correctional system, yet not seen by most Americans. By calling on OVU's vast network of partners and allies, the BRC was a rare opportunity to hear first hand stories from directly impacted officers, testimony from some leading experts on correctional wellness, and remarks from several prominent leaders and advocates working across the criminal justice landscape.

It was an honor to be joined by this distinguished panel of Blue Ribbon Commissioners. Their titles, words of affirmation, networks, spheres of influence and commitment to work towards officer wellness are demonstrative of the power that comes from relationships. We are also deeply grateful to the seven panelists who joined us to share their personal experiences and perspectives. Thanks to their courage and bravery, we feel we have taken an important leap in our collective effort to bring more awareness and action to this crisis in corrections.

On behalf of the entire OVU team, I feel privileged to have been part of such a momentous gathering and hope that our efforts will ignite more stakeholders to begin to recognize and address this crisis. It is our hope that sharing this report will provide an opportunity to inspire officers and staff and add much needed momentum to our movement.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AS REFLECTED ON BY COMMISSIONER JULIENE JAMES

On May 13, 2022 I had the honor of participating in One Voice United's Blue Ribbon Commission hearing on Correctional staff Wellness. I will never forget it. Throughout the day, I heard from corrections officers, families, and experts on the harmful effects of the prison environment on those who work there. I was struck by the commonality between those who work there and those who are incarcerated there. They all experience the same environment, and it does not discriminate in its effects. The witnesses shared their pain and trauma using such vivid language, it took my breath away. Here are a few of their words:

"The enemy is the environment, not the population."

"The rain doesn't care whether you're a prisoner or a CO. You all get wet."

"It's like second hand smoke–we may not be smokers, but we all get cancer."

"We're not people with lives outside. We're a body that the system needs."

"There should be a warning label before we sign up for this job."

"Even when I'm home, I'm not home."

"We need help."

There it was. An entire workforce paying with their health and their lives, simply for an opportunity to support their families and have a career. The tragedy of the situation is bigger than that. This workforce is meant to support the rehabilitation of those who are incarcerated. Yet they are in no position to help others heal. They are enduring a mass trauma of their own. In the words of one expert witness, "we're kidding ourselves if we think correctional staff can do rehabilitation."

How did we get here? It wasn't an accident. Those who have studied the origins of mass incarceration understand that a series of policy choices designed to get "tough on crime" led to this moment. Those policy choices had no basis in research and were propelled by racist narratives equating Blackness with criminality. After years of this failed experiment, studies consistently show that American-style incarceration does not deliver public safety. As counterintuitive as it may seem, reducing prison populations can both increase public safety and decrease the harms experienced by officers, incarcerated people, and all of their families and communities.

The day ended on a hopeful note. Some participants shared their dreams for the future: self care and healing from trauma; inviting prosecutors and judges into prisons to see the conditions for themselves; education about mental health and addiction treatment to support the needs of everyone inside prisons; a more empathetic culture that allows officers to ask for help and get it; an entirely reimagined system. I was buoyed by a dream of my own: what if officers and currently and formerly incarcerated people linked arms to push for humane conditions? This joint force of impacted people just might tip the scales toward more just and dignified lives for all.

"When we leave here today, I want folks to go back and think about how we make real change. How do we take a system that's just broken, harming everyone that comes into contact with it and transform it? This awareness and call to action shouldn't just stop when everybody walks out of these doors. So, I ask that you just ponder and think about what's possible for the future."



- Andy Potter
Founder & Executive Director of
One Voice United opening the 2022 BRC

TRANSCRIBED PROGRAM

The following is a transcription from OVU's Blue Ribbon Commission. It has been lightly edited for clarity.

Moderator Simon Greer:
Good morning, everybody. I have the honor of moderating this first ever Blue Ribbon Commission. And I'm looking for anyone who wants to claim there has been a Blue Ribbon Commission on Correctional Wellness before, because I don't think so. Some people might be asking why we're here. And I'm not going to belabor the point with all the statistics out in the world, but I will start with a select few that set the context for this hearing.

Research has revealed the following... that n average, among corrections officers, three a week take their own lives. We also know that corrections officers suffer with a 34% PTSD rate, which is higher than any other profession in the United States. And the statistic that stays with me most, so if you leave with no other numerical take away from today please hear this, corrections officers have a life expectancy of about 59 years as compared to about 75 years for the average American, which means you sacrifice about 15 years of life expectancy just because you go to work in corrections.

Now, corrections officers will tell you, many of whom are here today, 'we know what we signed up for, it's tough job, we get that'. But no one said you have to give up 15 years of your life for making this your career.

And so, in short, that's why we're doing this commission - because it's a crisis.

We could have had this meeting among 20 of us, 50 of us, a hundred of us who all agree about everything. We could talk to ourselves. Which is kind of what we do these days - right? We find the people who agree with me, get together, talk trash about the other people, and be happy that we're right.

But our idea was, let's not do that. Let's do something different.

Let's bring together a cast of characters who do not agree on everyting, who may disagree fundamentally about some things.

And so, everyone in the audience and all the testifiers and all of the commissioners here today don't all agree. But wouldn't that be novel - that we could get together and say, we disagree about a lot of things, but the 15 years of life that corrections officers are giving up, that we can agree shouldn't go on and we can agree to do something about it.

And maybe if this diverse a crowd of people with this many different perspectives could agree that it's a crisis that can't go unaddressed, maybe we can actually do something about it. That's why we're having the commission.

Now, it's easy to say, well, we want people from a lot of different backgrounds, but it's also harder to do because we all have different language, we have different life experiences, we have different perspectives.

So I just want to ask everyone to take a deep breath and prepare to offer each other some grace.

Someone is likely going to use a word that you dislike and you might react - "they called us guards, can you believe it, again with us being called guards?". And yes, fair enough to feel triggered but later you can grab them and explain why you actually prefer to be called a corrections officer and talk about that with them. And someone else might say inmate and triggering others to jump in objecting that we no longer use that word but prefer to say incarcerated individual.

Our job here is not to pretend that those differences don't exist and not to say that they don't matter. Over time and in the context of relationships, we believe that you can talk to someone and say, this is why the language matters to me, this is why certain words have meaning. But the assumption isn't that we're all on the same page with the same language, the same training, the same background, the same life experience. We have differences. But that's what we believe makes change possible, because we can cross our differences to solve our pressing problem. So hopefully you'll all extend a little grace to each other.

And with that, I think we'll get started.

I'm going to give the commissioners an opportunity to introduce themselves, quickly saying their name and affiliation.

Commissioner Introductions:

- Ken Daly, CEO Guardian RFID
- David Pitts, Urban Institute senior research fellow
- Daniel Kennedy, President of the student body at Oberlin College.
- Brianna Nuhfer, Vice President for criminal justice reform at Stand Together
- Reverend Terrence Melvin, the president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and executive director for the AFL-CIO Racial Justice Task Force.
- Amanda Ripley. I'm a journalist who writes about conflict.
- Dr. Nneka Jones Tapia, managing director of Justice Initiatives at Chicago Beyond
- Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union.
- Rob English, senior organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation.
- Julie James, vice president of criminal justice at Arnold Ventures.
- David Safavian. I'm the general counsel for the American Conservative Union, and I'm the director of the Nolan Center for Justice at the American Conservative Union Foundation
- Juan Gomez, executive director and co-founder of Milpa, and part of the Coahuiltecan Nation out in Texas and northern Mexico.
- Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

Moderator Simon Greer:
I'm going to invite our first panel of testifiers to come up and join us: Stephen Walker, William Young, Millie Brown is not here today with us but her colleague Tara Keaton will be offering her testimony, and Bryanna Mellen.

This first panel entitled I'm Not Okay, will share with you firsthand accounts from retired and current correctional staff and family members who all have firsthand experience with what it's like to work in and live in and around corrections.

For far too long the culture in corrections has been you just suck it up, you don't talk about it. Or maybe you tell war stories to kind of blow off steam, but to really tell your story firsthand and convey the impact that this life experience, this work experience has had on you is something we've done far too little. A lot of corrections officers will tell you, and I know some of them, they'll say, "I don't want to talk about that, I don't want to share that, I'll take care of it myself".

This is a brave, brave move by all four of you to be here today and to share your experience with the commission. I know the commissioners and the audience are super eager to hear from you. We know this is a career and a profession that has been overlooked and undervalued, and this is a chance for us to begin to turn that ship around.

So with that, I'm going to ask Stephen Walker to speak first.





TESTIFIER #1
STEPHEN WALKER

Morning Commissioners. Wellness is preventative care. I imagine that the prevention for a prep cook is fundamentally different than the prevention for a chain saw logger. So therefore, meaningful reform, meaningful prevention requires context. A need for research and understanding. To that point, I contend that we as a society endorse the intentional purpose and design of prison, understanding the context of an environment of punishment. With that, I'd like to pose a question to you. But first, looking at the credentials, the experience and insight in this room, and recognizing that for all of our work, study and insight, the complexities of the impact of prison are so vast and imperceptible that it will require our combined continued meditation and vetting for resolution. So my question is - how could a single correctional officer be expected to understand and process an environment that doesn't differentiate? And when it is real to them, they are most likely in crisis and questioning everything, including their own thoughts.

I can tell you that the correctional crisis centrifuge is debilitating.

My name is Stephen Walker. I raised the issue of experience, insight and crisis. My 35 years as an officer has vested a little of all of that in me. For context, I've been fired, suspended, assaulted, gassed, tased; intervened in fights, stabbings, riots. I've seen the loss of life. I almost lost my wife, my family and myself. As a union advocate I band aided the unidentified and misdiagnosed effects of stress, trauma and crisis in myself and in my fellow officers. But for the last 12 years, Mission One has been trying to find other individuals to help us raise the awareness of the impact of the correctional environment on people. That's why I'm here today. Wellness.

I believe that there are three issues that must be addressed in order to accomplish any sustainable or effective program. The first is contextual understanding. The second is a recognition of humanity. The third is collaboratively developed, research based educational services. So for the next few minutes, we're going to get deeper into the challenge. And that challenge is preventing and mitigating the undisclosed and under acknowledged harm the intentional design and operations of prisons perpetuates.

See, we all know there is a problem. But until recently, the fault of that failure fell at the feet of the individual officer. Again for context, may I ask, does anyone in here know anyone that wants to go to prison? Now, ask yourself why? And then why not? Apply that to the psyche of a correctional officer that actually does go to a prison every single day to the tune of about 2088 hours in a year. Again, context. If you sleep 8 hours a day throughout a year, that's 2920 hours.

It's time to shine some light into the subconscious closet of society. And acknowledge that the purpose and intention of prison is punishment, and from that is an environment that is anomalous to our societal structure, how we choose to live and engage with one another. It is also an environment that is essentially a minefield of fear, desperation, distrust and uncertainty. So until we can change prisons what suffers is our combined humanity. And at the leading edge of that humanity is the correctional officer.

Look, our officers come with good intentions. They come to satisfy basic necessities food, shelter, clothing, Disney plus. And to be self-sufficient, to grow out of our parents households. But we also come to be a contribution, to serve with honor. And that service comes laden with humanity, a humanity that presents sometimes as a fallacy of perfection that’s developed and or exacerbated by our academy process and our hiring process. We developed this black or white mentality, this us versus them, which leads, unfortunately, to cognitive dissonance. See, we developed this fault, this perception, that fault or failure is seen as an assault on our sense of identity. And, we believe that any admittance of weakness is a failure that could cost us everything. So all of our questioning thoughts, feelings and beliefs—we actively press down underneath things like, ‘Oh, you can handle it. Oh, ain’t no crying toughen up. Or, only crazy people need counseling.’

And the silent one that most of us don't know exists are ACEs - adverse childhood experiences, which are probably burning underneath each and every one of us. Which makes the next point, education, so vital. Agencies must have a pre genesis through exodus awareness and responsibility to the holistic wellbeing of its employees. They must intentionally, but sagaciously dispel the stigma surrounding self-care and within themselves they have to acknowledge that there are inherent mental and behavioral health dangers that arise out of this environment, and additionally acknowledge that the entry level knowledge, skills and ability that they intentionally hire for are probably insufficient to self care in this environment.

Unfortunately, since we're not starting from scratch, we're going to have to build this on the fly and the two engines of propulsion are research and education, and that's going to require partnerships because we as corrections have to acknowledge that the silos and the walls that we operate within and behind, got us here. And that mental and behavioral health is not our strength. So agencies must reach out to academia and mental and behavioral health organizations and work in concert. To evaluate the health and the harms of systems on people and use that same energy that they use for hiring and screening to make sure that we're healthy and disciplined when we're injured, and apply that to prevention and mitigation. And a key component of that has to be coordination, not control. They have to actively listen and engage and echo back for validation what they hear, but without judgment. Seeking ways to impose and then evaluate with mental and behavioral health practitioners and develop cross assessments and process back with the staff before you operationalize it. And develop assisted follow through not enforcement. See this is prevention and in prevention we normalize our conversations about how disease of this environment, generated in us, isn't happening to you. Now the choices are not simple, but they are clear.

Acts Chapter 16, verse 26 through 28 - I asked you, will you cry out and say, we are here? We can continue, as we have since around 62 A.D. on this trajectory or we can recognize there are human beings with feelings, frailties and good intentions. And take a chance on developing services that heed and protect humanity.

Now, knowing that my time is running out, I conclude that we need acknowledgment that the environment of prison has a deleterious impact on humanity, which is going to require coordinated partnerships, research,

intentionally developed services and support for people. I know it's going to be psychically numbing, but ...

we ask you not to give up on us.

Together, we can create meaningful prevention against the impacts of the prison environment.

In closing, I offer the assertion of the World Health Organization that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease of infirmity.

I had an epiphany as I was walking back in the rain, it wasn't raining when I left. You can be in the rain and the rain doesn't care if you're a correctional officer, or an incarcerated individual, it's going to soak you.

Thank you.



TESTIFIER #2
WILLIAM YOUNG

Good Morning.

It is an incredible honor and privilege to speak to you today in our nation's capital, on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of brave men and women who selflessly serve their communities behind the walls and the wire of the world's correctional facilities. Their dedication, their sacrifice, their struggles, and their strength, deserve to be recognized and rewarded and I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to publicly praise their efforts and officially, on the record, regard them as heroes.

Commissioners, my name is William Young and I've been a Correctional Officer for 17 years. I'm the author of two books, When Home Becomes a Housing Unit and The Nothing That Never Happened. In both books, I address and share examples of how this profession can negatively impact an officer's personal life, outside, out of uniform. I also host a podcast and create correctional content on YouTube with the intention of providing relevant and relatable information to aspiring, current, retired, or retiring correctional officers with a focus on highlighting the emotional damage that officer's incur from prolonged exposure to the correctional environment.
I appreciate you being here today and your willingness to entertain my testimony.

Shortly after I had published my first book, I received a message through Facebook. And this message, this communication, became a moment that I'll never forget. This message, this moment became a sobering source of motivation, reinforcing the importance of making the mental health and wellness of Correctional Officers a priority.

On Thursday, January 23, 2020, I was in my studio pretending to be productive when my phone vibrated. It was another message! I felt a flood of excitement rush through my body as my brain hit me with a tiny dose of dopamine. I love getting messages. I love interacting and engaging with my audience. I value their thoughts, their opinions, and their feedback, and I'm so appreciative when they take time out of their day to reach out and connect.

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Anticipating praise for my latest project, I grabbed my phone and flipped it over to see who had messaged me.

I opened up the message and had to stop reading it almost immediately. Seven words into the message my throat tightened and my eyes began to well up. Those first seven words were “I recently lost my husband to suicide”. This was not a “Hey I read your book and it was awesome” or a “How can I get a signed copy sent to me in Australia” type of message, this was different, this was real, this was one of my absolute worst nightmares coming to fruition on my phone.

Commissioners, have you ever had one of those moments when time stops and the silence of your surroundings becomes unbearable, a moment when you realize that you were in way over your head, a moment when you can’t find the words to adequately describe how you feel because you can’t feel a thing? This was that.

Frozen with fear and floating in my own head, I continued to read. The message read “I recently lost my husband to suicide. He was a correctional officer seeking help for correctional fatigue.”

The author of this message went on to say that her husband had been having some troubles at his facility, and that he had run into some situations that he wasn’t sure how to deal with. She said he had spoken to management in search of a solution, but instead of receiving help, he was reassigned to another area of the facility, to work with a lower custody level. There he patiently waited, for treatment, for support, for something. And that move, the change of atmosphere helped, a little, for a while. But unfortunately, the reality is, major injuries, serious symptoms of anxiety and depression rarely subside on their own overnight. We can’t just miraculously mend ourselves emotionally, regenerating the missing pieces like a starfish following a traumatic injury.

It became clear to me as I read on that her husband was fighting two different wars on two different fronts. On the one hand, he was wrestling with whatever had changed him, damaged him, whatever had affected him to the point that he realized that he couldn’t carry the weight of it by himself any longer and on the other hand, he was battling the stigma that surrounds Correctional Officers (*and other First Responders, Military, Emergency Service workers*) when they reach out for help.

I want to unpack that last paragraph so you understand what we're dealing with as we move forward with this conversation of the emotional and psychological impact of working in this profession.

As Officers, we are trained very well to do the job. We are shown how to handle the seizures and the stabbings and the searches. We are taught CPR/First Aid, tactical handcuffing, and Verbal Judo. We are shown where to stand when we're speaking with an inmate and how to extinguish a fire by pulling, aiming, squeezing, and sweeping.

Hours of instruction are given by dedicated professionals in an attempt to prepare us for the things that we'll encounter inside, on shift. But where we lack as a profession, is providing information and resources to staff about the emotional impact that responding to a medical emergency or a severe assault or an attempted or completed suicide can have on an Officer. We aren't told that these events will forever change us so when they do, when the nightmares come, when the self-isolation and the unwarranted agitation alter the way we interact with people off duty, we're caught off guard.

We're left fighting an enemy that we didn't even know existed, a threat we didn't know we were facing.

Sun Tzu, a Chinese General, military strategist, and author of The Art of War wrote "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

And that's the problem. We don't know our enemy. We're taught that the enemy is the population that we supervise, when in reality the enemy is the correctional environment in its entirety. Our enemy isn't just the fights and the felons, it's the culture. It's the colorless, cold, and unforgiving concrete that confines not only those incarcerated but us as well.

The tragedy is that by the time the husband of the woman who sent this message to me understood what was happening to him, he felt like it was too late. The enemy, the correctional environment had successfully snuck up

on him rendering him defenseless. In desperation he reached out to a fellow Correctional Officer.

Now a civilian or someone unfamiliar with the correctional career field may overlook the importance of him asking for help. An outsider may not understand the strength that it took for him to admit that there was a problem. Because in most professions, admitting that you're scared or stressed or that you have concerns with certain aspects of the job isn't a big deal. Outside, in other industries speaking to others about anxiety or depression isn't a career ending conversation but inside, in corrections, it can be.

See, there's this little thing called stigma that scares the crap out of people that work in the correctional profession. And stigma, in case you're not familiar, is, according to the Oxford Languages dictionary, a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.

The woman wrote in her message that her husband had reached out to a coworker despite that stigma, despite the risk of appearing weak, despite the shame, the disgrace, and the dishonor that he could've been subjected to. Despite the danger, he reached out and asked for help. She went on to say that the Officer that he reached out to and spoke with was familiar with my mission, my material, and gave him a copy of my book.

She said her husband took the book, brought it home, and read it cover to cover. And after finishing the book, he gave it to his wife and asked her to read it. He was once again reaching out. By giving the book to his wife to read and by saying that he could relate was him saying that he was hurting, that he needed help, that he wanted her to understand what it was that he was going through. He needed her to know where his head was at. He told her that he felt like a monster and that he hated it. He told her that there's so much that he wanted to say and talk about but he didn't feel like anyone would understand what he was going through.

That's the stigma. She wanted to understand, wanted to help him, but he told her that he felt he was too far gone for that.

Days after that conversation an argument erupted between the two of them. She wrote "I'm nine months pregnant with our first child and when he would snap into CO mode he wasn't himself..."

She said she had fixed him a sandwich and for some reason it angered him.

It sent him into a rage. It invoked an emotional response that was so explosive, so over the top that she wasn't sure what was happening. She said that her husband went to the bedroom and came back out with a gun in his hand. A gun that he had given to her for her birthday just a few months earlier. She wrote...

"He shot himself right in front of me."

Commissioners, after reading this, I felt so empty, so useless, so confused. All I could do was hang my head.

After consulting with my wife and conjuring up the courage, I called the woman and had a conversation with her about her husband. It was one of the hardest conversations I have ever had but I'm glad that I did. We talked about her husband and about her family and she thanked me for writing my book. She told me that what I was doing mattered. She said that what I was doing was important and that I needed to continue to reach out and to write and to communicate with Correctional Officers because there are those out there like her husband that are struggling and maybe, if we can catch them sooner, we can save them.

And that's what I'm trying to do. For her. For him. For us.

Commissioners, these stories are not unique, they are not anomalous.

Unfortunately, the testimonies that you have heard here this morning are the truth and the reality of countless correctional officers across the globe. We are fighting an enemy that we didn't even know existed, a threat we didn't know we were facing and we are in need of some help.

And that's where you come in. Through your offered ears, your open mind, and your willingness to participate in a conversation about a profession that is often unseen, you have already shown intention. You have already shown a semblance of support that is essential for us to push this movement forward, for us to finally receive the respect, the recognition, and the resources we deserve.

Commissioners, I will leave you with this.

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Henry G. Bohn wrote in his 1855 publication, A Hand-book of Proverbs that “The road to hell is paved with good intentions” and I agree. Without action, without follow-through, intentions to address the mental health and wellness of correctional officers are meaningless.

We need to act. Together we have the ability, the power to rescue, to salvage, to save the lives of correctional officers by creating a movement that challenges our current culture and cultivates an environment where staff are comfortable to a sk for help and are confident that they will find it.

Thank you.



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TESTIFIER #3
TARA KEATON
(READING TESTIMONY WRITTEN BY MILAGROS BROWN)

Good morning distinguished guests of the Blue-Ribbon Commission, my name is Milagros Brown. I have 20 years with the Connecticut Department of Corrections currently serving as a Lieutenant. I'm a member of CSEA/SEIU Local 2001 and President of the Correction Supervisors Council (CSC). I became involved with the union, almost from the beginning of my career, when a coworker invited me and picked me up to attend a meeting. As time went on, and I enjoyed helping others, I ran for election to be Secretary on the Executive Board. I served in that capacity for two years. I was eventually promoted to Lieutenant and joined the union which represents approximately 500 members consisting of Lieutenants, Captains, Counselor Supervisors, Parole Managers, and Deputy Wardens.

I come to you today in reference to the detrimental impact that this job has on Correctional employee's health, especially our mental health. The physical and mental consequences that result over the years working in this profession had already reached a severe point of crisis, which has only been intensified by the current pandemic. It is my hope that after providing you all with a greater understanding of the ways this work impacts our health, you can help to raise awareness around the need to develop programs and increase support for this workforce worldwide.

Correctional employees work in a very negative setting which takes a toll on our overall well-being. We are often required to work involuntary overtime, meaning 16-hours straight, which can only allow for 3 to 4 hours of sleep in between shifts. The effect minimal sleep has on an individual can cause you to be exhausted driving to and from work, less alert on the job, as well as decreased family time just to name a few things. It is also not uncommon to experience bodily fluids being thrown at you which may come in contact with your face. In some instances you may even be physically assaulted.
The staff working in our nation's prisons and jails are largely hidden from the public eye, considered essential employees in some instances and non-essential in others, despite the fact that our work doesn't change. For example, this workforce was considered critical infrastructure personnel who went into known congregate settings where Covid-19 existed and performed their daily duties without hesitation.

Telework was not an option as correctional facilities are operating twenty-four seven, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. With correctional employees suffering from high rates of PTSD, Depression and Substance Abuse under normal circumstances, it should come as no surprise that this workforce experienced even higher levels of stress during this timeframe. The fear of contracting Covid on the job, bringing it home to a loved one, or knowing that the possibility existed that a family member passed away from Covid and you unknowingly gave it to them, added stress. This along with the day-to-day operations within a correctional facility has a tremendous effect on all individuals, those both working and living in these facilities, and it also impacts their loved ones.

Prior to joining this union the members were working in collaboration with the University of Connecticut (UCONN) to develop a program designed by union members. The idea was to implement a program that would begin to address ways to obtain overall better health for this workforce. The program was started due to the fact that too many funerals needed to be attended due to staff deaths. Too many staff deaths.

The union wanted to find a way to promote a healthier lifestyle and help members restore a little bit each day. The first topic of discussion was sleep in which an app was created to monitor how much sleep the members were getting on a weekly basis. We currently have one day of Wellness Training incorporated in our contract. This one day of training has its curriculum developed and presented by the members. Since implementation we've had discussion on such topics as sleep, healthy eating tips, and mental health. Mental health is currently being discussed at this year's training and it seems to be the most talked about with our members. I believe this program has the potential to have great success as it's been developed and taught by the members currently working in this job force.

In closing I would like to express my gratitude to any union leaders, mental health workers, administrators, and legislators who have helped to establish correctional staff wellness programs. But sadly, these are the exception not the rule, and so I hope you can all join me in advocating strongly for the creation of programs and increased support for correctional employees and their families.

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Staff wellness programs should begin at the academy and continue through retirement...

and all correctional facilities should include annual training on mental health and stress reduction coping skills for all active-duty staff, including administrators.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today about this important matter.
Staff wellness programs should begin at the academy and continue through retirement, and all correctional facilities should include annual training on mental health and stress reduction coping skills for all active-duty staff, including administrators.

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TESTIFIER #4
BRYANNA MELLEN

Good morning. Thank you all for taking the time to be here today. My family's story is something that I wish I could say was rare. But unfortunately, tragedies like this affect corrections families far more than the general public realizes.

August 25th, 2011. My mom and I had been staying at my Aunt and Uncle's house for a few weeks with the hopes that it would finally convince my father to get the help that he truly needed. I had just gotten back from shopping with friends when my phone started ringing. It was my brother. I answered and the first words, he said were 'do you know why there are police and an ambulance at our house?' A neighbor had just called him, asking if we were okay. Knowing the state that my father was in I knew things instantly were not okay. I got into my car and drove about 90 miles per hour through our small town. I turned the corner onto our street and I saw our house surrounded by yellow tape. Every cop car in town and an ambulance in our driveway. I ran under the yellow tape and was practically tackled by a police officer. He asked me if I knew where my father would go if he was in trouble. I said I wasn't sure. They asked me if he owned any guns. I listed off what guns he owned and I heard over the radio that they thought one was missing. I said is my mom here, is she okay? And all he said was, she's alive. Which wasn't promising. They escorted me to a cruiser to answer some more questions. And then we went down to the station to answer some more questions. Finally, my brother and I insisted on going to the hospital to be with my mother.

Flashback to a few hours before I got that phone call, my father had texted my mom to see if she could come by the house after work so they could talk. My mom agreed and went to the house and found him in the living room sitting on the couch. My father asked my mother if she was coming home and she said not until you agree to get help. He then took out the gun that he had hidden under his couch cushion. I won't go into too much detail on what happened next.

But he knew what he was going to do and needed to stop my mom from interfering. A physical fight ensued, and once he was able to restrain her, he locked the doors and got into his car and drove. She had barely survived. On the road he called 911, reported that someone at our address needed medical attention. He then drove to a beach at a lake a few towns over, put his car in park and shot himself in the head.

My brother and I were at the hospital with my mom when a social worker took us into another room to tell us that they had found my dad and he had killed himself. I was 19 years old at the time and my brother was 17.

My father, Michael Mellen, retired a captain from Sousa Baranowski Supermax Prison in Massachusetts at the age of 45 after 22 years of working for the Department of Corrections. I truly had the best childhood growing up. My parents really made sure that we had everything we needed to be happy and comfortable. Little did we know our parents were sheltering us from a very dark world that my father experienced every day. He suffered from post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and also battled an addiction with oxycodone. We weren't aware until after he died that he was being prescribed enough oxycodone to sedate an elephant, as one doctor described it. He was in this vicious cycle of being in mental and physical pain and then numbing the pain any way he could. The more pain he was in, the more he needed to numb until he was just an absolute shell of himself. One day he came home from work and told my mom that he could never go back to the prison again and he actually never went back.

During his time in retirement, he bounced around from job to job, trying to find his place in the world. But he struggled to find a workplace that valued his leadership and his experience in the prison as a supervisor.

He only lived about 18 months after he retired.

So I want to go back to the day that my dad died and talk about that critical moment where my mom said only if you agree to get help. That didn't come out of nowhere. My mom had been begging him to get help for years. She was the only person who he showed even a little bit of himself to.

She took care of him when he was going through withdrawals at the end of the month. She was constantly thinking of ways that my brother and I could try to cheer him up on his bad days. She really was the rock in our family. When she asked him to get help again that August when he was at his worst, she knew it was life or death. When they were sitting on the couch that day, her worst nightmare had come true.

But what if, by some miracle in that moment, he had agreed to get help? Where would we have even started? As a family we were so ill equipped to understand what my dad was going through and had no idea how to help him. I did not even understand at the time what depression or PTSD meant. I barely even understood what my dad did for a living. My mom tried everything she had in her toolbox to try to help him, but unfortunately, we just did not have the right tools. He did agree to couple therapies at one point, a few years before he died. But he refused to go back because he accused the therapist and my mom of conspiring against him. That was the last time he ever stepped foot inside a therapist's office. His extreme paranoia was at an all time high, and he trusted no one. And I know 22 years in corrections had a hand in that.

The day of my dad's wake, my mom, brother and I all stood next to my dad's casket and greeted everyone who came to pay their respects. Only two people from my dad's prison showed up and one of them handed my mother, still bruised from fighting for her life, a pamphlet on Officer Wellness. He didn't even have the energy to comprehend what had just happened. But looking back, you see how absolutely broken a system must be for a representative of the DOC to hand an officer's widow a pamphlet on Officer Wellness as they're standing next to his dead body. Where was this pamphlet when my dad first started the job? Where was this information when his coworkers, who he worked with almost 70 hours a week, started to see his mental health declining?

The state managed to make a horrific situation even harder on the family of a man who dedicated his life to serving. A few days after my dad's death, the state had issued his monthly retirement check automatically. Someone at the state realized that the check included the few days in August after my dad was declared dead. So they billed my mother for the rest of that extra money. So again, where would we have even started if he did agree to get help? Families need to be a part of this journey with their loved ones starting in the academy because negative effects of the job aren't inevitable. It's not if they're going to change, it's when they're going to change.

Your loved one eventually might not be able to sit with their back to a door or a crowded room. Your loved one may lose interest in the things that used to bring them joy. They might isolate and refuse to talk about work. They may turn to drugs or alcohol to cope and so on. But when they do start to change,

...the family needs to know what to look out for before it gets to that crisis point.

I believe that it should start right in the academy.

I co-founded a nonprofit when I was 20 for mental health awareness and suicide prevention for correction officers. One time our co-founder Julie and my mom went to go speak at an event for families of officers in the academy, which you think would be a great step in the right direction for what I was saying. Well, the sheriff's staff asked to see their speech and began censoring the things that they weren't allowed to say in front of the families as to not scare them. What they didn't realize was that the reality of this is scary. Our story is living proof of exactly how scary it can get. Correctional suicide is happening at an alarming and unnoticeable rate. No matter how scary it is to talk about, families need to know what to look out for before their loved one gets to the crisis point like my dad was at. If you can catch the symptoms early on, it's much more easier to treat and much more manageable.

If you were to give my family two options – 1, attend a few real and transparent informational classes about job stress, mental health, and what to look out for in your loved one or 2, watch your loved one slowly fade away, which then culminates into a psychotic break and almost a murder suicide - we would choose option 1 every single time. And I'm sure any family member of an officer would agree.

My father was strong willed, sarcastic, tough, and was the first person by your side if you needed help with anything. He showed up for everyone else but himself. I wish he had realized how much he meant to everyone around him, but I know who he was the day he died was not him anymore.

Soon after he passed away, I started to relate to how my father was feeling. In the aftermath of a suicide, I found myself also slipping away. I had so many unanswered questions after he died.

Mainly, why did he choose to leave us? Was it something I did or didn't do? Why weren't we good enough? Obviously, these were irrational thoughts. But ask any survivor of suicide and they will share these same inner thoughts. I know after 22 years in corrections and battling PTS, depression, addiction, he just wasn't my father anymore. But the unanswered questions just ate away at me. I often turned to alcohol as my primary coping mechanism. I was reckless with my life and truly thought for a while that I was not worthy of living.

It wasn't until nine years and 11 months later, after my dad took his own life, that I was brave enough to finally ask for help. And I entered into a 30 day program in Utah to finally start addressing my own PTSD, depression and anxiety. My last day in Utah came just one week before the ten year anniversary of my father's passing. During my time there, I was able to face many of the demons I was battling and was able to let go of some of the baggage I had been carrying that was not mine to carry. I finally felt like I could breathe again. However, unfortunately, my story is just one of the many stories that can be told of people who are deeply affected by my father's suicide. My mom, who is in the audience today, is alive and happy and thriving, but she still struggles with intense PTSD and anxiety. My brother, who is two years younger than me, was so deeply traumatized by what happened that he moved to Maine and rarely speaks about my dad unless it's in a song he's written. My aunt and grandmother who were there for every step of my mom's physical and mental healing process. My stepdad, who loves my mother and us so unconditionally and has helped to heal three souls that he did not break with the patience of a saint. And many other family members, friends, neighbors and community members who his life and death has had a significant impact on.

One person I think about often is the kind soul who was at my father's side moments after he shot himself. I filed a FOIA so I could read the police report from the day my dad died because I was still on a mission to find any missing piece that could help me heal or answer some questions. I learned that a woman who was at the beach with her daughter that day heard the gunshot and rushed to my dad's car. She opened the door and sat with him, applying pressure to his head wound and didn't leave his side until the paramedics came. That woman's life was changed forever. A complete stranger that my dad's suicide has now touched. I had a conversation with one of my dad's best friends a few months ago. This friend was also the last person we know who saw him alive. He lived down the street from us and said that he saw my dad drive by on that day in August 25th. My dad waved to him like it was any other day and kept driving. What he didn't know was what had just happened at

our house between him and my mom. It wasn't until later that night that his friend found out that he was taking the last drive he would ever take. Through tears, he said, 'you know, I just thought he was waving hello, but he was really waving goodbye.'

At 19, I was never supposed to be sitting in a funeral home with my grandparents, picking out my father's memorial picture and writing his eulogy. I never imagined I would be four months pregnant and would not get to see the look on my dad's face when I tell him he was going to be a grandfather to a beautiful baby boy. I never thought I would be sitting in front of you telling the story. But if I can prevent this tragedy from happening to another family, to another little girl that really needed her father, that's my goal.

Thank you.



COMMISSIONER RESPONSES TO PANEL 1:



COMMISSIONER REVEREND TERRY MELVIN

Thank you so much. The first thing I want to do is thank each of you for being here today and sharing your story with us. And I want to say to each of you that I hear you. I want that to resonate, that I hear you.

Brianna, you bring in a special piece to this story. You know, we are looking at the system, and what's going on within the system itself. We've heard that we have a broken system that deals with punishment versus rehab. We've heard of a system where it is not right, not accepted, for people to share their feelings and get the help they need. But you bring in a different perspective of the family outside that did not ask to be a part of this. And it's not being brought into the system to get a clear understanding on what to look for and what to be advised to deal with and how you can be brought into the system to help the person that's working within the system. So I thank you for your bravery in being here with us to bring that to the table for us. It is a compelling story, and I say again, I hear you.

To the rest of you, what we're dealing with here is a system that, as I am hearing right now, is broken. We don't have a system in place where we, and I'm talking to the royal we as correction officers, we don't have each other's back in a sense that if somebody is falling, we're picking them up. Rather we are ridiculing them. We've got to figure out how to deal with that. We've got to figure out how to, when somebody reaches out for help, that other correction officers are there to help them. We've got to figure out how do we create an environment within the system, this is what I'm hearing, that is open to identifying areas where workers need help and putting the help in place.

But I just, with my small amount of time that I have left, I just want to ask each one of you if you could just say one thing in the system that needed to change the priority for you, the one thing, one priority for you in the system with all the things you've talked about. What would that one priority that you would leave with us as commissioners to deal with?

TESTIFIER RESPONSES TO COMMISSIONER REV. TERRY MELVIN

Bryanna Mellen:
One priority, I think, and I kind of went through it in my speech, would be to include the families in the academy from the very beginning. And I think education for the families is very important on how they can recognize the warning signs in their loved ones early on and make it an open conversation and not so stigmatized.

Tara Keaton:
I would say wellness, I think, if you have a well-rounded staff member, it makes an easier day. So I believe wellness is very important."

William Young:
I just think the information. We don't even know that this is a thing when we start. We're not told it, we're not taught it. We don't know when those things start, that the job and the environment is a cause of that. So we look for other examples. We think that we're who we were trained to be. We think we're doing a good job. We think this is how we're supposed to be, right? We're taught that people lie and manipulate and do all these things. The problem is we take that outside. And so when we start to change and turn into somebody that we weren't before we put on the badge, we're not even aware of that. Here's the thing, you know, there's a lot of research and stuff on how the environment affects the incarcerated. Right. But the analogy is this, they're the smokers, we get the second-hand smoke, but at the end of the day, we all get cancer. And so that information needs to be pushed on us right away, immediately. That, hey, you could be stabbed, but also, the threat of being stabbed every day for your entire career can also change you as well. So that's what I would say. Thank you.

Stephen Walker:
Reverend, that's, you're asking too much. It really is.

There's so much layered complexity of dynamics to this environment that affects humanity.

I think that's part of the problem, is that we don't recognize humanity in this.

It is a system built to isolate and contain and anything that compromises that mission is negligible, it's minutia. So the fact that your kids got a soccer game, the fact that it's your wedding anniversary, the things that exist in humanity mean nothing to the system. You're a body that we need to keep the system running. So I don't know how to answer that for you, Reverend. It is humanity, because in the absence of that, I mean, think about this for a second, with all the AI that's building up, in a sense, it's developing the ability to sense micro emotions and all of these other things, why do we need people?

Because the walls, we can legitimately build a box, stick people in, and problem solved, right? So why do we need people? Because that's not what the system is supposed to be about. It's supposed to be helping people restore, and re-access, reconnect to their humanity. But how can we help them do that, if we're now not allowed, actually we're punished, for displaying our own humanity?"



COMMISSIONER KEN DALLEY

Good morning. First of all, I want to echo what Terrence had mentioned also, the courage to come up and testify. There's a lot of vulnerability that you guys have shown today, and it's something that is certainly going to help to shed a light for a lot of us and a lot of Americans, especially those who have not served behind the walls. But we certainly help to support the profession. There's a couple of things that some of you had mentioned "Don't give up on us. We need your help." I think those are things that are very simple, very poignant, being able to make sure that there's enough attention and resources provided.

I do have a question for those who have served, at least three or four of you. Not to exclude you, Brianna, and my condolences to you and appreciate the courage you've shown this morning. When you talk about staff wellness programs, and I agree, I think that is absolutely vital from day one, do you feel some level of deceit that they were not provided? Some level of honesty, candor about what you might, or how you might feel about the profession, whether that's 30 days in, three years in, a decade in?

And the second part is, are there any staff wellness programs that are provided today, any sort, whether it's maybe in the beginning or is there any resource available to correctional officers? We know that sometimes there are counselors that come around for inmates, for mental health. What is afforded to correctional officers today in your experiences?

TESTIFIER RESPONSES TO COMMISSIONER KEN DALLEY

Stephen Walker:
On the job application, there should be the same warning label that's on Cigarettes. This job has the potential to impact your well-being, your social engagement, cause hypertension, diabetes, you run the gamut. Actually, we did create a fake label, well, it's not fake, it's very much real. But yes, that deceit and it truly is the equivalent exchange, you pay me to do a job. What you're not disclosing about the job is the deceit, is the imbalance of that equivalent exchange. I'm giving you my heart, soul, energy, you know, presence. But you're taking, again, my humanity from me because you're telling me that I can't be the human being we all want when we're on the street and engaging. And I'll jump on a soapbox real quick, so I'm not gonna do that. But the second part, look, this is a nascent field. For everybody else in society there are phenomenal wellness programs. Trust me, we've been on this, I think all of us have been looking at what's going on outside and see the services that exist. But there are none that are—they're so nascent in application to us. There needs to be more, it needs to be more dynamic because what they're trying to overcome is so vast. And, like I said, we're not starting from scratch. There's a lot of trauma that already exists to try and get people to step up.

William Young:

This whole conversation's really complicated because everybody needs something different

...right. And so when you start to talk about a wellness program or developing something, everybody needs something, something different. And that's very difficult to tackle, especially if you've never worked the job, if you've never carried the keys. And like he said, we're 24 seven, we never stop. It's not like we can stop and have an Officer Appreciation Day where you feed me free hotdogs. Some of us still have to work.

Some of us are eating hotdogs in front of the people that we're supervising. It's bad. And she said it in her speech, there's an eight hour wellness training every year, once a year, 8 hours. Okay, very good. I took a 40 hour crisis intervention class to teach me how to talk, to de-escalate individuals incarcerated, 40 hours. But they gave me 8 hours to go home and say, hey, you know, I know you just did CPR in the shower on that kid and he's dead, and thank you, but we need you to work another shift, and then when you go home, try not to yell at your kids because we didn't give you the tools to process what you just saw. So for 8 hours a year, thank you very much for doing that. But this job you can see doesn't only affect me, it affects our family as well. Briana could be my daughter. And this is this is what it is. And the other part to that is because we've been neglected for so long, I don't trust anything you put forward.

Because I know that you're not going to follow through on anything because we're all going to sit here, we're going to talk about this and it's going to be fine, and then we're all going to go home, and I still have to work, I still have to deal with the same stuff that I dealt with before I came here. And so, until there's that follow through, until there's that genuine investment in my life, in my kid's life, then what am I going to do? I'm only going to come to work and care about what my coworkers are feeling, how they're feeling, how can we survive this shift and go home? Because for you, who goes home at 5:00pm, and I'm saying you as in leadership and people implementing these programs, your day ends, you go home and we don't, we have to stay there. Even when I'm home, I'm not home. There's a fantastic story by Ray Bradbury, the Rocket Man. You should read it, because that's what correctional officers are, I'm the Rocket Man. And when I'm in space, all I can think about is home. And when I'm at home, all I can think about is work. And that's only because I get my eight hour training that they check the box and say, 'Hey, here you go, you're good.' But that's not enough, that's just not enough for us.

Tara Keaton:
So I can echo what the both of them have said, and unfortunately, I think it's something that needs to begin in the beginning. Yes, we did take a step, and the only reason my union has taken a step is because we have noticed that there have been so many deaths. And we've had members that have retired and died a month after retirement. So, do I think it's enough? No, I don't. I think it needs to start in the beginning. The 8 hours that they give us, yes, is it good for the members, absolutely. But that's something we negotiated. That's our union negotiating that, not the agency giving it to us. That is them recognizing, yes, there is a problem. But is 8 hours enough? No. So do I think there needs to be more? Yes, I do.

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COMMISSIONER
DARIELLE KENNEDY

So my father has been incarcerated for 20 years, and so I resonated a lot with what you were saying, Bryanna, about that loss and about that grieving. I always fear getting that phone call and not knowing, not having those answers, probably not having the accessibility of filing a freedom of information act to know what it will be that will possibly end my father's life, whether it's Covid, whether it's another incarcerated person, whether it's somebody showing excessive force in any type of situation. Also missing those moments, like you said, you had a beautiful child. I'll be graduating in a week and he still won't be here. And so I really resonated with that sense of loss and that sense of grief, although yours is very different from mine. And usually before I did Bridging the Gap, it would have been this us versus them narrative where I wouldn't have even been able to hear the stories of correctional officers or even hear about your own loss and think about correctional officers' family members, because my focus was on incarcerated people's family members because I am one. And so I did want to get into some of what you all were talking about, the seemingly competing narratives about this experience of the threat of being stabbed, but you also wanting to be able to help incarcerated people to be able to reconnect and be able to show humanity on both sides for correctional officers and incarcerated people. And so how is it that this prison culture can be changed where we acknowledge that you do have this threat of harm every day when you go in to work, but then you also want to achieve this responsibility of helping incarcerated people reconnect - in what ways have you already done this work, or in what ways do you think that this work can be done?

TESTIFIER RESPONSES TO COMMISSIONER DARIELLE KENNEDY

William Young:
So the job has changed a little bit from 20 years ago when we would just lock people up, throw them in a cell and just let them be. Now, it's rehabilitation, it's reintegration, it's acclimation to society. The problem is we haven't changed the training of the officers. So I'm still taught to do the job the way I was taught 20 years ago. But then they're introducing, you know, mental health programs and all of these avenues for the incarcerated to better themselves. And then they're still having us supervise that. The problem is, I don't have any understanding of what any of that is unless I go get it myself. Right. And so my role from custody staff is now almost more of a counselor role, to be supportive. And I'm currently working community corrections so I'm involved in that process of helping people find jobs, helping people get their GEDs, things like that, little things that I took for granted because somebody showed me how to, that now we're showing them how to do. But I think that because we're not taught, our training hasn't changed to match that, we're not shown the importance of that, hey if this person betters themself inside because they get out and then our kids go to school at the same school, we all hang out at the same place - So we want them to be better, you need to show us the importance of that. And you need to change the training.

Just for a simple example, 20 years ago, somebody kicking on a door was just being a jerk. Now they may be having a psychotic episode. They may be, you know, schizophrenic or bipolar or something like that. If I don't know that, if I'm not aware of the mental health challenges and things like that, then we're going to handle it differently. Right. But now kind of the push is slow that down a little bit. And so what I've done is I've gone and tried to find and read everything I can on mental health, on communication, on de-escalation, on whatever I can. Because you realize after a while that jail and prison is not what you thought it was before you went there. Right. That that these people are just people passing through, that turned left instead of turning right, and that's what it is. And so you start to deal with them as humans, as individuals. And then that's where like the progress goes.

So there's a saying that I hate and that people have said to me a hundred times, they say, don't talk to me like an inmate, when I am outside at home and I get kind of crabby with people. Everybody here is probably heard that. But the reality is, I'm not talking to them like an inmate. I'm actually talking more disrespectful to them than I do the inmates. Right.

And it's because we have that working relationship, because we're in there together, because I'm invested, I spend all of my time, my emotional energy in helping them do what they have to do, helping them get their ID, helping them navigate this course. But then when I go home, I don't have any left for my kids. Right. So our training, again, everything for me is you have to know what the problem is. And if we say, hey, this job is not what it was 20 years ago, the focus cannot be what it was 20 years ago. Why don't you learn this? Why don't you read this? Why don't we have continuing education on mental health so officers are better equipped to handle that situation? It'll be safer for everybody.



COMMISSIONER AMANDA RIPLEY

Thank you all. I've learned a lot from listening to you. I used to cover courts and crime and I visited many prisons and I wrote about incarcerated individuals and I wrote about crime victims. And I'm embarrassed to say I never really thought that much about corrections officers until I met Andy and heard the stories of other corrections officers. And you start to realize, I think you said it, Mr. Walker, that there's like this us versus them lens we got going in a lot of parts of our country. It breaks down. The more you listen to people's stories. Right. There's not a bright line between incarcerated individuals from what you're telling me. Right. And corrections officers. You can't separate the father from the corrections officer. You can't separate the mother from the crime victim. Like you just can't put people in these boxes the way the system and the discourse wants to. And often journalists, Democrat or Republican, like all these things break down at some point, to the point where I hope one day we can all become as suspicious as you all are of those splitting techniques, in politician's rhetoric, in the news media—that's splitting. And the more anxiety and uncertainty people feel, I've noticed, the more they split the world into good versus evil. So it's very tempting, right, to do that. I wonder if you have anything you'd like to say or things that you wish members of the news media understood? I don't know in your community, the way that they write about the criminal justice system or about the facilities that you work in. What would be your ask of journalists?

TESTIFIER RESPONSES TO COMMISSIONER AMANDA RIPLEY

Stephen Walker:
Real quick, I don't write really well, so I use a program called Grammarly. And I was writing this article and had the word prison guard in it. It highlighted the word and said 'this is archaic and may be offensive'. And I'm like, you got to be kidding me, how is it that this program knows this but all these writers keep writing Prison Guard. US versus them. Prison guards are supposed to be barbaric, brutal, uneducated, susceptible to bribes. Name one movie, one that depicts prison guards in a positive light. There's only one, and if you get it I'll get up and give you a hug. Rubin, Hurricane Carter. The warden was a jerk, no offense wardens, but the officer, he showed Rubin compassion, understanding, empathy, he called him sir, he let him work, and wear hospital scrubs as opposed to the uniform because Rubin refused to admit that he was a criminal. Look, we live with these guys. This amount of compassion and understanding goes a hell of a lot further than any physical exertion that you can apply to an individual. And the other part of it is that I started at age 24 and a dude that was in one of my living units, went to middle school, high school and college with me. And he was behind the door and knew my nickname, knew I ran track, knew my best friend's name. So there's no line,

...there's no us versus them. We are us. Period.

And I don't even know what your question was!



COMMISSIONER
MARY KAY HENRY

I just wanted to express how incredibly powerful what each and every one of you said to me. And how I thought a lot about the 100,000 corrections officers in our union and how little I understand about the weight that is carried by those officers every day and that you transformed through your story and understanding that is beyond what I've been able to absorb in my relationship with corrections officers, because I was thinking about Millie. I know Millie as the president of the union. I see Millie care deeply about all the corrections officers that she represents, but I don't really understand the enemy and the threat in the way that you described it. And ...

I've never really understood the system and the structure that you're challenging, that robs everybody of their humanity.

And that that's structured in. I've gotten little insights from people before, but this panel powerfully conveyed both inside the wall but also at home and then the impact on family in a way that I, I really hope as commissioners that we will work with one voice to override your completely legitimate distrust, that anything's ever change. And that somehow we can make change happen together. And then the other thing you four didn't get a chance to see, but that I wanted to convey, was the number of nodding heads in this room that makes you understand that it is a system that is robbing people of their ability to be fully human, not just at work, but in their entire life. And that is wrong and it's outrageous and enough is enough. And I just wanted to thank Andy for taking this to a national conversation where the secret's out and the silence is broken and we have to act together. And it's just an incredible honor. And I'm incredibly grateful for you connecting our heads, hearts and minds. I realize that I look at the men primarily and some women in this room that I've had decades of relationships with, but that I don't understand. And I have to admit to you, I'm ashamed of it.

Because it's just a reflection of how that structure kept us from understanding what one another was going through and how the union could be a vehicle for, beyond the 8 hours, how are we challenging the entire system, and changing it? So I just wanted to express my deep, deep gratitude for the panelists, but also One Voice United for putting the commissioners in front.

TESTIFIER RESPONSES TO COMMISSIONER MARY KAY HENRY

Stephen Walker:
Ms. Henry, it's not your fault. It's the system that teaches us not to tell people what we go through.

BREAK





Moderator Simon Greer:
Welcome back, everybody. Hope you got a chance to catch your breath. I'm about to introduce panel number two, but I first wanted to urge folks to maybe take a glance to your left and to your right. We heard some very powerful stories this morning. For some people that may have brought up things that you don't talk about everyday, things that you're handling, processing, dealing with yourself or trying not to deal with yourself. And so just take a look around, check in on whoever is nearby you. And if those discussions, those presentations, those brave testimonies do provoke something in you, please do reach out, don't feel like you have to now sit with it by yourself or alone or in private.

Panel number two is entitled 'Another Way is Possible'. The idea here is that we have three experts coming from very different perspectives, backgrounds, experiences, and their sharing with us, with the commission, and with all of you, is meant to build on what we heard from the first panel, to build on those firsthand accounts and testimonies and talk to what can we do about some of these things? As many of our panelists said this morning on panel one, those were real individual stories, but they were not isolated to these individuals. This is system wide. This affects everybody that the system touches. So we have three people with us now who are going to share a little bit about their perspective on that, their knowledge, and some of their ideas.



TESTIFIER #1
DR. MIKE PITTARO

Good morning, everyone. My name is Dr. Mike Pittaro. I'm an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice with the American Military University and Adjunct with East Stroudsburg University in Pennsylvania.

I think, first of all, holy crap, to try to be the next speaker after those four had spoken is a little bit more difficult. So during the break, I had to like pivot a little bit and switch some things around there and gather my thoughts. That was powerful. I don't think I've ever been at an event or a conference or anything where it actually really got to me and choked me up, even though I know about this. Hearing it firsthand from others, you know, outside of your own experiences is pretty powerful.

Right around 2007, one of the individuals I had worked with in corrections had died by suicide. It came as a shock, or at least we thought it came as a shock. After, you know, you reflect on it a while, you start to see the signs and symptoms that were there and didn't really necessarily do anything. He would come into work disheveled, he kind of just appeared like he wasn't sleeping much and everything like that. But at the time, the climate of corrections was a little bit more punitive in that respect, if you mentioned anything about any weaknesses or what was perceived to be weaknesses or vulnerabilities that could be held against you. And when I moved into administration, I can assure you it was held against you. So that's a huge part of this.

But as I kind of stepped into roughly about my 16th year in corrections, I started to feel some things. I was burning out. I was stressed. I felt like I was hitting a brick wall. I felt like my voice wasn't heard anymore. The stress started to get to me, led to marital problems, marital problems then bled into work, work bled into the marriage. And it just became this very cumulative type of despair. And if anybody has ever experienced depression, deep dark depression, you feel like you're just lost, you're lonely, you have nowhere to go to. And I'm sure everyone in the room can attest to the fact that in this profession, you're supposed to be in control, you're supposed to maintain that control. You're the helper, you're the fixer.

And that's my personality as well. But I couldn't fix myself. And so I found myself digging deeper into this depression to the point where I was scared. I started having really dark thoughts and couldn't get myself out of it. And I didn't trust anybody to talk to, my own family, close friends, especially people I worked with for fear of judgment. You know, I helped people, not Mike Pittaro in trouble, he doesn't get in trouble. I help others. And so it was a panic mode that led to that.

Thankfully, I worked my way through it. And that's kind of how, or rather what, led to me actually focusing on this as an educator. So, my personal experience, combined with the education and experience of working in corrections, kind of helped catapult this to a new direction. So, when I left corrections, I became executive director of an outpatient facility thinking, okay, that maybe is the cure all. That didn't necessarily work as well. So, I had started teaching in 2002 and loved it, worked part time, it was positive, rewarding, students got it and it just was a better feeling. But I still couldn't shake, you know, the fact that others I had worked with, that still stayed in corrections were still dying, whether it's dying by suicide or as mentioned earlier, dying by some type of physical illness, mostly cardiovascular disease. You know, with the average life expectancy of age 59 and I'm 55 as of this current day, that's a huge reality check that I'm not ready to die. So that's a huge problem. So it's beyond the mental health challenges, but it's also the physical challenges.

So, this is kind of like a back story, but I wrote this article in 2017. It was just basically an interest of mine and it was titled

‘Correctional Officers Are Dying, It's Time For An Open Discussion.’

That article, which really wasn't anything profound or anything, but it opened the door, in a sense to others reading it and saying, Oh my God, same issue here. So that expanded then into trainings, it expanded into other conferences and publications and consulting about this. And what I learned quickly was, as I delved into the research, is that there is no research. Or at the time it was extremely limited, compared to law enforcement, where there is an abundance of literature on law enforcement with mental health issues. But with corrections, the paucity of research was just so limited.

So I had to dig deeper and found some studies that once again limited but kind of grasped what I wanted to tell. So then I realized quickly that it wasn't just a Mike Pittaro problem, it wasn't just a Department of Corrections in Pennsylvania problem. This was nationwide, this was international. This is the culture of corrections, particularly in the United States, that is very toxic. And so in order to truly help ourselves, we will in turn help those who are incarcerated as well. This kind of has a ripple effect.

So, when I published this article, it then led to some other publications on that, and I decided to kind of expand a little bit further. I wanted to find out, alright, we know what the signs are, we know what the symptoms are, and right now we know what the causes are, but what can we do to prevent it? You know, what can we do to minimize those symptoms and those feelings that we have? So, I kind of took it on like a multi-pronged approach. And I started delving into, you know, physical fitness, physical activity. When I say fitness, some people get, oh my God, you know, but some types of things like that, some type of activity where you're moving. Then going into eating healthier and trying to work on the physical end of it as well, because we have high rates of, you know, high blood pressure, high cholesterol. So trying to address those issues as well as tackling the fact that we need some type of stress reduction, some type of stress outlet for ourselves. For me personally, it's working out, I like to work out. I know some people do not like to work out. You know, I know people that run, I hate running, I've tried it numerous times and I don't get it, I don't get that whole joggers high that they talk about, I can run five miles, I'm still not high, so I gave that up, so working out is my outlet. But walking, anything, walking your dog, just something to get you out there, but more importantly, to focus on ourselves. Because I think we have a tendency to kind of care for those around us, but not necessarily care for ourselves. And that's a huge problem for me personally. And I think many will agree with this. It was hard to open up. I think that I had to swallow my pride and to share my feelings, and that was a tough one for me. And so trying to get over that stigma, of basically ourselves, getting out of our own way is a huge issue right there.

But I then led into research on leadership because one of the areas of concerns that's come up in the surveys has been leadership, whether it's poor leadership, whether it's deficient weak leadership or leadership, just not supporting you or not feeling that you're valued or any type of empowerment. I focused on transformational leadership, something that I'm a huge advocate for.

I am an advocate for that coaching, mentoring, type of mentality. It worked for me in corrections. It works for me in education. It's something I embrace and I've been trying to spread that around. Not that it's everybody's cup of tea, but it works for me and trying to have that different type of thought process. For example, when I was in corrections at the time, I've always been a visionary, kind of thinker and I always have been ambitious, like...

'Florida's doing this cool program, we should try this at the prison'
...'nah we're not going to try that'
...'but I'm like, why?'
... 'No, no, no, we're not going to try that.'

And it was just ended like that. So every time I had an idea, it was just squashed with 'No we're not going to do that'. You know the 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' type of thing. But it was broken and that's the thing. It was broken and nobody was trying to fix the system. So, leadership was a huge issue. And then when I went into becoming an administrator, I couldn't actually kind of pass those policies and procedures to get everybody on board because those that were above me in the hierarchy were squashing those ideas. And I think that part of that problem, too, is for those who have moved into administration, sometimes there's a tendency to forget your roots, to forget where you came from. And so we would make decisions as leaders of corrections and yet not include the correctional officers who are actually implementing those policies and procedures, which made absolutely no sense to me.

And so it's trying to combine the two that we're all trying to address a similar problem here, that if we want to increase morale or improve morale and we want to, you know, increase our retention here from officers using corrections as a stepping stone to other positions and trying to retain those officers, we need to make some changes. So I focused on leadership. I focus on the physical aspects of it. I focus more so on the mental health aspects of it as well. I started to publish articles that I think worked for me just to share that knowledge of, you know, hey, this worked for me, maybe you want to give it a try. I'm fortunate to live in an area that's very wooded, with a lot of trails, that kind of deprograms me and kind of recharges, I like to just walk into nature and just kind of get that feeling there. Anything to kind of get out of the system, learn more about compartmentalization and trying to separate what you had at work and trying not to bring it home, trying not to bring an argument at home into work and vice versa, and how it can intermingle and then create more problems.

And then for many of us, myself included, you have to watch for excessive drinking. The bottle, unfortunately, is one of our outlets. It's obviously not an appropriate or a positive outlet, but it is an outlet. As the research has shown, we have high rates of alcohol, excessive alcohol usage, and problem drinking. We have high rates of divorce, we have high rates of being terminated. So it's just like we're elevated in all respects. So the culture itself is very toxic. And that's been my passion. And that leads into why I'm here.

My passion is trying to change the entire culture of corrections.

The first article came out in 2017. The frustration that I have, and that many shared in the first panel. is that we know all this. We've been talking about a lot of these things, but nothing has come to fruition. So, you know, I'll write an article, people in the room will read it. You know, other academics will read it, but the policymakers aren't reading them. The people that need to be reading this, the people that need to be interacting and consulting with us are not. And this is where we're having like this, this kind of blockade that needs to be overcome. So my goal is now trying to get out there and get this platform that I have. You know, as an educator, I'm thankful every single day because I have a platform to then basically express myself and kind of illuminate or highlight those deficiencies and weaknesses within the criminal justice system, including corrections without fear of repercussions, which is awesome. But if I were still in the corrections field, you're limited in what you could say because that could be held against you and that's the last thing you want.

So I try to highlight, not just for correctional officers, but for those that are incarcerated as well, highlight the weaknesses, deficiencies and areas that still need that attention.

My niche, though, has been focusing on the correctional officers. Now, as the young woman mentioned before our break, and I'm glad that you mentioned that this isn't just a focus on male correctional officers, but just correctional staff in general - men, women, those that work in custody, those that are programmatic staff, ancillary staff, all of those individuals make it up. And I had to learn that myself. In the first publication, I refer to correctional officers and refer to males, he, him and realized that I'm forgetting about females that work in the system as well, so addressing that entire group there.

Then of course, there are those that are drug and alcohol counselors, there are those that are teachers, recreational directors, all those that kind of still work within the corrections setting that are still impacted by what goes on in our nation's prisons.

So it's time for a change. And the reason I was so excited and passionate about coming here today is that I feel like we are making the change. This is the highlight. This right here is kind of like seven, eight years of work coming to fruition where people of different backgrounds are hearing our stories and trying and will hopefully bring this back to share with their network and then continue onward. We all have networks, in corrections or even in academia, you share among yourselves, so again, it's still limited. So I'm trying to expand out and this is where it helps us kind of lead out into that. So I'm hoping that we can continue this dialogue even after we leave here today and that we car share our contact information and hopefully kind of expand on a lot of these thoughts. It's become such an important area. It's funny because I wrote the article and didn't necessarily expect that it would take off like that and didn't expect that it would become anything more than just another article. But it led to the culmination of a book in which I now use in my classes to try to educate those who want to get into corrections.

So I'm thinking, okay, part of the problem is that if I can't address it necessarily on the back end, rather than just attacking the back end and trying to work with correctional officers in today's prisons that are dealing with this, which I think we're doing a cumulative, or collectively, we're doing a great job. But I wanted to kind of get at it from the front end. And as an educator, I have the advantage of working with individuals and preparing them for entry into the criminal justice system, particularly into corrections. What to expect. And I don't sugarcoat it like I had it explained to me when I was a student. Oftentimes, you know, you have this glimpse when you're a criminal justice student that everything is car chases and gun battles and all this excitement like superhero stuff. And then the reality of it is, whoa, okay, it's much more different than that. So, if I prepare them, for the good and the bad. And it took a little while for the administration to get on board with that, too. But I think it's a realistic approach. Yes, it's stressful. Yes, there's going to be challenges that you're going to face, physical and mental health challenges. But, this is how you can either prevent them or minimize them from occurring. And if they do start occurring, this is what you can do to try to get yourself some help. That is my main goal, is to prevent the loss of life for those that I have worked with, those that I continue to work with as students who become professionals.

Because, again, this isn't just a corrections problem. This is in criminal justice in general. At the end of this month or next month, I'll be talking to probation officers in Pennsylvania, addressing their needs. So it kind of overlaps. So trying to get students to prepare.

The other part of it is that corrections was, and may still be, a stepping stone to other careers. People use it just to kind of move into something else. Trying to stop that from occurring. Trying to make this the actual profession that it is and deserves to be. And the recognition that it has. And for the men and women who do work in this profession to be recognized for their efforts. So in order to do so, you have to make it more attractive. You have to present it as a more lucrative type of profession to be involved in. I think for a lot of us in the room, you get into corrections and then you stay when you realize that the stability of the job, the security of the job, the nice pay that comes along with it, the nice benefits, the early retirement, and that's important. I understand that. But as we've mentioned several times over, the high or the low life expectancy is a huge concern of ours. And it should be. And sadly, as I've creeped up the ladder with the fifties, I've encountered individuals who I've worked with who didn't necessarily also die by suicide, but simply died of natural causes caused by some type of physical illness. And as you know, COVID just expanded on that and created a huge, huge problem for officers. One of my former students, 30 years old, physically fit, two young kids, died by COVID. So it's just a huge impact. Trying to move this profession forward is a combined effort. And so each year I meet more and more people, from different sections of the United States, Norway, and have that ability then to kind of take this profession forward. My goal, as I continue, though, is to work with others to try to focus on the stress management, try to focus on stress reduction and try to educate officers that are current officers as well as future to be aware of what they're going to possibly encounter and how to counteract that. To do so, I went to be a suicide prevention facilitator over the quarantine. Kind of get some extra credentials in there so I can then address it with first responders. So one of my goals in the very near future is to go into the Department of Corrections and start doing trainings, for free, because I know that budgets always come up, so it's a freebie. Go in there and start talking about it, but give a realistic glimpse of, okay, this is probably what you're encountering right now or may be encountering and this is what you can expect to deal with. So that is my goal, is to try to expand this and to try to continue working with others. I think collectively we have a bigger voice than just one or two individuals.



TESTIFIER #2
TOR ERIK LARSEN

Finding a better way forward – What needs to change? What do you want change? How do you change?

First of all, my background as a corrections officer in Norway, then a union rep and now a union leader, does not make me an expert on change, but it has given me a unique opportunity to be involved in many different change processes, both on the individual and organizational levels. All my years of service have been either as a part of the rank and file or as a union rep, and it is in that capacity that I have been directly involved in so many processes of change. I haven't always loved the process. It hasn't always worked perfectly.

But, change is the one thing that we can count on. How we relate to it is what will define us as leaders.

Let me take a step back and tell you a bit about Norway, the country I come from, and about the Nordic model. It may sound to some like I come from a different planet but believe me its just a quick plane flight away. Workers in Norway have a constitutional right to influence their own workplace.There is even a special law (the work environment act) to secure workers' safety and their right to be part of the decision making through union representation.There is a written agreement, called the Basic Agreement, between the workers' (union) and the government that states how the unions and the employers have to work together to create the best result. And in public service the best result will always be to deliver the best possible service as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible.

I am not here to tell you that the U.S. should copy the Norwegian/Nordic model, but it has some valid points that I have seen firsthand can improve almost any private business or public service sector anywhere in the world. First and foremost, there is a fundamental link between employer and worker, through the unions.

The Basic agreement is a tool to prevent wasteful conflict between workers and employers; it doesn't eliminate tension but it does reduce waste and distraction.

The Nordic model has many important points, but the most important thing to understand is the essential purpose of the agreement: Through the model both employer and the unions have entered into the agreement with the purpose of creating the best possible basis for cooperation.

Along with the work environment act, this agreement is the basis for worker influence on our own workplaces. It's meant to ensure the workers have actual influence on our own workplace, how work is organized and how the method and approach to the work is developed. The agreement is to be used as a tool to develop leadership, workers' influence and the work environment.

The model gives every worker the possibility for both professional and personal growth.

The opportunity to develop mutual cooperation so that it can contribute to a flexible and user friendly service, with a good work environment, good leadership, better results and good relations with society (users).

To achieve this, unions and employers regularly meet to focus on three topics: Information – there is an obligation for the employer to inform the unions of anything that will influence the workers, and the obligation is mutual. The unions also have to inform the employer of their activity that could or would influence the employer. Any issue that could end up as a discussion, or as a negotiation, has to be disclosed here, before it can be discussed or negotiated.

Discussion – there is a long list of activities that the employer has to discuss with the unions before he or she can make a decision. In fact, there is also a possibility for the unions to demand a discussion before the employer makes a decision. Budget, building projects, business plans, training etc are all examples of matters that have to be discussed before a decision is made. The list goes on, but because discussions can be demanded, by the union, it is not a complete list. It's not necessary to reach an agreement in each case, but it is important that the union's voice is heard.

It's also a great opportunity for the employer to troubleshoot his or her own ideas.

Negotiations – Unlike discussions, the list for negotiations is exhaustive, and all elements that can be negotiated have to be within the employers area of authority, within the approved budget and be in line with the instructions and the political priorities that have been determined for the business. A change in the organizational chart or an increase in staffing are examples of cases that have to be negotiated.

This is a very rough summary of the agreement. And, I haven't said anything about what happens if the employer and unions can't agree or what if one of the parties breaches the basic agreement. And I could say a lot. But, for today, the point of the agreement is to further cooperation between unions and employers and to make sure that we provide the best service possible, create the best outcomes and do it efficiently.

Before I came to the U.S. to testify at this commission, I had a talk with the assistant director of corrections in Norway, I told him that I was coming here to talk about the basic agreement as an instrument for making a better way forward and that I wondered what he would say if he was here...With his first instinct he said, "I am all for it." After a while he said, "I don't think that involving the unions in the decision making makes it flawless, but it certainly gives me a better basis for making better decisions. And the fact that the unions sign off on a decision, gives it more legitimacy with the workers. The bigger the decision, the more important it is to have talked it through with the unions before the decision is made."

So what, if anything, does this have to do with change and finding a better way forward? Well, whether you want to improve staff health and wellness, inmate conditions or the financial structure and cost of corrections, you have to ask the question: what led to this? Why are we here? And, are we satisfied with the way things are currently?

In the 1950's these questions were asked in Norway, and that's what has led us to where we are today, a total rehabilitation of how we thought of corrections. To improve staff health and wellness we realized that we also have to improve living conditions in prison and we had to look at the financial cost in a different way (investing versus saving). The commission that asked these questions in Norway understood that to improve the impact prisons have on everyone they touch the government had to actually invest more

money directly into corrections, but in the long term the savings would make the total cost of corrections lower. With more money, the staff in corrections could get better training, have better staffing plans and ratios, and work with more rehabilitative measures and prepare the inmates for meeting life on the outside in a much better way. Increased staffing gives you better work hours, better possibilities for training and continuing education, better possibilities to positively influence the inmates and get to know them as people and not just inmates. But all that costs more. All that requires treating the people who work in the prisons as the true professionals we are.

Crucial to succeed in this model is the focus on dynamic security. At its core it made the staff feel more secure at work. Next to dynamic security, we use the term static and organizational security.

The dynamic security complements static elements (walls and fences around the prison, cameras and more) and the organizational measures (overlap between shifts, time for training staff/inmate ratio, work hours etc), and consists of dialogue between officer and inmate. The general idea is that if the officer knows the inmate, it's easier to influence the inmate. And if the inmate trusts the officer it's less likely that he/she will attack the officer and more likely that the officer can influence the inmate in his or her decision making. The important thing to remember is that to implement dynamic security, you need both static and organizational security, if they are not there it will be impossible to create a safe frame for dynamic work.

In Norway, we come from a history of thinking that incarceration should be a time for solitary penance and prayer, and many citizens still think it should be that way. Today we have evolved from that and we use the principle of normality, which is basically just to try and make life on the inside as similar to life on the outside as possible. We believe that the deprivation of liberty is the punishment and nothing more. We try to use the time an inmate is incarcerated to make a positive change, so that they are better equipped to live a life without crime when they are released. It has been a long journey from the 1950s and up to today's correctional principles. One of the main reasons we have been able to make this change is the Basic Agreement and the fact that employers and unions have to cooperate in the decision making. This effort to change has also changed the nature of the job for those of us working in corrections. First our training academy: in the past 70 years we have gone from on-the-job-training to a two year paid academy training. The academy in Norway combines academics with practical training and it has one year of mandatory service after you graduate.

The ratio of those who are incarcerated to officers differs, but the staffing ratio is 1 staff to every inmate.

Small but important things like the “overlap” between when officers leave from one shift and arrive for the next shift, are a part of the organizational security. This is important so the officers can discuss follow up on certain inmates and do a general run up of the day. Information is important and saves lives.

We have not reached our goals yet and corrections in Norway is anything but flawless. But we have made progress. We still have work to do on stress, PTSD and wellness. We have learned a lot from our brothers and sisters here about this issue and our work isn’t done. But the expectations and conditions of incarceration have changed and we are safer and more satisfied as a result.

It takes time to reform anything but especially, corrections, because you are not just reforming a sector of public service, you are changing parts of a cultural identity in a nation. To do that, it’s important to have as many allies as possible when you start.

This has not been an easy reform, and I don’t think it would have been possible without the cooperation between the employer side and the unions to think outside of the box, to imagine a different way of doing things and to insure that those of us who work on the frontlines everyday have our interests and voices recognized and so that the new system works for us and for everyone it touches.

That cooperation is based on the Basic Agreement as a tool for building cooperation and to facilitate change. It is based on respecting correctional staff and about a national culture that decided more than 50 years ago to do something different.

So in closing, when you hear about the Norway model for corrections, remember what made that a success is the Norway model of co-responsibility and cooperation between unions and employers.

Thank you.



TESTIFIER #3
CATERINA SPINARIS

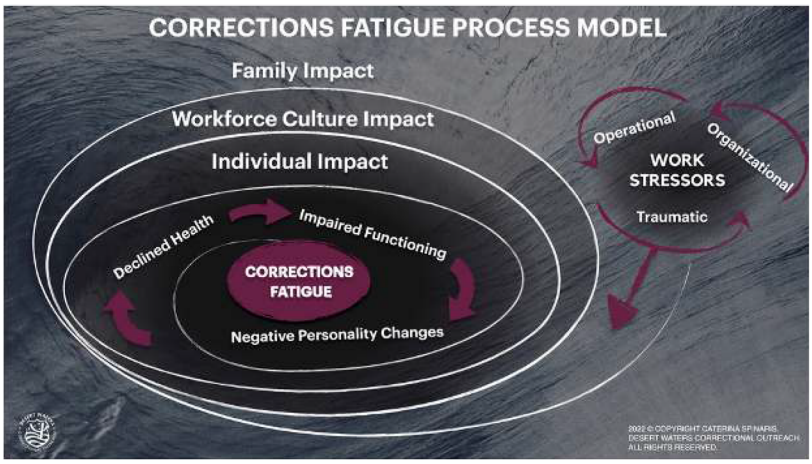
Good morning. I thank you for taking time from your precious day to be here with us today. My background is psychotherapy, and I'm a research psychologist as well. And so I'll come from a perspective of a clinician and a researcher, and also as a human being, talking about human beings I love, correctional staff and their family members.

My journey into the arena of corrections staff wellness started very unexpectedly and not by my design. This is how it happened: I moved from one part of Colorado to a rural area that was saturated with prisons. Altogether, three adjacent counties had 17 prisons and the corresponding county jails. So as I set up a little part-time private practice there—I thought I was there to semi-retire, grow garlic and raise goats. Instead, I ended up having correctional staff showing up on my doorstep for "shrink" work, psychotherapy--correctional staff, their families, exes, retirees. And that's when I started getting my education about what corrections work can do to a human being. And I used to tell my clients, "You have an invisible tattoo on your forehead that says PTSD." And they'd say, "Oh, that's corrections for you. No big deal." But it was and is a big deal. That's when the call came into my life to do something about it and step up, which was not what I wanted. It was not what I had any desire to do. But the call was relentless. So here we are 20 some years later. We founded Desert Waters Correctional Outreach as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with the aim being the health, sanity, well-being of correctional staff of all disciplines and job descriptions, their family members, and the agencies where they work, because it's really very hard to be a healthy fish in an unhealthy, polluted pond.

> The corrections environment is not just unhealthy for the incarcerated, is also unhealthy for the staff, as they're all swimming in the same pool.

So we set up Desert Waters Correctional Outreach to be like water in the desert, because at the time it was like a desert in terms of lack of support and resources for the staff and their families. And we promptly found out that we were not welcome, because, on the one hand, line staff thought we were spies for administration to find out who was disgruntled and turn them in. And so they responded to us with, "Stay away from us!" And administrators in some places thought that we were a danger to them because we would cause them lawsuits for PTSD or would empower the unions to ask for more privileges, and so they did not want to explore what we were bringing to the table, and they did not want their staff to approach us. So both parties said, "Go away, little woman, what are you doing here? Who are you? What do you know about corrections? Who are you to tell us what staff need?" And of course, I know nothing about corrections other than what I learned from the people that I talk to. My whole experience and knowledge foundation has been based on listening to staff and their families for 22 years, and also on doing the research and listening to the data and to the comments people make when asked.

For this hearing I put together a handout with three graphics. The first graphic is designed to take you on a little journey that describes what can happen over time in the life of a Corrections Officer or other corrections worker. We call it the Corrections Fatigue Process Model. Let's start with that.



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I originated the term Corrections Fatigue back in the year 2000, when I was trying to appease my conscience about not wanting to get involved in corrections, in spite of the strong feeling I felt to do so. At the time I thought, okay, I'll develop some material for the profession, and then walk away and go about my life.

So what is Corrections Fatigue? When I tried to label what I was observing in corrections staff, the word burnout did not fit. Burnout addresses the effects of organizational and operational stressors. Operational stressors in corrections include running 24/7 operations, shift work, mandatory overtime, high workload, equipment issues, plant issues, temperature, locks - whether they're working or not, overcrowding, noise, lack of cleanliness, those kinds of things - technical aspects of the job. Organizational stressors are the interpersonal, "people" aspects of the job, like friction, clashes, leadership styles, how promotions get done, how investigations get done, how evaluations get done, how discipline gets done. The concept of burnout, which addresses the impact of operational and organizational stressors, is missing the aspect of trauma in corrections. Corrections work is saturated with exposure to traumatic material. This can be directly, in your face, when you witness it with your own eyes or hear it with your own ears, in real time, like when you see somebody else getting affected, whether an incarcerated person or a coworker is being attacked or is dying of natural causes in front of you, whatever it might be. Or when you get assaulted yourself. Or you are exposed to traumatic material indirectly, when you learn about it, like when you hear about it later on, watch the video, read the memo, read the files. Corrections staff are saturated with incredible numbers of exposure to trauma directly and indirectly. The term burnout did not capture that, and that is why I originated the term Corrections Fatigue to capture and describe the cumulative effect of all those exposures - operational, organization and traumatic - like one big pot of stew, where everything gets mixed up together and different ingredients affect one another, changing the flavor of one another. For example, different stressors can make each other worse, like short-staffing (an operational stressor) will lead to an increased overall risk of an assault happening, which would lead to, of course, trauma, and then it would lead to the organizational stressors of staff arguing and blaming each other or their administration, or hating whoever attacked them. And then people call off sick because they don't want to go back into that environment or they're mad at somebody. So short-staffing gets worse, and the cycle keeps going on, and all in the system get impacted.

Corrections Fatigue starts by feeding into this hurricane or toilet bowl that you see in the graphic, however you want to label it, affecting staff at the individual level. And individual staff start to change. Earlier today there was a lot of talk about staff changing for the worse, so how do they change? We'll start with the negative personality changes. For example, somebody who was gregarious, trusting, friendly, warm and cuddly becomes like a wounded grizzly, a prickly cactus. They become short, irritable, impatient, possibly hostile, rude, mistrusting, reclusive, unfriendly. People become difficult to get along with, and their health starts declining. For one thing, being angry a lot affects our health negatively. So physical health, psychological health, and spiritual health start to decline, and continue to decline unless effective interventions are put in place and people practice effective coping skills. People who used to be fine and healthy before they started working in corrections develop all kinds of physical ailments like headaches, backaches, weight gain, sleep disturbances, high blood pressure. They start taking blood pressure meds in their twenties. They become anxious and depressed. Panic attacks are setting in. Then we have the post-traumatic symptoms, of course, piling up over time on top of the depression, and substance misuse becomes a common way to cope. Spiritually, people become hopeless, negative, cynical, alienated and disconnected from key relationships in their families and in their communities, or from their faith. And of course, all that affects functioning. How could it not? So people don't operate well in their community, in their homes. They don't nurture key relationships. They don't keep up with their responsibilities. They don't keep up with taking care of their dependents. They don't enjoy anymore what they used to enjoy. And at work, they start cutting corners, they may start treating others - other staff or the incarcerated - poorly. It's like they don't have brakes on their anger. Their brakes fail and they may "lose" it with people at work and at home. And as enough people in the workplace have those issues happening, these behaviors become the norm. The environment, the culture, becomes permeated with Corrections Fatigue. It's like a contagious virus that spreads. The whole workforce culture, the whole workplace, starts reeking of that same stench, and starts looking and acting "fatigued." And when new hires walk in the door, full of enthusiasm and vigor, they get hit with that negativity, that hopelessness, that darkness, that callousness, that impatience, that attitude of, "I'm not going to talk to you for a year till you prove yourself to me, that you're going to stay." And on and on it goes. And the symptoms end up becoming causes when they impact other people. And the whole thing continues to snowball.

Of course, Corrections Fatigue affects the people staff manage and supervise. And of course, it goes home because it is the same brain that is at work and the same brain that goes home. When they go home, staff don't switch their brains off. So the same things affect family, and family becomes the collateral damage. They never signed up for the job, but in essence they did, they just didn't know it. So the effects of Corrections Fatigue keep spreading and snowballing.

What can do we do to address this? We need to start with research-based education.

And I'm really thankful to Stephen Walker for bringing that up. This needs to be our focus to begin with, research-based education, because I believe information is power, and people need to understand what's going on within them and with other staff around them. They need to have a roadmap about what's happened to them, to grasp how they've changed, why they've changed, instead of "beating themselves up," feeling ashamed or hating who they have become. With such a roadmap they can understand what happened to them, without shame or self-hate. Like, "Oh, that's how I ended up there. It's no wonder I'm acting the way I do! What can I do to get out of this spiral?"

So, let's go now to the third graphic, My Three Wishes. These are my top three things that I'd like to see put in place regarding corrections staff wellness.



Before I start describing them, I'd like to say that I've seen a tremendous improvement in the area of corrections staff wellness since 2003 when Desert Waters was founded. Today it's like night and day, in terms of the corrections profession opening up and accepting that staff wellness gets impaired due to occupational stressors. This Blue Ribbon Commission is an example of how far we've come. But we have a long way to go still. A long way. To address these issues, we at Desert Waters conducted and continue to conduct research on the subject, and developing training courses based on the findings. We're doing a tremendous number of training of instructors in our courses, who get certified to teach their peers at work. One of our courses, that won an award, is the course "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment." We have versions of that course for new hires, for seasoned staff, for parole and probation, for juvenile detention staff, and juvenile community staff, and for administrators. We also address issues of administrators because they get forgotten in the mix, and they are affected too. So there's much, much more of an openness now, and yet there's still such a huge need. And 8 hours of wellness training, if you can get them 8 hours a year, are like a minuscule drop in a huge bucket. You need things that are much more ongoing, much more entrenched, much more part and parcel of how we do corrections.

So here are my three wishes, and if we have time, we'll go over the second graphic later. First of all, for corrections staff wellness, we have to factor in the effects of constant, continual, ongoing, chronic exposure to danger and other types of high stress events, and how these affect the brain, how they literally wire our brain at levels that we cannot control voluntarily. People who feel under threat a lot - and we talk a lot about hypervigilance in corrections, as the staff are continually on the lookout for danger – people under such circumstances are in a fight and flight mode way too much. And as corrections philosophies and practices change, for good reason, and we are emphasizing rehabilitation more and the fact that we're all human, that everybody involved in the system is human, we have to factor in that people who are chronically in danger are wired to either run in the opposite direction or attack and suppress the danger, to stop the danger from hurting them. This is a very big stressor for staff, especially when they're chronically partially sleep deprived. They're already impaired at that level because they're not doing mandatory overtime just a week here and a week there. We're talking about months and years of doing doubles. Three or four days a week, barely getting 4 hours of sleep daily. So we have people with their batteries already running low on juice, extremely low. And then we put them in very high demand environments where they have to be on their toes and respond and have good self-control.

Well, we have to factor in how the brain has been wired to be reactive to either squelch danger or get away from it. And this has to be taken into account, including it as a reality that may influence the uses of force, may influence how people interact with each other, may influence how even supervisors address their subordinates.

Then the next big thing. From everything I hear (because, remember, I never worked a day in corrections in my life), from what I hear from staff from all over the country, is that as the pendulum has swung towards more acknowledgment and understanding of the needs and rights of people who are incarcerated, staff safety may have taken a back seat. We need to also keep into account the needs and rights for safety of staff, because we forget that if staff are not safe and feel safe and feel taken care of, they are not going to be delivering what you want them to deliver. There is no way, no way, that the mission of an agency for rehabilitation will be accomplished with impaired, broken down, exhausted, freaked out, paranoid, reactive staff. I mean, if you have somebody who is ready to pounce on you in self-defense at the drop of a hat because they feel threatened all the time, they're not going to stop and be empathetic and a good listener with the incarcerated. Their brain is in survival mode. So we have to take that into account. They're put in an impossible position to be self-controlled, mature, professional when they are crumbling on the inside and when they feel very, very unsafe. And they feel thrown under the proverbial bus. We're kidding ourselves if we think that we're going to have good rehabilitation. Staff that feel unsafe are going to check the box, pay lip service to rehabilitation approaches, but the real thing is not going to really happen. We need to have healthy staff. The biggest investment an agency can do or anybody who cares about the rights of the incarcerated - the biggest thing they could do in my book is do everything they can do to keep the staff safe and healthy. Because if you have healthy staff, it's like you have tools in good condition. A carpenter, a machinist, a mechanic - what do they want? They want good tools. How can a carpenter build kitchen cabinets with broken down tools, tools that are chipped, broken, cracked, not oiled, whatever? They cannot build a good cabinet for you unless they have good tools. The staff are the tools through which the job gets done. So even if people don't like corrections officers, even if people don't value them, even if people don't want them around, the smartest thing to do would be to have them be healthy, because then they can deliver what you want them to be delivering. So even if you don't like them, please take care of them. You need them and they deserve it. Taking care of staff is the smart thing to do. It's a smart investment.

The other thing is that, of course, taking care of staff is the moral thing to do, the ethical thing to do.

If you send somebody to a toxic spill in their little sandals and shorts, that's not right. They need a hazmat suit. Staff are being thrown in the middle of all kinds of traumatic and other high-stress situations with no protection, no coping tools.

The message they are given, essentially, is, “Deal with it, another day in paradise, and come back tomorrow and do it all over again. And don't complain about being put in the same unit where the floor was covered in blood, and you're having nightmares about it. Sorry, you're going to have to go back there and work there. And it's not my problem. You signed up for this, and they hire at Wal-Mart.” And so that's how they are treated, and that's how they're being talked to. And that bothers me, a lot, because that's not right. We're throwing staff in the middle of the toxic spill, and not giving them hazmat suits, and we need to change that. We need to provide them with hazmat suits. Because, once again, how can they take care of things if they are not in shape to do so? And it’s the ethical thing to do to take care of our workers.

So what else do we need? We need staff wellness programs that are not a check the box type of program. It's not about having somebody with 13 tasks and then you tell them that now their 14th task is going to be staff wellness. We need to have dedicated positions created for staff wellness. That this will be their full-time job, and that they will have policies and procedures backing them up. That they will have budget line items backing them up. That funding is not going to go away, that it will not be the flavor of the month approach that will go away with the next administration, the next governor, the next warden. Staff need to know that their wellness program is going to be here no matter what. And that is because you cannot run facilities with broken down tools. You have to keep your tools in shape.

That's why we need things like preventative measures. And again, thanks, Stephen Walker, for bringing up the importance of preventative training. It's so much easier to take care of things in advance than fix something that broke. Trying to do things preventatively, equipping in advance, that's one of the things we at Desert Waters are doing with both staff and families, making them aware of what's coming down the pike, what to expect, how to read the roadmap that they're on, and then having also processing capabilities, knowing what they can do to manage situations, and offering them resources that are corrections-specific. For example, it's critical that corrections systems have EAP services where therapists understand corrections folks and their workplace culture. When I was still offering therapy services I've had staff tell me, "You're the fourth therapist I tried, and I'm amazed I even still tried. I was about to give up.

Everybody else could not understand the context of where I'm coming from. They thought I was just a mean spouse, when they didn't understand why I would come home in a rage." That is why we need corrections-specific, educated therapists and wellness literature that addresses their issues.

And since we have enough time, let us look at the second graphic, which presents Three Target Areas all of which are essential and must be engaged if corrections staff wellness programming is to succeed.



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There is no magic bullet. I don't believe in magic bullets. That's all fantasy. We need EVERYBODY in the system to do their part. And I'm talking now about the professionals, not the incarcerated. Top down, decisions makers, like administrators, supervisors and union leaders must do their part; horizontally, coworkers/peers must do their part as to how their treat one another, to create healthy workforce cultures; and bottom up, individual staff must do their part, implementing what they are taught at work about self-care. I'm talking about the fact that administrators need to set up whatever policies, procedures, budget line items are needed for staff wellness, and be held accountable for following through, and not have staff wellness be swept under the rug and go away because of other stressors. Peers need to do their part, how they treat each other. A lot of times staff tell me, “My problem is not the incarcerated; my problem is other staff.”

So it's about how staff treat each other, and not abuse and beat on each other. And then each individual staff member needs to do their part. If you are trained in wellness and resilience, and you are given tools, put them to practice. I don't care if you only practice one of them. Start doing something to help yourself. So we need everybody to do their part for us to move forward. Otherwise it's going to be jerky little movements here and there, and the flavor of the month kind of approach. And then we're going to stay in the misery of Corrections Fatigue. Way too many corrections people die every day, as you said, and have lousy life experiences.

Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER RESPONSES TO PANEL 2:



COMMISSIONER JULIENE JAMES

Thank you all so much for the work you do. You've really dedicated your lives to this, and I appreciate it so much. We've had a lot of wonderful imagery today that I think helps those of us who haven't carried the keys understand a little bit of what you're going through. I just keep coming back to this - the rain that is falling on all of us, the secondhand smoke, the toxic plant. And I am angry on your behalf because this isn't a problem that you should have to treat. It's not even a problem that you should try to prevent. Why do we have the system that we have? And I'm angry because of the decisions that were made, over decades of policy decisions, that led to this mass incarceration problem that we have, this under-investment in the treatment and the workforce. You know, retention, yes, that's a problem. Underpayment in many places is a problem. And it's because it's too much. It's too big. And we are, I think, overdue for a reckoning for that. So I'm carrying that. But what I want to focus on is something that I've heard as a little bit of a theme. I think you have power in your stories, so thank you for your vulnerability and sharing that. You have power when you're together. And so we've heard a lot about the power of collective action and unions. I am glad that at Arnold Ventures we're able to support some innovative approaches to conditions, and there are a lot of folks in this room who have worked on those things. So there is light, you know, there is possibility. But I think we have to look at the bigger picture. This triangle is so helpful for the system. But, who's influencing what that system looks like, what the pond is? And its policymakers. And, you know, some of the work that we do is around advocacy as well. It's not just looking at what's happening inside prisons, but who's making the decisions about that? And so my question to you all, and really to any of the panelists today, I don't know if I'm allowed to do that, but it's to say,

What do you want policymakers to know about your work, what do you want them to do? Because they have the power and they're not listening...

they're not looking. So what is it going to take? You're going to have to speak together and loudly with one voice. What do you want them to hear?

TESTIFIER RESPONSE TO COMMISSIONER JULIENE JAMES

Caterina Spinaris:
I would love for people to hear from the officers about what they need to be safe in their workplace. Whether it will be the staffing issues or some policies and procedures, because until they are feeling physically safe, all the other stuff is fluff to them and goes out the window.



COMMISSIONER DAVID PITTS

I really appreciate all of you offering your insights today and to all of you I appreciate the work that you do in your day to day careers. I actually want to touch on something that I think is really important and that I hear throughout everything you've said today, which is that we are in the midst of a full on staffing crisis in corrections today. There are not nearly enough people in the workforce to even start to create an environment where people can be healthy. And so we've heard that in Mrs. Brown's testimony that was read earlier that talked about the mandatory overtime. Not only does that create issues with sleep, you're missing children's events the next day, you're making sacrifices on behalf of your family that your family didn't sign up for. And it really creates, I think, a rippling effect that continues after that. I talk to wardens in my day to day work who operate facilities on about 60% of the staffing level they're designed to have. That means that they are using mandatory overtime extensively over the course of their week. And I also talk to wardens that in labor planning have shifts where even if they held over every single person from this shift before, would not have enough people to cover the prison at a minimal level with everyone on lockdown. When everyone's on lockdown, it's not the COs or the incarcerated people that suffer alone. Everybody suffers. No one wants to have that happen. And so what can the wardens actually do? I hear from them that they are lowering the age from 21 to 18, so when you're 18, you can join corrections. Now they're offering thousand dollar starting bonuses, which is a pittance, you know, for what they're trying to get done. And they're trying to shorten academies in an

effort to get bodies into facilities faster. And that goes certainly against everything that we've talked about today with the training. What the wardens can't do is work with pay, most of the time. If I, for example, operated a factory and I couldn't get enough workers to make my product, what would I do? I would increase the cost of the product and pay better wages. But we have legislatures that are involved in setting budgets and legislatures historically have not liked to give money to corrections organizations because it's not always the politically popular thing to do. And so I mentioned all of this to follow Julie's comments about the decades of policy decisions that have gotten us where we are to say that for those of us who work in policy, counting me, I think it is on us to say to policymakers that investment in the professional careers associated with this line of policy is crucial.

People are dying because this is not being compensated properly.

And I think until we start to do that, you can't have people who've worked 85 hours be excited about an eight hour wellness training day. That's the last thing that they want to do on their week, on their day off, if they have one. And so I don't have a question for folks so much as just to ask that all of us consider how we can play into, I guess, the advocacy necessary to get resource levels where they need to be so that people who work in prisons are compensated as the professionals they are. And even though we may not get to those ratios that you mentioned earlier or, you know, get to a two year academy, I think we have a lot of progress that we can make in getting closer to that. So thank you all again for what you do. And I appreciate being here today.



COMMISSIONER BRIANNA NUHFER

Thank you so much. I have learned a lot today. I'm honored to be able to join and listen to each of you as you share your heart, your stories, your experience and your research. So thank you. Kind of building on this theme of the challenge of the staffing crisis, I wanted to circle back to a question around recruitment. I think it was Mr. Young that said something really insightful to me, which is that we as a society have changed our expectations of our criminal justice systems away from purely a focus on punishment and incapacitation to one that rehabilitates. And yet,

we're still training and bringing in corrections officers and professionals under the incapacitation mindset of decades ago.

And we don't have the support systems around them, the training to fulfill the new mission of corrections that society is demanding, one of rehabilitation, one of a shared sense of humanity. So I'm curious, from a recruitment perspective, I had the opportunity to spend some time with former director of Corrections LeAnn Burch in North Dakota, and she showed how they were revamping all of their materials. They're rethinking what even the profile of an effective corrections professional looks like. And so, Mr. Larson, perhaps if you could start by commenting on how you guys are thinking about that in Norway in terms of where you go to find good talent and how are you describing the job? Obviously, it needs to match reality, and so I understand there are some challenges there from a funding perspective and lots of work to be done in policy change, but how are you thinking creatively about tomorrow's workforce as it relates to the corrections space? And maybe what can we learn from your experience?

TESTIFIER RESPONSE TO COMMISSIONER BRIANA NUHFER

Tor Erik Larsen:
I'll try and answer that question. What we did, I think probably 60 years ago, is that we stopped on the job training and we went for a more theoretical and academic training academy. We taught our new officers about these people that are in prisons, what type of people they are. We gave them tools for how to approach them and talk to them. We also spent a lot of time on preparing the future officers on what they will meet when they go out there. Because one of the years at the Academy is out and doing service in a prison with a mentor. So you're kind of eased into the profession, and in the recruitment, as you now do it as part of a degree. So once you've finished the Academy and worked for a year or two, then you can apply to take the bachelor's degree. I'm not sure if that's the best way to go because it's in, in its heart, it's kind of a practical job. But you can, if you use the time properly, you can prepare the future officers for what they're going to do. Like I heard a lot of people talking about here today, they lacked the preparation for what they were signing up for. So you could do that, but it won't fix everything and cause you have to continue education all the way. Also because you're not final, you're not finished with your education when you finish the academy, that's part of your education starts when you finish the academy and you have to revamp it.



COMMISSIONER
JUAN GOMEZ

I want to thank everyone here, especially for your service, those from the military and those that had to serve behind those walls as a result of that war on drugs, the war on gangs. I was locked up, I remember Ralph Anderson, he ended up moving to Idaho. He said, you know, the population is changing, so I'm going to get out of here before it gets worse, because whatever happened in the eighties, they're starting to talk to us about what's going to happen when you have the children of those who have been addicted to drugs, especially crack and the mental health conditions we're not being prepared for, and they're not gonna bring us better training. So I say that because one of the biggest, I think someone mentioned cognitive dissonance, and what I'm hearing is that there's deep seated harm, hurt, loss, grief and there has never been a time to be able to mourn about some of this stuff - we just go back at it. And the trauma and the drama didn't start when you started the

first day there. Many of you, many of us, we bring it there and that comes home. I had to go to South Carolina a few years ago after one of the worst prison riots since Attica. Seven men lay dead, many more terrorized, traumatized. They brought that home and they had to get stuck with it. You know, there ain't nobody coming in there. So they said, Hey, can you all come in here and help support? Because I hear about the support that is physical and mental. But you cannot forget the relational, the emotional and the spiritual, which we alluded to. You know, for instance, we come here, right, and we are on indigenous land here. We ought to honor our elders, our ancestors, the Piscataway, the Algonquin peoples people, right. Like, I see that flag. And it's really a powerful symbol because I see that eagle. I see this one right here, it's a really important bird for us. The highest regard you can get. You get honored. We get decorated, too, you know. So I want to take the time to honor all of you in a good way, in our indigenous way, because we have to think something different. This is a baby bald eagle. It was given to me in Arizona by the White Mountain Apaches. They had to have a fight with the military there just so they can maintain their land. So I'm going to take the time to step right there and sing a song that came to me. I was in Germany, they took us to an internment camp and the song came to me right there, it's talking about how we got to call upon our Mother Earth to help heal us, to help, because you need it. In some of these places, I was working in Rikers Island from last July all the way to December and I'll tell you, you don't want to be incarcerated there. You don't want to work there. It's crazy. It's off the hook. So before they get to prison, they're in jail and it's off the hook over there. So, like I said, just a moment of silence and think about, you know, all those that came before you, think about your families, think about all of that. I'm gonna ask you all to stand starting with facing the east, and I'm gonna sing the song, and at the end, I'm going to blow the whistle ...non-transcribable serenade and whistle blowing... Thank you for all the work, for all the hardships. You know, I think about, you know, the women behind those walls who are also serving their time or working there. Because I've also had to go into those walls and if you see it say something, the sexual harassment is very pervasive. So, if you're working there, don't ever forget that those things need to also be addressed because it's one of the most toxic places for a lot of women and young men to be exposed to. Thank you so much. And like I said, I say that much, in the best way. You know, they could say, they are the glory. You know, they are the powerful. You know, they are the ancestors.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER CLOSING ROUND OF COMMENTS



COMMISSIONER ROB ENGLISH

Thank you very much for that ritual and that honoring. Sitting here, and I've organized for over 25 years and communities across the country, Baltimore, Cleveland. And, what came to me, even though I've never carried the keys, is the stories here brought me back to before I was an organizer, I served in the military. And the idea of being behind walls, and feeling that you become a monster. That was lifted up by Mr. Walker and Mr. Young, and the toll that has on your soul. I can relate to that. At the same time, I had a conversation with a returning citizen just last week, and he said the same thing, and he actually used that word monster. And the effect that has on us. And then I think about today with Ms. Mellen and Ms. Kennedy - two daughters, one from an incarcerated family and one from a correctional officer with huge loss. And as I think about that, and honor that moment, my question for all of us, maybe for the panel, maybe Mr. Larsen from your experience from being afar, is, what would it mean for us to have returning citizens' families, returning citizens, correctional staff and officers united in this moment? Because this is a moment, as Simon says, that

we're so polarized and at the same time on criminal justice, it's one issue that Republicans and Democrats, independents can come together.

So, Mr. Larsen, I don't know if you have some insight into bringing together unusual allies in this fight?

TESTIFIER RESPONSE TO COMMISSIONER ROB ENGLISH

Tor Erik Larsen:
I'm not sure how to answer that actually because the Norwegian society is quite different than the U.S. society. There's something in our cultural identity that says that everybody needs a new chance. So I think it's easier to make a transition like that in Norway because you're always faced with the question - If you take a look at yourself in the mirror and think about your absolute lowest point, where you were at your worst - would you like that moment to define the rest of your life? I'm betting that none of the men and women that are incarcerated in the U.S. would like to be defined by their worst actions. I think that's probably just like a baseline in Norway for us.



COMMISSIONER
DAVID SAFAVIAN

Thank you. So for those of you I don't know, aside from being a lawyer, I'm a former police officer and I'm also formerly incarcerated. After listening today, I kind of have come away with three things. First is I'm reminded today that the job the correction officers do is one part law enforcement officer, one part social worker, one part counselor and mediator, one part mentor and really fundamentally restorer. And you know, you all know, we all hear about the thin blue line, but you guys are really on the thin blue line. Because you have this charge of safeguarding, safeguarding communities, safeguarding the people you're charged with overseeing, and safeguarding each other. But the mission there, on the public safety side, should be equally focused on rehabilitation and reentry, and hopefully redemption because those parts make every neighborhood safer. Really what kind of bottom line that I'm walking away from is, the profound policy parallels, ironically, between the life and job of a corrections officer, and those that you're charged to oversee. The mental health, the intergenerational cycle of trauma. And I think at the end of the day, the challenges you all have are linked, believe it or not, to many policies that we advocate on justice reform. We have too many people incarcerated, we don't have enough resources to make sure that corrections officers have the things that they need, they're in danger because of overcrowding. If they don't have the tools, as the panelists talked earlier about, to help reform and rehabilitate, what's the purpose of the job?

I think that's kind of where it all comes down. The real issue, it seems to me, is do we treat the symptoms? All due respect, mental health care is important, but it's a bandaid, as Mr. Walker told me during a break. Or are we treating the problems caused by the system? And it really, again, to steal a line from Mr. Walker, it comes down to humanity, it seems to me.

Prisons cannot be places where officers or inmates have to check their humanity at the door.

Because then it becomes a horrible job that nobody wants to do, and it's no longer a profession, it's a job. So it seems to me that we really need to not, well we have to focus on the symptoms, I agree with everybody I've heard today.

But we really have to focus on the change of culture, the change of mission, so that people who decide to go into this profession, as opposed to for the job, are going in there because they're rewarded. They're rewarded economically. They're rewarded spiritually and emotionally, and they have job satisfaction. If all you're doing is carrying the keys, I'm not sure that's a great job. And then it is, as the professor talked about, it becomes a stop over for other gigs. I'll close with this, and I don't have a question, obviously, we're in D.C., the home of the filibuster. Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over and over again and expecting a different result. And our bottom line has to be the culture of change, which has to focus on rehabilitation, which makes progress on officer safety. Yes. The short term Band-Aids, as we talked about, are important. But until we transform prisons from human warehouses to places of accountability and rehabilitation, I'm afraid we're going to continue the insanity going forward. And so my only advice, hope, prayer, wish, is that everybody in this room starts to echo the messages that we've heard today, not to each other, because that's a little bit of preaching to the choir. But to the people that actually set budgets, make the rules, decide who does and doesn't have to go to prison and for how long. Those are the critical tools of change. And I think it's so good, so healthy for you all, and, you know, kudos to you, Simon and Andy, to bring this diverse group together because we got to stop talking to ourselves and we got to start talking those crazy people up the street and in every state capital around the country.



COMMISSIONER
NNEKA TAPIA JONES

Thank you. I'm a warn you now, Simon, I'm probably going to go over my time because I've been sitting here holding them a lot, so I apologize. But like my fellow commissioners, I want to thank everyone who has provided testimony here today, it has been incredibly moving and powerful. But I have some comments that I prepared that I want to share. But before I do that, I also want to respond to the panelists who just spoke with us and not offer a question, but just a mere comment for something that I feel like we need to bring into this room and to think about. But, Mr. Larsen, you said something that, you said a lot that resonated with me, but one thing was the question that you asked yourselves in Norway, the two questions that you asked, what led to this and why are we here? And I was struck by that because the reality in this country is that we have to have a conversation about how racism has gotten us to the point where we are today. This system that we have in this country of mass incarceration is rooted in a fear of black and brown people. And I heard the gasp in the room as Mr. Larsen you said that the staffing ratio was 1.1 staff members to 1 person incarcerated. And I've heard many comments here today about how we need to recruit more staff and what we can do to recruit more staff. And I respect those comments, but I also challenge all of us and everyone listening today to think about how we dispel that fear of racism and the people who are incarcerated in these facilities. And to think about how we can decarcerate more people. It's not just about hiring more staff, but it's about reducing the number of people who are negatively impacted by the system. And so that is my challenge to all of us today, to think about the power that we have in this room, to really champion decarceration as a part of this effort. Now, I also wanted to share that it was really early in my training as a clinical psychologist that I knew I wanted to specialize in correctional mental health. It was because of my life experiences, which I won't bother to go into now because Simon will nudge me, but that I knew that I wanted to go into this field because there were people leaving these systems that were broken, and that was the people who were incarcerated. And I knew that was my purpose to support them in one of the lowest moments that I felt that they had endured. And it was in my first week working at Cook County Jail in Chicago, where I was greeted by a bubbly sergeant. And his laughter was boisterous. His personality was larger than life.

He was my go-to guy. Anything I needed, he did. He would often say 'anything you need Doc'. That was our banter back and forth. And one Friday morning, May 1st, 2009, my go-to guy was no longer here. He had died by suicide. Now, he was not the first nor the last officer friend I lost, sadly. And it was in that moment that I knew my purpose was expanded to not just help the people who were leaving the institution, who had been confined that were broken, but also to help the staff who were leaving the institution and were also broken. And so when I made Warden in May of 2015, that was my focus, to support the people who were incarcerated and to support the staff. To think about the programs and the policies that we could change to make wellness essential, but to also bring light into a dark facility. We were only able to do that by working with our staff and by working with the people who were incarcerated and by working with the community. Someone spoke about the power in having allies, and that was the power that we were able to bring to life. And because of that, we were able to reduce the population at Cook County Jail by more than 20%. Staff began to feel safer. It's nowhere near what it needs to be because it's still a dark correctional institution like every correctional institution in this country. I left that system in May of 2018 because I, as an administrator, was broken. And I realized that the system wasn't just breaking people incarcerated and it wasn't just breaking staff, it was also breaking administrators.

Every one who comes into contact with that system is devastated by it.

And it was in my current role as the managing director of justice initiatives at an organization called Chicago Beyond, we're an impact investor fighting for justice. It's in this role that I have been able to take all of those cumulative experiences and to work with all of those groups, current and former correctional leaders, current and former correctional staff, people who are incarcerated and people who have been incarcerated and community members. And to say we have to invoke change. We can no longer sit on the sidelines. We just recently published, Do I have the right to feel safe? And I ask that each of you go to our website, ChicagoBeyond.org and download this publication because it was written with Andy Potter, Simon Greer, Corey Post, and the whole One Voice United team. And it was also written with Just Leadership USA and many people who have been incarcerated in this system. And it was written with people who have been survivors of crime, the people that we say this system is supposed to protect, but it doesn't.

And it was written with families who have been impacted by incarceration. Together, we can change this system. We all have the right for holistic safety. That's creating communities where we all feel protected and whole and resilient. But it's going to take all of us to unite and have some of those difficult conversations and to realize that even though we come from divergent pathways, we all want the same thing. To be safe and to be well. And together we can do that.



COMMISSIONER
RABBI JONAH PESNER

Thank you, Simon and Andy, and thank you to everybody. As we come towards the final moments that we're going to share together today, let's take a collective deep breath. Take a moment and look around the room in this Sacred Assembly, because our time here is coming short, but the sanctity of these moments we have shared and the stories we have heard, need to stay with us and inspire us as we go forth on our journey. It's recorded in Hebrew scripture that my ancestors, the children of Israel, the Hebrew slaves, cried out in a collective lament. And it was then that God heard their cries and began the process of redemption. The transformation of a people in a box. Trapped, and suffocating, having been stripped of their humanity. To be transformed into a people that could be free and breathe. Today we have heard that collective cry. The lament of the families. The families of the officers and the staff, the women and the men who toil in the box. The families of incarcerated people who live and die in the box. We are taught in Ezekiel, God says, as surely as I live, it is not the death of someone who has done wrong that I seek. But rather that she or he return, and live. So forgive us, God, because, your children are dying. The officers and the staff and the people who are trapped in the box are dying. And that as surely as you live, Oh God, is the sin. So challenge us, inspire us, and guide us, O God, as we go forth on our journey. To realize that correction, in your ancient language, Tikkun. Tikkun means repair, return and heal. *[Hebrew scripture non-transcribable]*... may we repair all that is broken here on earth, so that our world will be like the heavenly kingdom above a place of love and life and mercy for all your children. Amen.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Where do we go from here? The Blue Ribbon Commission report is not just about looking back, but also looking forward.

The following recommendations were synthesized by the One Voice United team after reflecting on the testimony, commissioner responses, and feedback we received from the broader audience at the Blue Ribbon Commission. We acknowledge that not everyone in attendance will agree with every recommendation on this list, but we have done our best to capture those in which we saw greatest alignment and potential for impact.

In seeking to build upon the momentum garnered at this first-ever hearing on correctional staff wellness, we hope that all stakeholders will be unified and resolute in understanding that everyone impacted by the correctional system would benefit from a mentally sound and healthy workforce – a goal we hope we can all commit to working toward together. It is also worth noting that regardless of any action step one might take, this Blue Ribbon Commission was a momentous achievement in itself as it brought together a diverse group of stakeholders who collectively agreed that there is a wellness crisis facing correctional staff that must be acknowledged and addressed. What follows then are the post-BRC recommendations and a call to action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Voices from Frontlines.

Correctional staff voices should be included in any forum where the future of correctional policy is debated, and those worker voices should be amplified across media platforms. Increased and meaningful officer representation will result in better outcomes when policy design is not only shaped by wardens and administrators but also informed by the experience and perspective of front-line staff who have the most direct knowledge of how policies turn into practice. Highlighting the importance of including frontline voices also requires that correctional staff of all levels commit to speaking up and raising awareness around the physical and emotional impairments that obstruct those on the frontlines from performing their duties. When staff feel seen, heard and valued they are more likely to have positive experiences on the job, which can result in a workforce that is more inclined to be invested in the future of their work and committed to the longer term outcomes. Efforts aimed at both including and empowering frontline voices have the potential to elevate the corrections profession as a key stakeholder in transforming the system that is currently harming everyone it touches.

"THIS HAS NOT BEEN AN EASY REFORM, AND I DON'T THINK IT WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EMPLOYER SIDE AND THE UNIONS TO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX, TO IMAGINE A DIFFERENT WAY OF DOING THINGS AND TO INSURE THAT THOSE OF US WHO WORK ON THE FRONTLINES EVERYDAY HAVE OUR INTERESTS AND VOICES RECOGNIZED AND SO THAT THE NEW SYSTEM WORKS FOR US AND FOR EVERYONE IT TOUCHES."

– TESTIFIER TOR ERIK LARSEN

RECOMMENDATIONS

02

Tell Stories.

The corrections profession has long been overlooked for the vital role its staff plays in law enforcement, first responder and essential worker community. Much of that is the result of a work environment shielded from the public eye. The day-to-day burdens, as well as the heroic actions, are usually known only between correctional staff and the outcome has been a false and negative narrative about correctional staff painted by sensationalists outside of the profession. If more staff are encouraged to share their stories, more truth will be injected into the conversation. By bringing forward new, different, and honest accounts of correctional officers and the system they operate in, it is possible to change the narrative. A nationwide strategy seeking culture change, beginning with changing this narrative, is an important step that can help correctional staff to see themselves, and be looked to by others, as professionals who are serving the public with dignity and honor. Human resilience is, in many instances, tied to our narratives. Increasing the frequency in which correctional staff are seen as positive agents of change will help to bolster their mental health while further opening up possibilities for them to actively contribute to a legacy of transforming the correctional system.

"YOU HAVE POWER IN YOUR STORIES"

– COMMISSIONER JULIENE JAMES

RECOMMENDATIONS

03

National Training, Recruitment and Retention.

Correctional institutions are like cities unto themselves and their staff have been utilized as far more than just public safety providers. On any given day, correctional officers are asked to serve in a functioning hospital, drug rehabilitation clinic, mental health counseling center, school, job training facility and to provide transportation and security statewide. While the corrections landscape continues to evolve, the training curriculum has not kept pace with those changes. By investing in increased training and specialization, officers will have an enhanced capacity for ensuring the betterment of the people under their supervision and the national workforce will be better equipped to meet the growing demands of modern-day corrections. Furthermore, the current wellness and staffing crisis facing corrections today demands that the current approach to training be adjusted to meet this emerging dynamic. Although attention to physical self-defense is an important component of training for officers and staff, far too little attention is paid to the need for emotional intelligence training, mental health awareness and practices, the art of de-escalation and transformational leadership. The issue of staff wellness in corrections must become a core tenant of any training academy and ongoing training curriculum. And most importantly, addressing the nationwide staffing shortage that is wreaking havoc on everyone behind the walls requires more concerted recognition of these brave men and women as law enforcement professionals who deserve a commensurate salary and benefits structure.

"FOR THOSE OF US IN POLICY, COUNTING ME, I THINK IT IS ON US TO SAY TO POLICYMAKERS THAT INVESTMENT IN THE PROFESSIONAL CAREERS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS LINE OF POLICY IS CRUCIAL. PEOPLE ARE DYING BECAUSE THIS IS NOT BEING COMPENSATED PROPERLY."

– COMMISSIONER DAVID PITTS

RECOMMENDATIONS

04

Centering Health + Safety.

For any reform package to truly be effective, the officers and staff who work in correctional facilities must also be protected against incapacitating physical, mental, and emotional health problems, or any other hazards of the job. Their wellness and safety are crucial for them, their colleagues, those they supervise, and the broader community. Investments in officer wellness, training, continuing education, and career advancement all have the potential to lead to breakthroughs in transforming the nature of incarceration. Rather than viewing these expenditures as being at odds with reform efforts, they should be pursued in tandem. Policy research and campaigns seeking to transform correctional practices should be grounded in an understanding of facility-wide safety needs. These reform campaigns must incorporate the occupational and psychological well-being of the correctional employees who are the key to the transformations they envision. It should be clear to everyone that individuals struggling with depression and trauma are unlikely to have the willingness, nor capacity, to be effective agents of change. If reform efforts continue to overlook officers and staff in this process, not only will the efforts lose out on the important insights they have to offer, but by making them “invisible” those seeking change risk further damaging a workforce already struggling with a lack of agency, autonomy and dignity — and in desperate need of healing and support. Sadly, despite all the talk of reform, there remain far too many officers and staff struggling to receive adequate attention and treatment for this silent killer. Politicians, DOC administrators and union leaders should collaborate with local practitioners and treatment providers in securing support services that can be readily available for any worker (or family member) in need of help and those resources should be accessible in ways that do not present a risk to one’s job, reputation or safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Centering Health + Safety (continued).

As national efforts continue seeking to reform our system of incarceration, the health, safety, and wellness of those working in prisons must be prioritized. After all, as it is those workers who will be tasked with implementing any reforms and ultimately be responsible for ensuring their success.

WITHOUT ACTION, WITHOUT FOLLOW THROUGH, INTENTIONS TO ADDRESS THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS OF CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ARE MEANINGLESS"

– TESTIFIER WILLIAM YOUNG

"WE FORGET THAT IF STAFF ARE NOT SAFE AND FEEL SAFE AND FEEL TAKEN CARE OF, THEY ARE NOT GOING TO BE DELIVERING WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO DELIVER. THERE IS NO WAY, NO WAY, THAT THE MISSION OF AN AGENCY FOR REHABILITATION WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH IMPAIRED, BROKEN DOWN, EXHAUSTED, FREAKED OUT, PARANOID, REACTIVE STAFF…WE'RE KIDDING OURSELVES IF WE THINK THAT WE'RE GOING TO HAVE GOOD REHABILITATION. STAFF THAT FEEL UNSAFE ARE GOING TO CHECK THE BOX, PAY LIP SERVICE TO REHABILITATION APPROACHES, BUT THE REAL THING IS NOT GOING TO REALLY HAPPEN. WE NEED TO HAVE HEALTHY STAFF. THE BIGGEST INVESTMENT AN AGENCY CAN DO OR ANYBODY WHO CARES ABOUT THE RIGHTS OF THE INCARCERATED - THE BIGGEST THING THEY COULD DO IN MY BOOK IS DO EVERYTHING THEY CAN DO TO KEEP THE STAFF SAFE AND HEALTHY."

– TESTIFIER CATARINA SPINARIS

RECOMMENDATIONS

05

Cross Lines of Difference.

The mental health of everyone associated with our correctional system is strained. Officers, staff, civilians, administrators, those who are incarcerated and their loved ones are all negatively impacted by the current system. To reform corrections in ways that truly make it mentally and physically safer for the officers and staff who work in prisons, as well as for those individuals who reside there, it is going to take a concerted and sustained effort by all stakeholders. Meaningful and respectful dialogue between unlikely allies, even those who hold competing views of the problem, is a critical component for making positive change. Regardless of your point of entry into this conversation or the stakeholders to whom you feel the greatest allegiance, the path toward repair requires breaking through barriers and looking together for innovative solutions to improve the health, safety, and livelihood of everyone who is touched by the correctional system. While it may sound like a long shot, if we can find ways to come together and to forge common ground solutions, the chances of sustainable transformation will be greatly enhanced.

"TOGETHER WE CAN CHANGE THE SYSTEM…BUT IT'S GOING TO TAKE ALL OF US TO UNITE AND HAVE SOME OF THOSE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS AND TO REALIZE THAT EVEN THOUGH WE COME FROM DIVERGENT PATHWAYS, WE ALL WANT THE SAME THING, TO BE SAFE AND TO BE WELL, AND TOGETHER WE CAN DO THAT"

– COMMISSIONER NNEKA JONES TAPIA

RECOMMENDATIONS

06

DOC Culture Change

From the moment a new cadet begins the academy, all the way through to their retirement, the correctional workforce should be educated about the risks of the job and provided with ample resources for accessing support. To help facilitate this needed culture change, officers and staff should be encouraged to ask for help and everyone in the correctional profession must reject the notion that symptoms resulting from PTSD indicate a weakness. A workforce that is forced to suppress their own trauma is unlikely to have the physical and mental capacity that would be expected of staff who are charged with supervising and caring for some of our nation's most vulnerable populations. If we expect correctional facilities to transform into places that foster healing and rehabilitation, it needs to start from the top. De-stigmatization of occupationally induced stress and other mental health injuries requires administrative buy-in and a new precedent must be set that ensures staff are not retaliated against when reaching out for help. In addition to promoting the use of Employee Assistance Programs, agencies should build a support program for staff's family members that regularly educates them on the signs of stress, depression, and PTSI and offers emotional and professional guidance. Operating procedures such as pre-shift briefings and critical incident debriefings are both examples of sound policy options that go beyond individual staff investment. This is because such policies create ripples that enhance facility-wide safety. Finally, adopting staff wellness programs, offering more frequent training opportunities and promoting peer support systems are all important considerations that can actually save lives currently being lost to this epidemic.

"IT TAKES TIME TO REFORM ANYTHING BUT ESPECIALLY, CORRECTIONS, BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT JUST REFORMING A SECTOR OF PUBLIC SERVICE, YOU ARE CHANGING PARTS OF A CULTURAL IDENTITY IN A NATION. TO DO THAT, IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE AS MANY ALLIES AS POSSIBLE WHEN YOU START." – TESTIFIER TOR ERIK LARSEN

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion...

Regardless of where you come from, one thing is undeniable. There exists a serious wellness issue within the U.S. prison system that affects every individual who lives and works behind the walls. To change the future of corrections, we must work together to combat this crisis. And we must understand that the living conditions for those who are incarcerated are the same as the working conditions for those who serve as officers and staff. Everyone from educators, to administrators, to advocacy leaders and policy makers can play a role in improving those conditions. We all have something to gain from transforming a system that for too long has been failing to rehabilitate the majority of those who are incarcerated and stealing years off the life expectancy of those who work there.

The question now is only, will we do it?

"THE SECRET IS OUT, THE SILENCE IS BROKEN AND WE HAVE TO ACT"

– COMMISSIONER MARY KAY HENRY

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AUDIENCE REACTIONS

During the days and weeks following the event, attendees of the Blue Ribbon Commission shared their reactions with One Voice United through email and an anonymous post-event survey. The following are just a few of those reactions.

> This convention has lifted my spirits and given me hope that this one voice will be heard.

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AUDIENCE REACTIONS

> Thank you for the opportunity and privilege to attend this conference. As a retired Corrections Officer and as Union Organizer now. This is a true testament to the overall mental health for our correctional staff. I would like to get more involved in any way I can. This has rejuvenated me to do more and to share stories with others. The opportunity to go to the Capital and speak to Congressman Pappas is something I will always remember. I served 21 years as a Correctional Officer –retiring as a Lieutenant and an additional 14 years in the Military 8-USMC and 6-National Guard. This was one the greatest Honors in my life. I personally can't wait for the next conference and to learn/do more. Please let me know if anything is needed or what I can do to help!!

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AUDIENCE REACTIONS

"OVU has a grace about it like I haven't experienced with any organization that I've worked with. To say that I was blown away by the whole week is the understatement of the year and to think, you included me in on everything -- still pretty overwhelmed by it all. I can't predict much of my future, but I can say for sure that I am a part of the OVU family and you have my unyielding partnership, support, working hands, and whatever you need to help further the OVU mission. I love all that I witnessed and experienced...can't wait to help continue the work.

AUDIENCE REACTIONS

> Amazing discussion on a topic that has been walked around and ignored for decades. This discussion gives a chance on real change. Trauma-informed care for both staff and inmates living in the same housing unit together.

APPENDIX

Below are links to key items we created for the Blue Ribbon Commission gathering. We are sharing these not only to give more detail on the BRC but also as a toolkit for those who may want to create a gathering of their own.

BRC PROGRAM BOOK

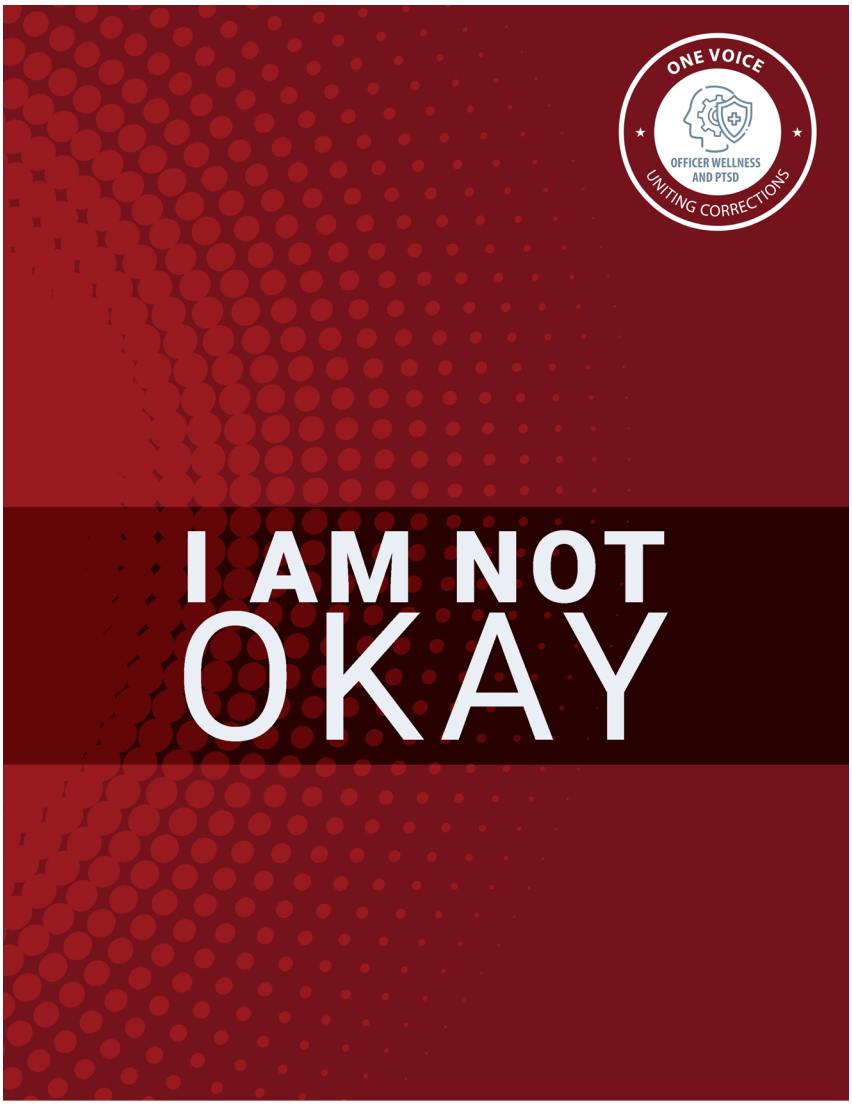
- Agenda
- Speaker Bios
- Staffing Survey

OVU FAQs

- What is One Voice United?
- Is OVU a Union?
- What do you mean by "provide a national voice"?
- How can I participate?

Other Materials

- BRC Commissioner Invite
- Speaker Preparation
- BRC Run of Show


ONE VOICE
OFFICER WELLNESS AND PTSD
UNITING CORRECTIONS
I AM NOT
OKAY

Authors

- Brian Dawe
- Andy Potter
- Simon Greer
- Corey Post
- Havi Carrillo-Klein
- Jeremy Tripp

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

- Olivia Torretta

Icon credit: author by ProSymbols from the Noun Project.

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Foreword

Two seasoned officers with national leadership experience and dedication to furthering the healthy lives of correctional officers have studied and observed the emotional health of officers. They have produced a paper to stimulate discussion and set a direction for designing programs and providing care for correctional workers who work in conditions that subject them to intense daily stress.

This white paper is a very important review and proposal for the emotional and ultimately the physical health of correctional officers and their families. I am an independent psychologist who has counseled and written expert testimony for hundreds of correctional officers from state and county institutions. I have written essays and booklets on stress, including "Stress Management for Correctional Officers," which is used in many prisons, and I have spoken locally and nationally. I am honored to be fortunate enough to review this paper, which summarizes issues of Stress and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in prisons. This paper summarizes the research and gives specific practical proposals to advance improvements in the health and well-being of officers.

The authors are highly knowledgeable and respected officers and advocates for the health and welfare of officers.

I have had the good fortune to know Brian Dawe for the past quarter century. As a leader of ACOIN and now the National Director of One Voice United, he has advocated for improved work conditions. He has promoted and organized studies assessing the emotional effects of stressors and trauma inherent in the jobs of correctional officers. Out of these studies he has developed and promoted training programs on stress and wellness. He has advocated to develop programs at the state, county, and federal levels to assist with stress-related reactions to the dangers that officers and their families endure. He is a man of action, initiating advocacy and legislation to improve prisons and the lives of officers. He has encouraged establishment of stress-management programs to improve working conditions for the good mental health of officers and their families.

Andy Potter is the Founder of One Voice United and also a highly respected and accomplished retired correctional officer with over three decades of experience working inside and around the correctional system. He is also the Executive Director of the Michigan Corrections Organization, the union responsible for launching the Dignity Assault Initiative for the State of Michigan. This initiative was designed to develop management systems for handling sexual misconduct and assault by inmates to officers and to handle liquid assaults (urine and feces) on correctional staff.

Andy initiated studies of the extent and impact of stress and post-traumatic stress within the State of Michigan prison system. He has fought private food vendors and brought food service in-house, effectively reducing stressors on prisoners that then contributed to their negative behavior toward others that made the work of officers more difficult and dangerous. He is a lifelong advocate for the welfare of officers and an SEIU international vice president. He is Chair of the national SEIU Law Enforcement and Corrections Council.

Both of these men are committed to correctional officer wellness. They bring a two-pronged perspective to issues of stress and the effects of danger to officers. The first perspective is a practical one developed from many years in the trenches. From that they know what can happen and they know whether proposed solutions are practical. The second is a knowledge of research. Research done in a vacuum can be idealistic. The research and the figures found can be highly accurate

but the conclusions from it need to be applied and promoted within the constraints of budget and work obligation. Programs can be initiated within current constraints. Planning and advocating to increase realistic helpful interventions are understood by these authors. In short, what they have written is thorough and practical. Its conclusions can be initiated while planning for expanded proposals can be strategized.

In this paper you will find a review of statistics on the health and well-being of officers, the pitfalls and dangers that bring on stress and PTSI that affect those who choose this type of work. This paper speaks to physical health and measures to live healthier and longer. In one especially insightful area the authors point out that when institutions create trainings and assistance, trust by the officers to grab hold and participate in such help needs to be given much attention. Advocacy and programming will not be beneficial if officers don't avail themselves of it.

This paper is realistic in proposing reasonable solutions even examining those from other countries and jurisdictions. It will be a great addition to advancing the health and welfare of officers. It will further provide hope and treatment for those who are harmed and require support.

My hope is that union leaders, mental health workers, administrators, and legislators will read this paper and enhance the programs already established and advocate strongly for the creation of programs and support for officers and their families.

Thank you to these authors for their thoughtful and insightful work.

Donald

Donald W. Steele, Ph.D
Psychologist
February 2021

Disclaimer

This white paper is not meant as an academic look at correctional officers' wellness, though it does draw on a number of academic studies and research findings. Rather, this paper is meant to bring many works on the topics of officer wellness, PTSI, stress, and related issues together in one place and in a popular format that will be easy for officers, their unions, policymakers, advocates, and the public to understand and engage with.

By and large, the materials captured here are not our original research but culled from many sources and publications and also born from the authors' experience. We have done our best to cite those whose work we draw upon and know that we have benefited greatly from their cutting-edge and deep work. We apologize in advance if we have failed to fully acknowledge the authors of any of this important work, and we certainly don't mean to claim that we are the original authors or owners of many of these ideas.

The process of organizing and compiling all this scholarly work is, though, our full responsibility, and we hope by bringing all this information together — adding in the experience of frontline correctional officers, ourselves, and the brave officers we have interviewed for this purpose — that we are making a contribution to the field. And most importantly, we hope we are helping to bring these issues to light in a way that the public can understand and urgent action can be taken.

Icon credit: Information by Nawicon from the Noun Project.

Introduction

The mental health of everyone associated with our correctional system is strained. Officers, civilians, administrators, those who are incarcerated and their loved ones, they're all being negatively impacted by the current system. PTSI, depression, and the physical and psychological damage they cause are at near epidemic proportions. Unfortunately, little has been done to confront this head on.

The sheer numbers of people impacted by corrections presents a unique and historic opportunity. More than 400,000 correctional officers,[1] hundreds of thousands additional administrators and staff, nearly two million incarcerated individuals[2] and their families — this arguably means over six million Americans impacted every day by living and working in our nation's prisons and jails. At One Voice United, we seek to harness the political power of this divergent group of stakeholders and begin advocating for the cultural shift needed to truly make it safer for the officers and staff who work in prisons and those individuals who reside there. To reform corrections in this way will take a concerted and sustained effort by all stakeholders.

Truly meaningful and sustainable reform requires education, advocacy, and participation among all stakeholders. We hope this white paper will serve as a first step toward grounding wellness at the center of reform efforts and that it is of service to the correctional officers and staff who are our brothers and sisters working on the front lines of America's correctional system. All frontline staff must educate themselves about the various ways in which the current system impacts us — a process we hope to have helped facilitate by sharing this white paper.

As leaders seeking to improve the profession for all staff in corrections, we must come off the sidelines and take our rightful seat at the table and promote an agenda that acknowledges the experience and wisdom of the men and women who work this job every day. Our mandate is to engage in and foster discussions about issues that directly impact the safety, security, and lives of everyone who is touched by the correctional system.

It is time for leaders in this profession to promote programs that will address the current circumstances impacting our mental health while pushing for reforms that strive to make those circumstances obsolete. Every policymaker, supervisor, and correctional professional working in the correctional system must attack this from all angles by retraining ourselves and our administrations to take mental health issues seriously. From the Commissioner to the new cadet just arriving at the academy, it is imperative that the entire correctional industry take a fresh look at where the dangers in corrections lay and act to mitigate them.

As frontline correctional workers, we must self-monitor our conduct and uphold our oath to the profession by refraining from bullying, harassment, or rumormongering and condemn any activity that demeans or disrespects fellow staff. It is essential that everyone in the correctional profession reject the idea that the symptoms resulting from PTSI indicate a weakness, nor should anyone dismiss the challenges faced as being "just part of the job." If an officer develops PTSI, it must be compensable under Presumptive Workers' Compensation statutes, as it should be for all first responders.

1 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, March 31). Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2020. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes333012.htm.

2 Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research. (2018, December 20). United States of America | World Prison Brief. https://www.prison-studies.org/country/united-states-america.

Correctional staff of all levels should commit to raising awareness around the physical impairments to performing these jobs —failed or aging equipment, radios, door locks, unmanned towers, etc. — and together, everyone must insist upon remedial action. We must sit with our administrations and unabashedly identify the sources of stress and PTSI and devise a plan to address them. Finally, we believe every stakeholder in corrections must be unified and resolute in our understanding that all of us who are impacted by corrections would benefit from a mentally sound and healthy workforce, and we must commit to working toward that goal together.

In an effort to bring this white paper to life, we have interviewed three seasoned correctional officers.

Subject 1, who we will call "Matt," has worked in Michigan's prisons for almost twenty years and was on leave recovering from PTSI after being violently attacked by an inmate.

Subject 2, "John," has worked in New York prisons for more than twenty years.

Our third and final subject, "Sam," has worked in corrections for thirty years in the California prison system. Their honesty, dedication, courage, and humility are characteristics of correctional officers at their best, and their wisdom and insight have made this paper that much better.

Please note that direct quotes and comments remain unedited to preserve their authenticity, but do not necessarily represent the views of One Voice United.

Executive Summary

This summary captures succinctly the numbers that define the wellness crisis facing those working in America's prisons and jails and goes on to lay out a series of clear and specific recommendations.

The full report that follows provides greater depth in defining the problem, exploring the causes, and explaining solutions, and incorporates the firsthand experiences of a number of correctional officers to bring a human side to the statistics and studies.

THE PROBLEM*

- Correctional officers have a significantly higher PTSI rate as compared to the general public.
- Firefighters, EMTs, police officers, and even returning war veterans do not approach the percentages of correctional professionals who suffer from PTSI.
- Correctional staff across the country believe PTSI is a serious and pervasive issue within corrections that is lacking attention.
- Correctional officers are more likely to commit suicide than all other law enforcement professionals.
- A correctional officer's life expectancy is far shorter than that of the general public.
- Correctional staff suffering from PTSI will use more sick days per year than other staff, which results in increased costs to correctional agencies.
- The majority of staff stress comes from policies, procedures, and the administration.
- Physical assaults, psychological assaults, assaults with weapons, assaults with bodily fluids, and threats to loved ones and families are all part of the dangers that officers contend with on a regular basis.
- The overwhelming majority of officers are never trained to recognize or interact with a population suffering from mental illness.
- All stakeholders are impacted by the stress and PTSI levels within a facility.

**Note: Statistics above are generalizations based on statistics cited throughout the white paper.*
Icon credit: Alert by Juergen Bauer from the Noun Project.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS*

- Initiate communications plans that educate all stakeholders on the urgent need to address correctional stress and PTSI and to draw attention to the psychological and physical damage that a career in corrections can induce.
- Adopt staff wellness programs that begin with the first day at the academy and continue through retirement, including annual training requirements on mental health and stress reduction coping skills for all active-duty staff, including administrators.
- Commit to administrative buy-in and promotion of Employee Assistance (Wellness) Programs emphasizing confidentiality, 100% differentiation from the discipline process, and de-stigmatization of occupationally induced stress and other mental health injuries.
- Place an emphasis on teaching de-escalation skills, including emotional intelligence training for staff and transformational leadership training for management and administrators.
- Promote a Dignity Assault Initiative at correctional facilities across the country.
- Build a support program for staff family members that educates them on the signs of stress, depression, and PTSI and offers emotional and professional guidance.
- Fund continued research on the fiscal costs of lost leave time as a result of staff stress and PTSI.
- Instate Pre-Shift Briefing (Roll Call) for all staff as they enter and leave the correctional facility, updating them on the climate behind the walls, processing anything that may have transpired, and creating a point of contact before and after the workday.
- Form Critical Incident Response Teams that are part of the standard operating procedure and available to "talk-down" or debrief staff having just endured a traumatic incident.
- Adopt minimum staffing levels to limit forced overtime and allow for increased movement plans and programming for those incarcerated.
- Allocate resources to evaluate successes and failures of COVID-19 safety protocols and plan for future pandemics.
- Take policy action to create a standard of Presumptive Workers Compensation for Correctional Officer PTSI.
- Change PTSD in corrections to PTSI, Post Traumatic Stress Injury, as it should be recognized as a workplace injury, not a personal disorder, and covered under Workers Compensation legislation.

**Note: Statistics above are generalizations based on statistics cited throughout the white paper.*
Icon credit: Tools by i cons from the Noun Project.

CHAPTER 1:

Correctional Officer Wellness: Defining the Problem

How serious is the mental health crisis in corrections today? In a national survey of correctional officers conducted in 2018, 91% of respondents agreed with the statement "PTSD is a serious and pervasive issue within corrections."[1] And, since COVID-19 swept like wildfire through America's prisons and jails, it is likely to have only gotten worse.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2018 there were an estimated 434,300 local, county, state, and federal correctional officers in the United States.[2] A 2012 national study by Desert Waters Outreach of nearly 3,600 correctional officers and civilian staff found that officers have a 34.1% PTSI rate, as compared to 3.5% for the general public. A 34.1% PTSI rate equates to over 148,000 active-duty correctional officers with PTSI. The study also found that civilian correctional staff have a 27% PTSI rate.[3] Rates of depression are equally disturbing, with custody staff averaging 31% and civilian staff 25.7%.[4]

From their first day at the academy, new recruits are taught to never trust the men and women in their custody; officers are trained to believe that those who are incarcerated are always looking for weaknesses and will find ways to maximize that knowledge to their utmost advantage.

Officers working in the majority of prisons and jails quickly learn from the punitive nature of many administrators, as well as the feudal approach to management and the traditional culture it perpetuates. In short order, the current system intentionally trains and conditions staff to not trust those who are incarcerated and are told by their peers that they can't trust management.

> *The inmate will try and get the trust of an officer and con him into bringing in contraband. With that, you have to keep your guard up at all times… Every corrections officer feels like they're on their own — against the world, against the supervisors, against your family.... There's no safe haven. It's a fear that we live it but we're too macho to call it a fear.*
>
> *—John*

> *Without question, until we can eliminate this adversarial us vs them mentality and [the idea] that the individual has some penance to pay or there's recognition that there's something amiss in your life that we need to help you dive deeper into to resolve — until we can eliminate friction — there's always going to be something in us.*
>
> *—Sam*

1 *Post, C., & Tripp, J. (2018, October 13). One Voice Leadership Meeting and National Survey Results Discussion [Conference Session]. National Medal of Honor Awards, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*

2 *United States Department of Labor. (2021, April 9). Correctional Officers and Bailiffs: Occupational Outlook Handbook. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/protective-service/correctional-officers.htm.*

3 *Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D., & Kellaway, J. A. (2012). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/PTSD_Prev_in_Corrections_09-03-131.pdf.*

4 *Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Comorbidity_Study_09-03-131.pdf.*

So, who's left? Each other. The "us vs. them" mentality is instilled in staff almost from day one.

New officers must also deal with an internal emotional conflict on their very first shift behind those walls. Human beings are naturally empathetic and compassionate to the plight of others. But officers either learn to leave compassion and empathy at the time clock or, like many other new recruits, they quit.

There are various studies on retention rates after a cadet's first year that show many variables to be influential. According to one study, states with low pay, poor benefits, and meaningful alternative employment opportunities can see turnover rates as high as 45%, with an average range of 12% to 25%.[5]

Another study points to a national average of 16.2%.[6] High turnover leads to less seasoned staff and a less secure facility, resulting in more stress and more self-terminations, thereby perpetuating the cycle. Turnover also drains an agency's budget and can result in forced or mandatory overtime for staff. In the 2018 One Voice survey, 91% of officers agreed that, "understaffing has led to unsafe increases in mandatory overtime and increasingly low morale among staff."[7]

One way to illustrate the harsh realities of a career in corrections is the suicide rates. It is estimated that 156 active-duty correctional officers take their own lives each year, three per week.[8] That's a rate of 34.8 suicides per 100,000 correctional officers. When compared to police officers' suicide rate of 15.1/100,000, which is less than half that for correctional officers, the problem is illuminated.[9]

> *One of the first guys I saw that hung himself hit his girlfriend in the head with a hammer and then threw his baby down a long flight of steps. I remember to this day — I looked at him and it looked like his whole eyeball was black. I'll never forget that. He was in the segregated unit, it was dark in there, and his eyes were all black. So, when I went on break I heard a code call, so I went back there and he had hung himself right after I was there with him. His neck was so long from vertebrae stretching, it was nothing like what the movies show you, and that's something haunted me and I never told my wife and kids about it. That stuff plays on your mind when you see stuff like that and you don't want to bring that home.*
>
> —John

5 *Minor, K. I., Dawson-Edwards, C., Wells, J. B., Griffith, C., & Angel, E. (2009). Understanding Staff Perceptions of Turnover in Corrections. Professional Issues in Criminal Justice, 4(2), 43-57.*

6 *Nink, C. (2010). Correctional Officers: Strategies to Improve Retention. Centerville, UT: MTC Institute. https://www.mtctrains.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Correctional-Officers-Strategies-to-Improve-Retention.pdf.*

7 *Post, C., & Tripp, J. (2018, October 13). One Voice Leadership Meeting and National Survey Results Discussion [Conference Session]. National Medal of Honor Awards, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*

8 *New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force. (2009). New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report. New Jersey Office of the Attorney General. https://www.state.nj.us/lps/library/NJPoliceSuicideTaskForceReport-January-30-2009-Final(r2.3.09).pdf.*

9 *Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Comorbidity_Study_09-03-131.pdf.*

This does not include the 1 in 7 retirees who suffer from suicide ideation. According to a California study, 14% of retirees contemplate suicide.[10] We could not identify a single agency that tracks the suicide of correctional retirees.

While suicide, PTSI, and depression are at the core of many of the maladies that affect correctional officers, there is far too little discussion inside the correctional system and almost no understanding outside the prison walls. The public's acknowledgment that first responders suffer from higher rates of PTSI and depression has resulted in legislation, programs, and funding to help address this issue.

However, the majority of our elected officials fail to recognize that correctional officers are first responders. As a result, correctional personnel have been excluded from much-needed legislation, training, program accessibility, and funding. Firefighters, EMTs, police officers, and even returning war veterans do not approach the percentages of correctional professionals who suffer from depression and PTSD.

In recent years there has been positive growth in nationwide attention to police suicide that has led to the American Psychological Association now recognizing police psychology as a discipline and providing board certification for providers to treat police suffering with mental health challenges. It is time to advocate for similar outcomes to include correctional officers, so that there are more care providers trained to help in this specific profession. This recognition could also help lessen the "taboo" mentality that is currently attached to seeking support.

> *When you go home, with your wife and your kids, you're already guarded, so you find yourself doing the exact same thing with your wife. When it's a regular thing that your wife may want, at times you feel like you're being cornered or being conned out of something and it's just something regular for her, but to you, you feel like there's ulterior motives because [correctional officers'] minds are geared to work four steps ahead to survive in corrections. It's regular things your family would want from you, but you feel as though everybody has an angle. Problems you would normally hash out with your wife and kids — you put on a persona that they don't care about you because they don't understand what you go through, but then again we don't tell them.*
>
> —John

The mental health of correctional staff is being negatively impacted by the entire correctional system, causing depression, stress, and suicide — all reaching near epidemic proportions and often manifesting in additional physical ailments. The stresses are so high that, on average, a correctional officer's mortality is between ages 59 and 62, which is 14 to 21 years shorter than the general public. [11]

10 *Lerman, A. E. (2017). Officer Health and Wellness: Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey. https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/ executive_summary_08142018.pdf.*

11 *Cheek, F. E. (1984). Stress Management for Correctional Officers and their Families (Vol. 106). College Park, MD: American Correctional Association. See also: Cheek, F. E., & Miller, M. (1982). Prisoners of Life: A Study of Occupational Stress Among State Corrections' Officers. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO. Washington, D.C.*

The psychological damages endured result in lost leave time, costing an agency on average between $390,000 and $590,000 per year per 1,000 full-time employees.[12] The damage to the officer and their families cannot be calculated. It is important to consider not only the impact on correctional officers but on their families as well. Most correctional professionals take the job because it is one of the few pathways to the middle class for those who don't have college degrees. But, as the old labor folk song goes, "They bring more than a paycheck to their loved ones and families." We have far too much evidence of how a spouse, child, or other family member is impacted by the job.

When correctional officers' issues are not considered or, worse yet, are disregarded, as is so often the case, another source of correctional stress is revealed: a lack of respect, understanding, or concern. Given Hollywood's traditional portrayal of correctional officers as "knuckle-dragging Neanderthals" and the absence of any counter-narrative, it's not surprising that in the public's eye the myth has become the legend.

What is so often missing from the national conversation is just how many people are impacted when 34% of correctional officers and 27% of non-custody staff are working at a diminished capacity.[13] The mental health and well-being of correctional staff is directly linked to the safety and rehabilitation of the entire prison population; and so, for those who are invested heavily in programming and reforms, correctional staff wellness needs to be a priority.

12 Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Comorbidity_Study_09-03-131.pdf.

13 Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D., & Kellaway, J. A. (2012). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/PTSD_Prev_in_Corrections_09-03-131.pdf.

CHAPTER 2:

What We Know & Don't Know

STATISTICS

It is worth noting that one of the major obstacles anyone faces in evaluating anything to do with corrections is the lack of availability of timely and relevant data. Many agencies refuse to release information necessary to evaluate operational efficiency, safety, and functionality, and without that specific statistical information it is difficult to make accurate assessments. With this in mind, this chapter seeks to provide useful statistics on PTSI, depression, and suicide. Further, this chapter looks into the myriad of issues that impact an officer's work environment, add stress to the job, and are tied up with the questions of problems and solutions of dealing with correctional officer and staff wellness.

PTSD		
PTSD Rate General Population	3.5%	Women 5.2% Men 1.8%
PTSD Emergency Medical Responders	14.1%	New York EMS Post 911
PTSD New York Firefighters Post-911	14.3%	
PTSD Iraqi War Veterans	12-20%	
PTSD Correctional Custody Staff	***34.1%***	
PTSD Male Custody Staff	36%	Police Officer Male 15%
PTSD Female Custody Staff	30%	Police Officer Female 18%
PTSD All Correctional Staff	27%	
PTSD Female Staff	21.7%	
PTSD Male Staff	30.5%	

(2012 PTSD Study, Desert Waters) [1]

DEPRESSION		
Depression General Population	9.1%	
Depression Males	8.0%	
Depression Females	10.2%	
Depression Corrections Custody Staff	31.0%	Police 12%
Co-Morbidity (PTSD & Depression)	21.9%	
Depression All Correctional Staff	25.7%	
Depression Male Staff	28.7%	
Depression Female Staff	22.1%	

(2013 Comorbidity Study, Desert Waters) [2]

1 Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D., & Kellaway, J. A. (2012). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/PTSD_Prev_in_Corrections_09-03-131.pdf.

2 Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Comorbidity_Study_09-03-131.pdf.

DIVORCE

"Correctional officers are above the general population on all measures of divorce. Correctional officers are higher in rates of divorce, and in the rates of growth in the divorced population. It is difficult to do the statistics any other way. *They were 20% more likely to get a divorce than the general population which is rather sobering…* However, police officers are 18% less likely to get a divorce than the general population." [3]

HEART DISEASE

"Individuals formally screened for PTSD and depression reported that they suffered from heart disease approximately twice as often as individuals who were disorder-free and approximately 50% more often than individuals who had PTSD only or depression only. These results indicate that correctional professionals with concurrent PTSD and depression are substantially more likely to report having heart disease and suggests that they are at increased risk for heart disease." [4]

SUICIDE

	Suicides	Population	Per/100,000
Current All LEOs	7.4	40,000	18.5
Corrections Only	2.4	6,900	34.8
Police Only	5	33,200	15.1

(New Jersey Attorney General Study) [5]

CORRECTIONAL OFFICER MORTALITY[6]

Average life span of an adult male =	75 years
Average life span of adult female =	80 years
Average life span of a correctional officer =	59 years

3 Aumiller, G. (2016, December 2). Divorce in Cops and Corrections [web log]. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/divorce-cops-corrections-gary-aumiller-ph-d-abpp/.

4 Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Prevalence and Statistical Information Pertaining to PTSD, Depression, and Heart Disease among U.S. Corrections Professionals. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. http://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Oasis_April_2013.pdf.

5 New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force. (2009). New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report. New Jersey Office of the Attorney General. https://www.state.nj.us/lps/library/NJPoliceSuicideTaskForceReport-January-30-2009-Final(r2.3.09).pdf.

6 Cheek, F. E. (1984). Stress Management for Correctional Officers and their Families (Vol. 106). College Park, MD: American Correctional Association. See also: Cheek, F. E., & Miller, M. (1982). Prisoners of Life: A Study of Occupational Stress Among State Corrections' Officers. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO. Washington, D.C.

Icon credits: PTSD by WEBTECHOPS LLP, Depression by Adriana Danaila, Suicide by HeadsOfBirds, Death by Alzam from the Noun Project.

A 2011 Florida study found a slightly higher mortality rate of 62.4 years.[7] Correctional officers give up between 14 and 21 years of their lives in the name of public safety — a very high price to pay for these officers and their families.

ASSAULTS

The number of assaults on staff is grossly underreported. Much of that is the result of correctional agencies excluding incidents that would be prosecuted as assaults on the street from being reported as assaults behind the walls. An agency might also count an incident when multiple officers were injured as one assault. In addition, many assaults go unreported and are dismissed by management as "part of the job." Of those that are reported, few are prosecuted.

The de minimis nature in which many of these incidents are handled sends several wrong messages to staff and those who are incarcerated alike. It illustrates a perceived disregard for staff safety by management. It adds to the "us vs. them" mentality that staff often adopt, only the "them" in this instance are not the incarcerated individuals but, rather, the administration. It promotes a bunker mentality, adding to that sense of isolation and abandonment staff often feel. It can also feed an unwanted undercurrent, "*. . . if the administration won't handle this problem, we must.*"

The way management deals with this very sensitive area can either unify staff believing that the administration "has our backs" or it can foster mistrust, division, and vigilantism.

> ". . . recent figures from Wolff and colleagues showed that across a nationally representative sample of U.S. prisons, the rate of inmate-on-inmate assault ranged from 129 to 346 per 1,000 offenders, and inmate-on-officer assault ranged from 83 to 321 per 1,000 offenders." [8]

The wide range in the estimated number of assaults reported illustrates the need for a uniform reporting mechanism. This is another area in which data collection and transparency are lacking and sorely needed. The way the assaults on staff are handled in each department speaks volumes about the way staff are viewed.

> "As another example, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), correctional officers and jailers, in 2014, sustained 53.5 work-related intentional injuries by another person per 10,000 FTEs. This is much higher than the equivalent rate for all types of workers (2.9 per 10,000 FTEs), and even higher than that for police and sheriffs' patrol officers (42.5 per 10,000 FTEs)." [9]

7 Parker, J. R. (2011). Florida Mortality Study: Florida Law Enforcement and Correctional Officers Compared to Florida General Population. http://www.floridastatefop.org/pdf_files/floridamortalitystudy.pdf.

8 Wolff, N., Blitz, C. L., Shi, J., Siegel, J., & Bachman, R. (2007). Physical Violence Inside Prisons: Rates of Victimization. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 34(5), 588–599.

9 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016, November 10). News release: Nonfatal Occupational Injuries and Illnesses Requiring Days Away From Work, 2015. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/osh2.pdf.

There are 1,430,000 individuals incarcerated in our prisons.[10] Applying the rates found in the 2007 study estimates there are between 12,500 and 48,300 assaults on prison staff per year.[11] With that level of violence, a correctional officer can expect to be seriously assaulted at least twice during a twenty-year career.

How many other occupations have that expectation? How many other employees must consider what their security protocol is if they are taken hostage? Whether or not they consciously realize it, those considerations are planted firmly in a correctional officer's subconscious and they have an impact.

> "The violence in prisons haunts guards' private lives. They begin to treat their family and friends like they treat convicts, lose their trust in people, and feel threatened on a daily basis. This behavior often leads to domestic violence, drug abuse, and feelings of guilt." [12]

> *I noticed he was sneaking up behind me, he said something and returned to his cell. As I approached his door, he lunged at me… when I ignored him, he came at me from behind. I turned to face him to defend myself, his left hand was behind his back and I assumed he had a weapon… he struck me in the neck, I tried to block it, I pushed him into the doorway and I grabbed hold of him and got him in a headlock and punched him in the face. I tried to secure the knife and could not obtain it, it was tied to his wrist. He tried to stick his fingers in my left eye, and I was holding his hands down by his wrist.*
>
> *—Matt*

Physical assaults, mental assaults, assaults with weapons, assaults with bodily fluids, and threats to loved ones and families are all part of the psychological trauma officers endure on a regular basis. Even when it's an officer located two thousand miles away who gets murdered, brutally assaulted, or taken hostage, every officer who hears of that incident realizes it could be them. Their family members' fear and stress levels also increase when they learn of these assaults. It's the pebble-in-the-pond ripple effect.

Most often assaults are associated with a physical altercation. However, just as much psychological trauma can be induced with verbal threats. When a gang member or violent offender tells an officer "I know where you live" or "I'll see you when I get out," these varied threats can have damaging consequences. But when they tell an officer they know when they work and they intend to pay their family a visit when they get out, it has a detrimental impact on staff psyche.

10 *Carlson, E. A. (2020, October). Prisoners in 2019. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf.*

11 *Wolff, N., Blitz, C. L., Shi, J., Siegel, J., & Bachman, R. (2007). Physical Violence Inside Prisons: Rates of Victimization. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 34(5), 588–599.*

12 *Picincu, A. (2019, March 24). The Disadvantages of Being a Correctional Officer. Chron. https://work.chron.com/disadvantages-being-correctional-officer-10287.html.*

It can be a potentially fatal mistake to get complacent and forget, even for a moment, the realities of working in the correctional environment, which is counter to the adaptability of human nature.

This gives rise to the cognitive dissonance that is a foundational block for the stress of officers. Even during times when all is relatively calm, and it is possible to slip into the mundane daily routines of the job, officers and staff must remain purposely hypervigilant.

This underlying stress is one reason why hypertension and heart disease in correctional officers are considered on-the-job injuries.

> *There was a guy, when I'm doing a bunk check at night, he says "Smiley" and I stop and back up and say "are you talking to me?" and he goes "yeah, your nickname is Smiley, right?" "How do you know that?" He says "Well your best friend's name is Dwayne, his nickname is Onion, and you went to Hale Junior High School, El Camino High School, and El Camino College..." I wrote the guy's name down, went home and broke out my yearbooks, and this dude is there through the whole period.*
>
> —Sam

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE

Except for health care professionals, there are few occupations that deal with the levels of exposure to infectious and communicable disease that correctional staff do.

The exposure levels to officers, administrative and civilian staff, families, and the incarcerated population during the COVID-19 pandemic was staggering, leaving many dead.

On April 1, 2020, the Federal Bureau of Prisons ordered an immediate lockdown of all federal correctional facilities.

> "For a 14-day period, inmates in every institution will be secured in their assigned cells/quarters to decrease the spread of the virus. This modification to our action plan is based on health concerns, not disruptive inmate behavior. . . Limited group gathering will be afforded to the extent practical to facilitate commissary, laundry, showers, telephone, and Trust Fund Limited Inmate Computer System (TRULINCS) access." [13]

Countless died as a result of COVID-19 spreading through correctional institutions infecting officers and the incarcerated population. Thousands of family members still live in fear that their loved one will be infected too. As if the daily stresses of a life working behind the walls isn't enough, the long-term effects of added stress caused by this pandemic have yet to be calculated.

13 *Federal Bureau of Prisons. (2020, March 31). COVID-19 Action Plan: Phase Five. Federal Bureau of Prisons. https://www.bop.gov/resources/news/20200331_covid19_action_plan_5.jsp.*

It's no secret that prisons and jails are incubators for communicable disease. Hepatitis B and C, MRSA, tuberculosis, ectoparasites (bedbugs, lice), influenza, and HIV are all found at elevated levels in correctional facilities. As a result, correctional officers face higher levels of exposure to communicable disease than any other occupation, with the exception of health care workers.

> "... Although there are little empirical data on the rates at which COs contract any of the above-noted illnesses, practitioners and scholars consider infectious and communicable diseases among inmates to be a significant threat to the health and safety of COs" [14]

HIV prevalence is three times higher in our prisons and jails and 30% to 40% of those incarcerated are estimated to be positive for Hepatitis C.[15] MRSA outbreaks are not uncommon either.

One symptom long associated with a high level of stress is an impaired immune system. Correctional officers are not only exposed to a much higher level of communicable disease than the general population, they are also much more susceptible to infection if their immune systems are compromised. Correctional officers must deal with the anxiety associated with potential exposure and also with the stress that comes from the fear of exposing their families as well.

MENTALLY ILL POPULATION

> "James and Glaze (2006) further noted that in 2005, 56 percent of state prisoners, 45 percent of federal prisoners, and 64 percent of those in jail reported symptoms of at least one mental health problem." [16]

An unscientific survey of approximately 150 correctional officers from various parts of the United States attending a conference on PTSI in 2019 were asked how many of them had been trained in recognizing and dealing with inmates with mental health issues. Only two officers raised their hands.[17]

14 *Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.*

15 *Reindollar, R. W. (1999). Hepatitis C and the Correctional Population. The American Journal of Medicine, 107(6), 100-103.*

16 *James, D. J., & Glaze, L. E. (2006). Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates.*

17 *Dawe, B. (2019, November 16). COPTSD156 Conference [Conference]. COPTSD156 Coalition Initiative Hosted by American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network, Boston, Massachusetts. https://6defa663-3457-49e5-bbb4-a72868787876.filesusr.com/ugd/ba33c6_ab8fa4cd-064f46b6b0b79a0419c89373.pdf.*

Here is an example where the culture of corrections and an officer's humanity collide. Even if an officer is aware that an individual has mental health issues, they must not treat them any differently than they would any other in their custody. To do so could mark that individual as a possible snitch, and for anyone inside to be perceived as being a "rat" is a potential death sentence. It can also mark the officer as soft and potentially weak in the eyes of others and therefore seen as unreliable to fellow staff. Officers learn to suppress their emotions and compassion, often with severe consequences to their own mental health. Even officers who want to extend a sense of humanity are confronted with the restrictions on "overfamiliarity," which actually forbid those types of connections. So, it's not just that they don't want to be perceived as weak or soft, but are required to close off in order to keep their jobs. For many officers, it's not long before empathy and compassion go missing from their personal lives as well.

SYNTHETIC DRUGS

The introduction of illicit synthetic drugs into the correctional systems poses yet another threat to staff health and adds additional levels of stress. K-2 Spice, Fentanyl, Suboxone, and other potentially deadly drugs are turning up in prisons and jails on a regular basis. Several inside have died from overdose, and numerous staff members have taken ill as a result of exposure. It also adds additional stress on staff working in the visiting rooms. As security measures increase to ensure safety and reduce contraband, interactions with visitors can become strained.

> "From mail-rooms to drones in the yard, these drugs have consistently found their way into correctional institutions, leaving officers exposed and inmate consumers susceptible to the dangers of the opioid epidemic. Despite increased awareness and focus on prevention, the volume and availability of these drugs remains steady and continues to wreak havoc on the correctional system. Correctional departments are also asked to serve as drug rehabilitation clinics but given few resources to combat the problem effectively. So, what can be done? First, recognize correctional officers as first responders and allow them to carry and administer life-saving drugs such as naloxone. By doing so, we create an alert and well-trained workforce with the skills and knowledge to impact the opioid crisis on the front lines and provide on-the-spot care." [18]

While there is plenty of coverage of the few officers who violate their oath and take part in these activities, there is far too little attention paid to the threats the drugs pose and what a potential sustainable and effective response would look like.

18 Potter, A. (2018, September 6). Opinion: Prison are overlooked in opioid crisis. The Detroit News. http://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2018/09/05/prison-overlooked-opioid-crisis/1192865002/.

CHAPTER 3:

Surprising Sources of Stress

If the average person was told that corrections is a stressful job, they would almost universally accept that proposition. What might surprise them would be to learn that the individuals in our custody are at the low end of the spectrum on what leads to stress in corrections.

National studies conducted by Dr. Caterina Spinaris, referenced multiple times in this report; Dr. Donald Steele, who has spent over twenty years treating correctional officers for stress; and American Military University professor Michael Pittaro, Ph.D., who is a criminal justice expert and author, have all separately reached the same conclusion: approximately 60% of staff stress comes from policies, procedures, and the administrators themselves.[1]

> "Most outrageous and unexpected is betrayal and abuse by some administrators and superior officers who abuse authority and bully officers as though they were inmates." [2]

> "Brower (2013) remarked that policies and programs designed to improve officer health have not been instituted in many prison facilities because administrative officials fail to recognize the dangers attached to the job." [3]

An additional 15% to 20% of staff stress comes from each other:[4]

> "Unfortunately, also, officer betrayal of or bullying of officers by other officers or managers also can cause severe stress or PTSD. This latter can range from demeaning an officer for being weak to punishment and intimidation such as jamming radios." [5]

1 *Dawe, B. (2019, November 16). COPTSD156 Conference [Conference]. COPTSD156 Coalition Initiative Hosted by American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network, Boston, Massachusetts. https://6defa663-3457-49e5-bbb4-a72868787876.filesusr.com/ugd/ba33c6_ab8fa4cd-064f46b6b0b79a0419c89373.pdf.*

2 *Steele, D. (2016, April). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Correction Officer's Life. National Correctional Employees Union. https://www.nceu.org/index.cfm?zone=%2Funionactive%2Fview_article.cfm&HomeID=566264.*

3 *Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.*

4 *Dawe, B. (2019, November 16). COPTSD156 Conference [Conference]. COPTSD156 Coalition Initiative Hosted by American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network, Boston, Massachusetts. https://6defa663-3457-49e5-bbb4-a72868787876.filesusr.com/ugd/ba33c6_ab8fa4cd-064f46b6b0b79a0419c89373.pdf.*

5 *Steele, D. (2016, April). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Correction Officer's Life. National Correctional Employees Union. https://www.nceu.org/index.cfm?zone=%2Funionactive%2Fview_article.cfm&HomeID=566264.*

The remaining 15% to 20% comes from the incarcerated population:[6]

> "Personally, I can attest that there is ample PTSD in the lives of correctional officers. As a psychologist in private practice I have seen hundreds of officers from state and county facilities where there are stabbings, hangings, assaults with contaminated needles, assaults with saliva, urine, excrement, credible threats to life and welfare of officers and families, sudden unexpected deaths and suicides." [7]

This chapter will consider not only the intrinsic sources of officer and staff stress, such as the three discussed above, but also several of the outside factors that increase the load on an officer's psyche. After looking at who correctional officers are, the chapter delves into some of the reasons this profession is so greatly impacted by the mental rigors on the job, more so than other first responders.

WHO ARE CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS?

During childhood, kids regularly invent games where they imagine what they will be when they grow up. Many pretend to be police officers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, firefighters, or teachers. How many kids in the neighborhood grew up locking their friends in the basement because they wanted to be a correctional officer? How many seniors in the high school yearbook listed "correctional officer" as a career aspiration? Almost no one does that. No one wants to go to prison, even if they have the keys. Unless you have family working in corrections, many of the men and women who fill out an application for a job behind the walls are doing so for one reason — economic necessity. There are some military veterans and a few approaching corrections as a stepping-stone, but by and large, most correctional applicants just need a job with a few benefits and maybe a little security. Few wanted to make it a career when they started.

Some choose this path because they see it as an opportunity to help people "correct" their wrongdoings and come out better, but those for whom this was their motivation quickly find out that it's not really an option, because the current system was not designed with this in mind..

> *The suffering that you are actually guiding, overseeing, and nobody tells you that's what this is and nobody probably will never admit it openly, that there are people that are suffering. There's no person or culture that I know that has willingly submitted to subjugation. It's against human nature. People don't like being confined and constrained. It's part of why it's punishment. We're actively part of that and there's this dissonance that develops within you when you see something that's not natural happening to an individual, and it's compounded when you subconsciously know that you have a hand in it.*
>
> *—Sam*

6 *Dawe, B. (2019, November 16). COPTSD156 Conference [Conference]. COPTSD156 Coalition Initiative Hosted by American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network, Boston, Massachusetts. https://6defa663-3457-49e5-bbb4-a72868787876.filesusr.com/ugd/ba33c6_ab8fa4cd-064f46b6b0b79a0419c89373.pdf.*

7 *Steele, D. (2016, April). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Correction Officer's Life. National Correctional Employees Union. https://www.nceu.org/index.cfm?zone=%2Funionactive%2Fview_article.cfm&HomeID=566264.*

Correctional officers are a cross section of Americans, drawn mostly from the middle and lower economic classes. They represent every race, religion, color, gender, and educational background in the nation. There is no one correctional officer demographic, at least not when they start a career in corrections.

HOLLYWOOD AND MEDIA PORTRAYAL

Try to recall the last time there was a movie or television show that portrayed correctional officers in a positive light. From the 1950's Jimmy Cagney gangster movies to *The Shawshank Redemption, Orange Is the New Black, and Prison Break*, it's hard to find a positive portrayal of correctional officers. The same is true in daily media and news.

As a thought experiment, on your computer, pull up your browser and type "correctional officer news" and see exactly what is in the news at any given time. For every positive story, if there is one, there are infinitely more negative ones. Correctional officers save people's lives every single day. On a regular basis officers and staff intervene in riots, assaults, gang violence, attempted suicides and murders, medical emergencies, fires, attempted escapes, and drug overdoses. They risk their lives not only protecting the public but to protect convicted rapists, murderers, child molesters, armed robbers, drug lords, and gangbangers from one another — it's the job.

When they aren't on the job they are parents, Little League coaches, part-time fire and EMS, and community members. Yet, the media's portrayal has many believing officers are the bad guys, sadistic knuckle-draggers and wannabe cops. It is true that officers and staff are unusual in terms of what is asked of them. They run toward the very things that others run away from, but again, this is part of the job.

The inaccurate narrative that has taken hold is that correctional officers are the bad guys while those who are incarcerated are increasingly portrayed as innocent victims. That takes a toll. In addition, what is entirely missing is that the system has not been designed for the success of anyone it touches.

Granted, like every profession, corrections has its issues, as do others. Take embezzlement on Wall Street or price fixing in pharmaceuticals. There is not a profession in the world that does not have some members who should not be in that profession. Some teachers shouldn't teach, some preachers shouldn't preach, and some people should not be given a badge. With over 430,000 correctional officers nationwide, if only 1% should not be in uniform that's 4,300 bad officers. Make no mistake, no one wants bad officers off the blocks more than the other good officers. Bad officers endanger everyone. It doesn't take long for 4,300 to distort the image of, and put in danger, the other 425,000, especially when there is no counter narrative, no one to tell all the lifesaving stories and explain all the good that is done every day. Without those real-life stories being told, the public is left with a very warped and damaging idea of who officers and staff are and what they do.

Compounding matters is the near-universal policy that custody staff are not allowed to talk to any media outlet unless it is pre-approved by the administration. The repercussions are real and known to all staff — talk to the media and you're looking at a suspension or worse. This leads us to the primary source of stress cited by most staff: the administration.

ADMINISTRATION

> "The results of this review indicate that the organizational structure and climate of correctional institutions has the most consistent relationship with COs' job stress and burnout . . . interventions should aim to improve the organizational structure and climate of the correctional facility by improving communication between management and COs." [8]

When an administration's everyday actions are accepted as professional and part of organizational norms, challenging and changing that culture can be a herculean task. Self-evaluation and facing the realization that there is a problem is never an easy thing to do.

> "An important first step is recognizing that this field of employment is perilous and accompanied by many threats to CO health. Brower [2013] remarked that policies and programs designed to improve officer health have not been instituted in many prison facilities because administrative officials fail to recognize the dangers attached to the job. Improvement of CO health starts by changing this mindset among not only administrative officials but also other relevant stakeholders in the correctional field." [9]

This is a long-standing problem, as can be seen from this 1982 quote from a research paper by the National Institute of Justice:

> "Stress among correctional officers and administrators is often caused by the conflicting goals of custody and rehabilitation, trial and error in management, and the correctional system's vulnerability to political and community groups." [10]

This section is not intended to impugn or point fingers at any particular administration. It is, however, a key intention of this paper to shine a light on some of the administrative practices that add to the overall stress in corrections. Cultural change is essential if there is to be reform in corrections, and it starts at the top. As with most line officers, members of the command staff fall into their predetermined roles. Fortunately, there is no law or statute that mandates correctional departments be run as paramilitary organizations steeped in secrecy. Management structure can be redesigned; data

8 *inney, C., Stergiopoulos, E., Hensel, J., Bonato, S., & Dewa, C. S. (2013). Organizational Stressors Associated with Job Stress and Burnout in Correctional Officers: a Systematic Review. BMC Public Health, 13(1), 1-13.*

9 *Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.*

10 *Cheek, F., & Miller, M. D. (1982). Reducing Staff and Inmate Stress. Corrections Today, 44(5), 72-76.*

collection methods updated, promoting transparency without risking security; and pilot programs launched. The bipartisan winds of criminal justice reform make this issue ripe for change, but it will take a willingness to relinquish traditional norms and a commitment to make a long-term concerted effort to do so.

> "Many scholars conclude that employment as a CO is among the most dangerous and life threatening of all professions . . . Given how COs are heavily relied upon to supervise inmate behavior, establish order in their facilities, and maintain wider institutional security, it is paramount that correctional practitioners, researchers, administrative officials, and other interested stakeholders begin developing more effective and widely used strategies for enhancing the general well-being of this critically important workforc." [11]

COMMAND DECISIONS

Correctional agencies in the United States operate under a paramilitary command structure. Like soldiers, correctional officers must follow orders. The actions taken in any given situation are predetermined by training and policy. Officers are not allowed to provide input into the formation of the policies they implement or the procedures they follow. They are not asked for feedback regarding their success or failure. In the decision-making chain of authority, officers are the proverbial "potted plant." They are expected to follow orders and if they disagree, they are allowed to question directives only after the order has been carried out. Despite media focus on officers, it is the administration that decides who goes to solitary and for how long. The officers work within the conditions of confinement that those who are incarcerated live in, but it is the administration that decides those conditions.

However, unlike the military, correctional administrators' tenures are usually brief, and leadership is constantly changing. New commissioners and wardens are often appointed with each new election cycle. In many of our jail systems, sheriffs are elected often with no correctional or even law enforcement background. As a result, command decisions and directives will often change with each administration. This frequently leads to inconsistency and upheaval within a facility or department. "Change" is viewed with a large dose of skepticism by staff. Unlike most occupations, "change" in correctional policy can have a direct impact on the health and safety of everyone involved. Understanding the limited input staff have into the operational design of a facility helps to shine a spotlight on where major reforms are needed most —at the top. If a facility is run poorly or is more violent than others, that reflects most directly on the administration. If there are bad officers and they are not weeded out, that too is management's function. In corrections, everything flows top down.

11 *Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.*

UNDERSTAFFING

There is no greater threat to the safety and security of a correctional institution or to the completion of the mission of corrections than the issue of staffing. Staffing impacts virtually every aspect of a correctional facility's operations. It is also one of the most influential components of staff stress.

When a jail, prison, or juvenile detention facility is designed, the number of officers needed to safely staff the facility is determined by government officials, usually someone from finance. That number is based on a variety of factors, including facility security classification (low, medium, high, close), population, and architectural design. The number of staff is the "operational" staffing level.

The number of incarcerated individuals a facility is designed to hold is the "design capacity." The actual number they will put into a facility is the "operational capacity." For example, most prisons were not built to be double bunked (design capacity), but today most of them are (operational capacity). Together, the operational staffing level and inmate design capacity establish what the agency cites as the inmate-to-officer staffing ratio.

The initial staffing levels established at the onset are what the agency feels will maintain a safe, secure facility if normal operations are underway, including programming, education, religious activities, outside work details, visits — the day-to-day. A facility can operate with reduced staff if many of those programs and activities are curtailed; however, whenever staff is reduced, the margin for error declines and dangers increase.

The point at which the agency starts to hire overtime to fill positions strongly indicates what management feels is a safe ratio. As long as there is not too much violence or an escape, correctional administrators are primarily judged on how they handle their budgets.

Inmate-to-officer staffing ratios is one of the more disingenuous statistics that the public is led to believe. According to the statistics being reported, in our jails the ratio of inmates to officers is 4 to 1,[12] in our federal facilities it's 4.4 to 1,[13] and it's being reported as 4.9 to 1[14] in state facilities. Every correctional officer in the nation would strongly disagree with those numbers.

Most correctional officers work in conditions in which they are outnumbered by better than 60 to 1. Many operate at over 100 to 1, especially in the yards and "chow halls" of medium to larger jails and prisons. The numbers being reported by the agencies are derived by simply dividing the total number of inmates by the total number of officers — a completely misleading statistic.

12 *Zeng, Z. (2018, February). Jail Inmates in 2016. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/ji16.pdf.*

13 *Davidson, J. (2015, September 1). Too many inmates, too few correctional officers: A lethal recipe in federal prisons. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/federal-eye/wp/2015/09/01/too-many-inmates-too-few-correctional-officers-a-lethal-recipe-in-federal-prisons/.*

14 *Stephan, J. (2008, October). Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2005. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/csfcf05.pdf.*

An officer works an average of 40 hours a week and has two to three weeks' vacation, personal time, sick leave, etc. An inmate is there all 168 hours every week. The numbers reported to the public are accurate only if every officer works 24/7 and never goes home.

What is the difference in perception when the public hears 1 officer for every 5 inmates versus when they hear 1 officer for every 70 inmates? Reporting accurate staffing numbers is not just a matter of needed transparency but could also make a huge difference in mobilizing the public and elected officials to address this fundamental weakness in the correctional system.

The way to establish an honest staffing ratio is to do a "post audit." Every post is evaluated on every shift as to when it is operational and when it is unmanned. Only then can the staffing ratio of a facility truly be established. If those numbers were revealed the public would be shocked, and our elected officials would possibly then be moved to action.

Lack of staff is a major contributor to employee burnout and limits the capacity of officers and staff to contribute to a system where rehabilitation is an achievable goal. This shortage impacts everyone, from administrators to those in custody. Managers are under pressure to make decisions on the staffing numbers they can get by with. If someone gets injured or worse, they have to live with their decision. What programs can be cut or canceled? Is there a need to curtail visits and initiate other restrictions? These decisions impact the tension in the facility as well. Understaffing strains every aspect of a correctional system.

There are several ways to achieve safe staffing levels by either decreasing the incarcerated population or increasing staffing levels. In December 2018 Congress passed the First Step Act[15] initiating several reforms designed to decrease the incarcerated population. ***However, as the population declines, it should provide the opportunity to bring staffing back to safe levels and not simply decrease staffing in tandem with declining population numbers. A decreasing population should lead our nation to ask some fundamental questions: How do we have decreasing numbers but still have overcrowding? Is the ultimate measure of success short-term reductions or lower recidivism rates? Regardless of the short- or long-term priorities, why not take advantage of lower numbers to improve staffing ratios rather than lean further into understaffing?***

DISTRUST OF ADMINISTRATION

> "COs' negative perceptions about managerial decision-making practices can create friction between both sides and contribute to higher levels of CO stress and burnout [Finney et al., 2013; Lambert, Hogan, & Allen, 2006]. Lambert and colleagues [2012[found that officer stress and burnout could be predicted by their distrust of the prison administration." [16]

15 First Step Act of 2018, S.756, 115th Congress (2017-2018), Public Law No: 115-391.

16 Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

Rarely if ever are staff asked for their input on administrative decisions or policy. There is no buy-in opportunity for staff, no way for them to own the policy or partake in preplanning and development. In fact, staff usually find out about a change the same day it's implemented. In many ways it's the paramilitary nature of the command structure that shuts off staff participation.

When changes initiated by the administration impact living conditions for those incarcerated, staff serve as the buffer of policies they know little about yet must enforce. This becomes another unnecessary source of resentment and stress. And when those decisions have a direct impact on staff and facility safety, it becomes a source of anger.

EQUIPMENT

The failure to provide adequate equipment to properly and safely work in a correctional environment rests squarely with agency heads. Officers have no control over the equipment they are provided or the condition it's in. Cell doors that won't close or regularly jam; radios that don't work or are without batteries or horizontal warning alerts; insufficient handcuffs; dangerous transportation vehicles; outdated fire extinguishers; not enough protective gloves, face guards, extraction shields, or protective vests — all of these issues are commonplace in corrections. These deficiencies convey a shallow disregard for officer safety yet again.

In some cases, the lack of proper equipment has led to escapes, assaults, and even death.

> "Corrections officer Jayme Biendl had complained repeatedly to supervisors about working alone in the chapel at the Monroe Correctional Complex (Washington). The 5-foot-3, 130-pound officer also complained that security cameras in the area didn't work. Late Saturday, her worst fears were realized when she was found strangled in the chapel, and a microphone cord was found near her post." [17]

> "The report found locks failed for years at the Lewis prison, leading to beatings of prisoners and guards, and that Ryan [former Arizona Director Charles Ryan] failed to appreciate the seriousness of the problem until he saw broadcast video of an assault. One prisoner was killed in an assault and two guards severely beaten in incidents related to faulty door locks." [18]

At the time of this writing, the locks in the Lewis prison in Arizona have still not all been fixed.

17 *Ostrom, C. M., & Chan, S. P. (2011, February 2). Monroe guard complained about working solo before inmate killed her. The Seattle Times. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/monroe-guard-complained-about-working-solo-before-inmate-killed-her/.*

18 *Christie, B. (2019, December 6). Arizona prison guard union says cell door locks still broken. ABC 15. https://www.abc15.com/news/local-news/investigations/arizona-prison-guard-union-says-cell-door-locks-still-broken.*

OUR OWN WORST ENEMIES

> "Keinan and Malach-Pines [2007] identified an additional impediment to successful implementation of safety and wellness programs: the widespread attitude known as 'machismo' among COs. Machismo prevents officers from requesting any type of assistance, because they perceive such requests as a sign of inherent weakness. It is imperative that there is a change to the cultural mindset in corrections and recognition that this is a dangerous field where external sources of assistance are sometimes required to improve officer well-being." [19]

In corrections today, officers feel endangered by those in their custody, abandoned by management, misunderstood by the public, ignored by politicians, and demonized by the media. They can't — and don't want to — tell their family the things they see and sometimes are called upon to do. Friends want to hear the gory details that officers don't care to relive. For all of these reasons, officers turn inward, to each other, not only for physical protection but for their emotional and psychological well-being. Working in a prison is very much a mentality akin to being in a war zone.

Under the circumstances that prevail in today's prisons and jails, officers believe that all they have is each other. As such, there is a "what happens in prison, stays in prison" silent undertone. The code of silence you hear about is often about survival. An officer's very life may depend on a fellow officer's willingness to risk his or her own life. If their loyalty to each other is in question, so too might be their response when an emergency occurs requiring one officer to help another. Outnumbered as officers are in the environment in which they work, they never want to have to question whether or not their back is covered.

Should an officer not adapt to the culture of the institution where they work, their time there may be difficult. Officers want to believe that in every instance, no matter who the officer, if the alarm bell goes off the response will not vary. This perception fuels anxiety, which influences decisions and determines action or inaction. There is little worse than to be shunned or isolated from your very lifeline. In the world of corrections, going along to get along is often believed to be the safest course. You make waves, you get sunk. Weakness in corrections, regardless of your role in the system, is perceived to endanger everyone.

> "The culture is tough and macho, and any sign of vulnerability, especially a mental health diagnosis, carries stigma. 'Officers can never be weak. Inmates can never be weak. It's its own world,' said Brian Baisley, the head of the medical evaluation unit at Riverhead [jail in New York]." [20]

19 Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

20 Lisitsina, D. (2015, May 20). 'Prison guards can never be weak': the hidden PTSD crisis in America's jails. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/20/corrections-officers-ptsd-american-prisons.

Outnumbered as the staff and officers are, physical strength plays a much smaller role than does mental strength. If an officer is viewed as easily manipulated or conned by those incarcerated, his or her ability to do the job will be questioned. If an officer shows a little too much compassion, empathy, or familiarity with those inside, his or her loyalty to fellow officers may come into doubt. This is another example of the internal conflicts that officers face daily with the decisions they are called upon to make.

> *It's you against the world and there's no safe haven; you have to watch your back with anyone. It's a fear that you live with but you're too macho to call it fear because that's when you are perceived as weak.*
>
> *—John*

The result of this need for mental toughness amid conflicting loyalties leads to building a psychological wall that officers tend to create to protect themselves. The first brick in that psychological wall is "I can handle this" — it's machismo in its deadliest form. The culture not only accepts it but rewards and promotes it, and there is very little sympathy for anyone who is so weak as to need help.

The current correctional system is designed to desensitize everyone who enters into it. The feeling of empathy and concern for others is tucked away in order to fit a culture dominated by risk, danger, and fear. These are conditions ripe for emotional distress and anguish buried just below the surface. The repercussions for seeking help range from being ostracized and isolated to losing your job. In many cases, promotional opportunities cease, assignments are limited, and officers may lose their private right to carry a fireman, which in and of itself can cost them their job. Officers fear that if they seek help their confidentiality may be breached and that they will be branded as weak.

> "PTSD is considered taboo partly because many fear a diagnosis will have negative repercussions on their career prospects. They won't get diagnosed because of the stigma," Michael Van Patten [a twenty-plus-year veteran officer from Oregon] says. "Many are afraid that they will be put through a 'fit for duty' test with a state psychologist as a result and will be decertified." [21]

Correctional officers find themselves in a Catch-22. If they seek help, they may be ostracized, endanger their career, and possibly lose their jobs. If they don't, they may get by for a while, but it could catch up to them, as the sixty-one-year-old mortality rate for officers indicates. [22]

As described above, staff perception and management style are the biggest impediments faced in tackling this dilemma. The culture ingrained in both will take a while to change, but that must not deter change efforts. Having emotional reactions to a career in corrections is not about being weak, it's about being human. Just as administrations need to

21 Lisitsina, D. (2015, May 20). 'Prison guards can never be weak': the hidden PTSD crisis in America's jails. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/20/corrections-officers-ptsd-american-prisons.

22 Parker, J. R. (2011). Florida Mortality Study: Florida Law Enforcement and Correctional Officers Compared to Florida General Population. http://www.floridastatefop.org/pdf_files/floridamortalitystudy.pdf.

change their often-draconian management style, so too do staff who must self-evaluate and treat each other better. If indeed officers are all in this together, then it is time to update the definitions of loyalty and having each other's backs.

FAMILY CONFLICTS

> "The unique dimensions of a correctional officer's job have led researchers to recognize the deleterious impact of the correctional work environment on the family domain, which may further manifest as job stress and job dissatisfaction. Given the regimented, almost militaristic, tendency of work inside the prison walls, incongruence and conflicts between work and family domains may be more frequent or magnified for correctional employees. Indeed, prior studies have found a number of work–family conflict dimensions to be linked to job stress and job satisfaction [Lambert et al., 2006] as well as eventual job burnout [Lambert, Hogan, & Altheimer, 2010]." [23]

> *Fitness-for-duty exam comes and now they want to take your gun away or they want to see if you can even handle the job. Fitness for duty is a huge thing for correctional officers. They'll say you can't do the job and they'll take you out, without pay, and that's a big problem, you know? It's one of the things that holds us back from getting help.*
>
> *—John*

orced overtime, shift work, and schedule changes dramatically impact participation in educational obligations, day care, family gatherings, and children's events for those working in corrections. Understaffing, which is a major problem in many jurisdictions, greatly impacts officers' schedules and hence their life outside of the walls. For example, officers can literally be told during their shift that, due to understaffing, they will not be able to go home at the end of their eight hours but instead will be expected to work an additional eight-hour shift back-to-back. That lack of control is in and of itself a major source of stress. On top of that, having to tell a child why they had to miss a game or recital adds insult to injury. When officers find themselves having to apologize to their families, week after week, the resentment and stress mount.

Most officers do not recount their daily activities to their families. There is often not much to say, and when there is, it's not usually something they want to share with loved ones. Officers don't want to raise unnecessary alarms in the hearts and minds of their family members or discuss the gory details when things go sideways. Officers often explain that when they return home, they change out of their clothes and shower even before saying hello to their children to avoid having their kids see them the way they look at work — and they don't just mean the uniform.

Having the support of families is critical to officer mental health, and when those family members have a better understanding of what officers do, it can help assuage their fears as well. Without it the isolation just grows worse and with it the dangers (see recommendations for more on mentoring as a solution).

23 Armstrong, G. S., Atkin-Plunk, C. A., & Wells, J. (2015). The Relationship Between Work–Family Conflict, Correctional Officer Job Stress, and Job Satisfaction. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 42(10), 1066-1082.

JOB SATISFACTION AND RECOGNITION

Unlike for other law enforcement officers and first responders, there are no rewards or acknowledgments of a job well done in corrections. No front-page headlines when a correctional officer saves someone's life or risks their own life protecting offenders from attacking each other. Even the administrators are slow to recognize and appreciate the jobs correctional officers do.

The drumbeat of negative messages about corrections is never-ending, making staff defensive and providing yet another source of stress that finds correctional officers combating an "us vs. them" mentality.

> "The first point — and one of the most important ones — is recognition. Employees feeling valued motivates satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. That's why recognition and appreciation should be part of strategic HR decisions, and should be assimilated into the organization´s culture. . . Across the board, recognition equates to motivation and success not only for employees but for employers." [24]

For correctional officers who neither feel good about what they do nor see any positive results (most often they see individuals returning to prison, not the success stories of those who turn their lives around), their self-esteem suffers and they question their worth. As this happens the employer loses too, as they are not getting the best officer they could otherwise.

> *And this does and can occur without the ability to communicate with family members external to the prison. And it does build a sense of absence or neglect in our children.*
>
> *—Sam*

> *It's not vulnerable to be open to your family, that's something that we have got to do. That's your haven. You put it up when you go to work and you take it down when you leave work — that's what we're working on being able to do.*
>
> *—John*

> *The standard refrains are 'That is what you are paid to do' or 'You want a thank you for doing your job?'*
>
> *—Sam*

24 Daud, G. (2016, March 11). Appreciation and Recognition – The Key to Job Satisfaction and Engagement. Intraway. https://workwiththe-best.intraway.com/blog-post/appreciation-and-recognition-key-for-engagement-and-satisfaction-at-work/

CHAPTER 4:

Physical & Psychological Manifestations

Stress manifests itself in the human body in multiple ways both physical and mental. As previously mentioned, stress can compromise the human immune system, making "stressed" individuals more vulnerable to infection and disease. This does not always mean that stress is the source of these ailments, but it is almost always a contributing factor.

PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS	PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIFESTATIONS
• Diabetes	• Addictions (gambling, sex, steroids)
• Dizziness, chest pain	• Alcoholism
• Rapid shallow breathing	• Anxiety
• Hypertension/heart disease	• Depression
• Insomnia	• Divorce/separation
• Obesity	• Fatigue
• Self-harm	• Flashbacks/nightmares
• Ulcers/gastronomical problems	• Guilt/internal conflict
• Hyperarousal	• Lack of concentration
• Suicide	• Social withdrawal
• Increased tobacco use	• Substance abuse
• Opioid/pain killer abuse	• Paranoia
• Nutritional deficiencies	• PTSI

These manifestations, both physical and psychological, can result in increased absenteeism, late calls, sick calls, and family leave requests. The economic costs can be calculated, and they're proven significant. The impact of this on the incarcerated people who correctional staff are meant to supervise has never been truly investigated. And ultimately the cost on the officer, the human beings themselves, especially when you consider the number of suicides and correctional officers' mortality rates, cannot be overstated.

Icon credits: Patient by Teewara Soontorn and Psych by Priyanka from the Noun Project.

It is important to note the differentiation between stressors, PTSI, and Acute Stress Disorder. Caterina Spinaris describes different types of stressors officers may endure at work.

> ***Operational stressors*** refer to technical aspects of 24/7 operations, including offender overcrowding; understaffing, shift work, mandatory overtime; equipment issues; noise; unclean space; temperature extremes; high workload; low job autonomy; and low job variety.
>
> ***Organizational stressors*** refer to psychosocial aspects of correctional work — managing people, be it staff or offenders, and interacting with offenders' families and victims. Organizational stressors include supervisor-subordinate conflict; staff-offender conflict; low-quality teamwork; lack of input into policymaking; perception of unfair disciplinary, evaluation, investigation, or promotion practices; perception of insufficient support by supervisors or administrators; perception of harassment; negative public image; interactions with the judicial system; and unclear or changing organizational goals and policies.
>
> ***Traumatic stressors*** refer to incidents of physical or sexual violence, injury, death, or threats of such. Traumatic exposure is either ***direct*** or ***indirect***.
>
> > ***Direct traumatic exposure*** involves having such events happen to oneself (such as being assaulted or threatened), or witnessing, in real time, the occurrence of such events happening to others.
> >
> > ***Indirect traumatic exposure*** involves learning about such events at a later time — such as by reading about them, viewing them electronically, or being told about them. Both direct and indirect traumatic exposure are endemic in correctional work. It is important to note that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, recognizes that indirect traumatic exposure that is work-related, including electronically or though pictures, can result in the development of PTSI.

Moreover, these three types of stressors at times interact. For example, the probability of a violent incident increases due to short staffing (operational stressor). Such an incident (traumatic stressor) is followed by investigations, perhaps staff discipline, conflict among staff, and increased tension between staff and offenders (organizational stressors). These outcomes may lead to further short-staffing and mandatory overtime (operational stressor) due to staff taking "mental health days" or sick days to recover from injuries. They may also lead to increased risk of another violent incident occurring (traumatic stressor).[1]

1 *Denhof, M. D., Spinaris, C. G., & Morton, G. R. (2014). Occupational stressors in corrections organizations: Types, effects and solutions. US Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, 54, 71-82.*

Stress is non-diagnosable, whereas PTSI and acute stress disorder are diagnosable disorders. The differentiation between them is described below by Heather Sheaffer, MA, LCSW:

> "The symptoms of acute stress disorder are very similar to the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The most important diagnostic distinction between the two disorders is that acute stress disorder persists for a period of one month or less after a traumatic event. PTSD symptoms can persist for months or years [Foa, 2009]. The DSM-5 estimates that half of patients experiencing PTSD initially presented with acute stress disorder [American Psychiatric Association, 2013].
>
> Another important distinction between acute stress disorder and PTSI is the diagnostic emphasis of dissociative symptoms present in acute stress disorder. Dissociative symptoms, such as feeling detached from an experience, feeling numb, or being unable to remember traumatic events, are believed to impede the victim's ability to deal with the problem, even when treated shortly after the trauma. These symptoms are a predictor of PTSI because the victim may experience symptoms more severely once dissociative symptoms cease [Bryant, et al., 2011]." [2]

2 *Sheaffer, H. Acute Stress Disorder. Theravive Counseling. https://www.theravive.com/therapedia/acute-stress-disorder-dsm--5-308.3-(f43.0).*

CHAPTER 5:

Stakeholders

> "Improvement of CO health starts by changing this mindset among not only administrative officials but also other relevant stakeholders in the correctional field." [1]
>
> "Stakeholders are considered the key driving force and most important critical success factor on every project. They fall into two basic categories, namely, the internal or primary stakeholders who are contractually or legally bound to the project and normally have a vested interest in its success, and the external or secondary stakeholders who have no active role in the project but who are being affected by it in the positive or negative sense and who consequently may adopt a supportive or hostile stance towards the project." [2]

The officers, civilian staff, administrators, and those who are incarcerated are all primary stakeholders, although among them, only the administrators have decision-making authority, leaving the others as primary stakeholders in name only. In some instances, employees are represented by unions who have some power to exercise their rights as stakeholders.

Those who are incarcerated have some legal protections by which they can raise their issues as stakeholders. As constituted today, in most cases the influence of both officers and those who are incarcerated is minimal unless the unions' contractual language protects staff, or the courts intervene on behalf of the incarcerated.

Administrators are a key component and a critical stakeholder on multiple levels. Not only are they stakeholders from a managerial standpoint, but they are impacted by stress at a rate of 27%, eight times that of the general public.[3] They, too, need the training and access to counseling that all staff do. Administrators are also gatekeepers, in that they can champion or deny any stress-awareness initiatives. By approaching them as partners rather than in the traditional combative employee/employer relationship, there is a much greater chance for success. Everyone will benefit from a program centered around stress awareness, mental health management, and officer wellness.

Families of both the staff and those incarcerated are external stakeholders and are also impacted by the stresses of having to interact with the world of corrections.

It should surprise no one to learn that the PTSI rate for those incarcerated is even higher than the officers, adding to an already very volatile and tense situation.

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1 Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

2 Khan, A. Z., Skibniewski, M., & Cable, J. (2017, May). Adversarial project stakeholders. Influencing projects with options. In Project Management Center for Excellence 2017 Project Management Symposium, May (Vol. 5).

3 Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D., & Kellaway, J. A. (2012). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/PTSD_Prev_in_Corrections_09-03-131.pdf.

> "..., it is noteworthy that no less than 60% of men in prison have symptoms and signs of severe to moderate PTSD." [4]

The commonality of interest among traditionally adversarial parties combined with the emotional interests of families and friends and the support from reform, religious, and academic communities, amplified by the need to control the fiscal costs of the current system, provides a unique opportunity for a diversity of stakeholders to make the wellness case and promote change.

> *The absence of substantive and continuously contemporary training in recognition and address of PTSD is an unknown and often mislabeled impediment for both officers and the incarcerated.*
>
> *—John*

Broadly speaking, these are all stakeholders. Frontline stakeholders include officers, the civilian staff, the administration, and those who are incarcerated. Others directly impacted are the families of those living and working there; the vendors and contractors that service the facility; the teachers, attorneys, social workers, clergy, and advocates who frequent there; the community where the facility is located; and the elected officials who represent that community. The police and firefighters or emergency medical personnel that may have to respond in a time of crisis are also part of those likely to be impacted.

They all have a vested interest in a system that promotes opportunities for the people who are incarcerated to rehabilitate and assimilate back into society while also providing a safe and humble middle-class profession for those working there.

Currently, many stakeholders lack an awareness or understanding of how they are ultimately impacted by the wellness crisis facing officers. Generally, unless an individual is personally touched by the system, most people never consider the circumstances under which correctional officers work. When civilians drive by a prison or jail, they don't think about the staff inside. There is very little consideration for those who work there, nor much concern for the living conditions behind the walls.

As key stakeholders, the incarcerated population is directly impacted by efforts aimed at decreasing correctional stress. Can those incarcerated and their advocates coalesce with correctional officers on addressing a common problem? They already have.

In New Jersey, for example, a plan to merge two county jails met a great deal of resistance from the union representing the officers. They responded with a staffing audit and security review showing a litany of issues that the counties would face. Their efforts did not persuade the elected officials, however, criminal defense lawyers in New Jersey filed a lawsuit to stop the merger on behalf of those incarcerated. The union in turn filed a friend-of-the-court brief in support of their suit, and the judge, citing concerns raised by both parties, stopped the merger.

4 Thomas, L. (2019, February 27). Prisoner Post Traumatic Stress. News Medical. https://www.news-medical.net/health/Prisoner-Post-Traumatic-Stress.aspx.

In the mid-nineties a private prison company Corrections Corporation of America (now known as CoreCivic) had been granted a contract with the Washington, DC, Department of Corrections to run the District's Treatment Center. The Fraternal Order of Police, the union representing public correctional officers in DC, began their fight to end that contract almost as soon as it was signed. They held protests, informational meetings, attended city council hearings, and brought in expert testimony. Nothing seemed to be able to change the minds of the DC City Council. That was until Jack Rosser, the Chairman of the FOP Corrections Committee, began reaching out to a variety of stakeholders. Jack met with community leaders, family members of those incarcerated, defense attorneys, religious leaders, and reform advocates. Those meetings resulted in a joint effort from some very unlikely partners that culminated in the facility being returned to public control in 2017.

Stakeholders may often approach the issues from different angles, as illustrated by the examples above, but in both instances they shared a common goal. And there are likely many more goals shared between the two largest stakeholders in corrections; for example, reducing PTSI rates, implementing health and wellness programs, combatting suicide among staff and those who are in custody, reducing overcrowding, improving food quality, increased programming and rehabilitation, and more staff training. If more effort can be focused on uncovering a set of shared goals, there is great potential to work toward common solutions.

Why would those incarcerated want staff to be better trained? It makes life behind the walls more secure and less violent. Why would staff want the people in their custody to have properly cooked quality meals and adult portions? From a security standpoint, one of the fastest ways to ignite tensions is to serve poor-quality, badly prepared food in inadequate portions. There are multiple issues on which these two traditionally adversarial parties actually have common ground and shared interests. One of them is most assuredly to decrease the level of stress and tension in the space they share.

In the quest to address the issue of staff mental health and the conditions and policies where staff and officers work, there are a vast number of stakeholders impacted, some of whom don't even realize it. One of those is the average taxpayer.

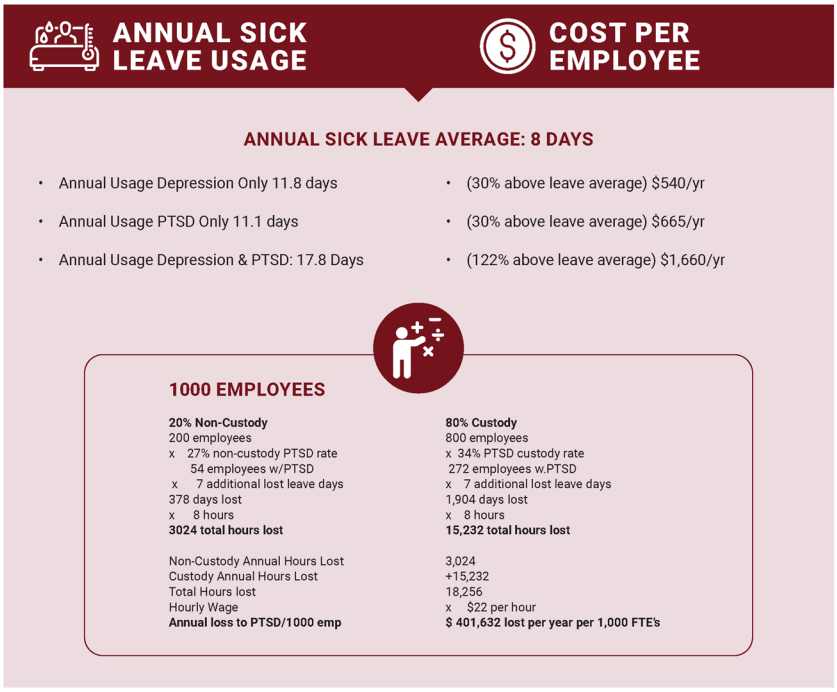
WHAT DOES PTSI COST THE TAXPAYERS?

According to the National Institute of Justice, the American Psychiatric Association, the National Library of Medicine, and the National Institute of Health and Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, the economic costs are extensive.

> "Over half of the two billion dollars of our nation's annual costs attributable to PTSD are related to loss of work productivity." [5]

5 *Harris, J. I., Strom, T. Q., Ferrier-Auerbach, A. G., Kaler, M. E., Hansen, L. P., & Erbes, C. R. (2017). Workplace social support in job satisfaction among veterans with posttraumatic stress symptoms: A preliminary correlational study. PloS one, 12(8), e0181344.*

The Desert Waters Comorbidity study found that PTSI costs a facility with 1,000 employees from $393,000 to $590,000.00 annually just in additional sick leave costs. The study indicates that staff with PTSI take approximately seven more sick days per year than those without PTSI. With a 27% PTSI rate for ALL staff and an average hourly salary of $22 ($45.7K year), if a state has 5,000 correctional employees (not just custody staff, employees), the state is losing between $1.9 and $2.95 million every year in sick leave and back-filling costs to PTSI-related sick leave. [6]



For every 100 employees a department has they lose between $40,000 and $60,000 every year to PTSD-related leave.

6 *Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Comorbidity_Study_09-03-131.pdf.*

Icon credits: Sick by priyanka, Cost by slothali, and Math by Llisole from the Noun Project.

> "Compared to workers without the disorder, those with PTSD have greater rates of work absenteeism, a higher number of medical visits, an increased likelihood of unemployment or underemployment, lower hourly pay, and increased difficulty meeting work-related demands." [7]
>
> "Stress, as manifested in many physical illnesses, including hypertension, heart attacks, and ulcers, was found to be higher [in correctional officers] than that of a comparable sample of police officers. Moreover, alcoholism and divorce rates are higher for correctional officers than for the population in general.
>
> As a result, correctional organizations spend enormous sums annually for sick leave, compensation, and liability claims. Stress among correctional officers and administrators is often caused by the conflicting goals of custody and rehabilitation, trial and error in management, and the correctional system's vulnerability to political and community groups." [8]

Although the plight of the prison population is not a concern that enters the minds of the average American on a daily basis, paying taxes certainly is. The current documentation and research about the costs of PTSI and other wellness issues supports the urgent need for reform. By drawing the nexus between decreasing correctional costs by increasing staff mental health, decreasing the incarceration without endangering the community, and shifting gears from a punitive to rehabilitative approach, it is possible to offer solutions and move broad groups of stakeholders from "negative" or "neutral" to "supportive."

7 *Pflanz, S. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Center for Workplace Mental Health. https://www.workplacementalhealth.org/Mental-Health-Topics/Posttraumatic-Stress-Disorder#section_1.*

8 *Cheek, F., & Miller, M. D. (1982). Reducing Staff and Inmate Stress. Corrections Today, 44(5), 72-76.*

CHAPTER 6:

Solutions

The first step is always admitting a problem exists.

> "A 2013 report issued by the ACA (American Correctional Association) noted that of the more than 4,000 prisons in operation across the U.S., fewer than 100 had any type of Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Moreover, very few of these programs have been scientifically evaluated to determine their effectiveness in improving CO well-being." [1]

That's a very significant indicator of the extent of the problem and the lack of understanding of its magnitude and impact. Although the last seven years have seen increased recognition of this issue, with a 34.1% PTSI rate we are light-years behind where things need to be.[2] There are programs, strategies, and treatments to help individual staff members dealing with mental health issues. There are strategies for organizations to address stress that can be retrofitted and adapted to fit corrections, and then there are strategies to change the overall culture of corrections from punitive to rehabilitative.

STAFF TREATMENT OPTIONS

INDIVIDUAL THERAPY:

Provides one-on-one counseling for staff members with a licensed practitioner. If confidentiality issues and exposure are a concern, staff can opt for individual counseling by external third-party providers that removes those possibilities. This allows the staff member to be unencumbered in their discussions and to avoid any feelings of discomfort they may feel when exposing their emotions in a group setting of their peers.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI):

Learning EI can be just a training exercise; however, using it can also decrease anxiety and stress. "*Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others.*" [3] Chapter 7, "Transforming Traditional Roles," takes a closer look at this emerging technique in training staff to better handle day-to-day situations.

1 *Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.*

2 *Denhof, M. D., & Spinaris, C. G. (2013). Depression, PTSD, and Comorbidity in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health and Functioning. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Comorbidity_Study_09-03-131.pdf.*

3 *Kranick, L. (2016, March 16). Transformational Leadership can Improve the Culture of Corrections. American Military University Edge. https://amuedge.com/transformational-leadership-can-improve-the-culture-of-corrections.*

GROUP THERAPY:

An advantage of group therapy is that it allows staff to share their experiences, fears, and emotions and to realize they are not alone. Everyone is impacted by a career in corrections; it's a matter of degrees of impact. Peer-to-peer counseling can be very effective in addressing this problem. Mental Health First Aid,[4] first developed in Australia in 2001, has been taught internationally for nearly two decades and has been used in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the Essex County Jail and House of Correction in Massachusetts with favorable reports from staff.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY (CBT):

"*CBT has been found to help significantly with depression treatment. In CBT, the patient and therapist work together to agree on patterns of behavior that need to be changed. The goal is to recalibrate the part of the brain that's keeping such a tight hold on happy thoughts.*" [5]

COGNITIVE PROCESSING THERAPY (CPT):

"*CPT teaches people to identify how traumatic experiences have affected their thinking. It also teaches them to evaluate and change their thoughts. CPT usually takes twelve sessions and can be delivered in an individual or group format. The goal is for patients to learn ways to have more healthy and balanced beliefs about themselves, others, and the world.*" [6]

EYE MOVEMENT DESENSITIZATION AND REPROCESSING (EMDR):

"In EMDR, patients pay attention to a back-and-forth movement or sound while calling to mind the upsetting memory until shifts occur in the way they experience that memory and more information from the past is processed. By processing these experiences, people can get relief from PTSD symptoms and change how they react to memories of their trauma. EMDR can take up to twelve sessions." [7]

STELLATE GANGLION BLOCK (SGB):

"The SGB is a procedure in which an injection of a long-acting local anesthetic, using ultrasound or fluoroscopic guidance, is made in the right side of the neck around the main nerve that controls the "fight or flight" response (the sympathetic nervous system). This nerve, (the cervical sympathetic chain), which is a two-way conduit, connects the parts of the brain that control the fight-or-flight response (referred to as the central autonomic network) to the rest of the body. By blocking or "turning off" the traffic in the cervical sympathetic chain, it is believed that the parts of the brain that control the fight-or-flight response are allowed to completely reset, resulting in long-term relief of the associated anxiety symptoms. Multiple peer-reviewed medical studies show that a right-sided SGB results in significant long-term improvement in chronic anxiety symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI)." [8]

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4 National Council for Behavioral Health. (2016). Mental Health First Aid USA (First Edition Revised).

5 Anderson, J. (2014, June 12). Get 5 Positive Techniques From Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Everyday Health. https://www.everyday-health.com/hs/major-depression-living-well/cognitive-behavioral-therapy-techniques/.

6 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. PTSD: Treatment. https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd/treatment.asp.

7 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. PTSD: Treatment. https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd/treatment.asp.

8 Stellate Ganglion Block For PTSD. Dr. Sean Mulvaney - Regenerative Medicine & SGB For PTSD. https://drseanmulvaney.com/stellate-ganglion-block-for-ptsd/.

EXPOSURE THERAPY:

"This type of intervention helps people face and control their fears by exposing them to the trauma memory they experience in the context of a safe environment. Exposure can use mental imagery, writing, or visits to places or people that remind them of their trauma. Virtual reality (creating a virtual environment to resemble the traumatic event) can also be used to expose the person to the environment that contains the feared situation. Virtual reality, like other exposure techniques, can assist in exposures for treatment for PTSI when the technology is available. Regardless of the method of exposure, a person is often gradually exposed to the trauma to help them become less sensitive over time." [9]

PSYCHODYNAMIC THERAPY:

"*Psychodynamic therapy is a form of talk therapy. It's designed to help you find relief from mental or emotional stress. For example, a doctor may recommend it for depression. Proponents of psychodynamic therapy believe present-day problems are linked to unconscious conflicts arising from events in the past.*" [10]

MEDICATION:

"Medications are sometimes used as an adjunct to one of the therapies described above. One of the more common types of medications used are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). SSRIs are antidepressants, and depressed mood can be part of PTSD. Also sometimes used as a short-term and adjunctive treatment are benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepines are quick-acting medications that are effective but can be habit-forming." [11]

9 *Treatment & Facts Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA. (2021, June). https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/treatment-facts.*

10 *Holland, K. (2016, December 18). Psychodynamic Therapy for Depression. Healthline. https://www.healthline.com/health/depression/psychodynamic-therapy.*

11 *Treatment & Facts Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA. (2021, June). https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/treatment-facts.*

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

All the programs in the world won't help if the officers, staff, and administrators won't use them. For this reason, the discouragement of utilization and limits on access to mental health training by administrators must be addressed at the onset. Research shows that staff unquestionably want this training.

> *The biggest help for me has been talking about [my PTSI]. I was embarrassed and didn't want people to think I was crazy, hard to be around, or not trust me.*
>
> *—Matt*

The One Voice United national survey found that 94% of respondents believe "there needs to be agency-wide training on mental health awareness and stress management."[12] Similarly, a California study found that 88% of officers wanted stress-management training, 82% wanted trauma/PTSI training, and 86% wanted personal nutrition and exercise training.[13] Although not talked about openly, clearly there is an awareness that this issue needs to be addressed.

In most instances, officers do not trust these programs to address stress management if they are overseen by the administration. There is a deep-seated fear among officers that their personal information will not remain confidential. If they seek help, their job could be in jeopardy, but if they do not, their lives could be in jeopardy. Because the job loss may possibly be immediate and the ravages of stress take place over time, combined with the perceived fear of possibly being exposed, most opt to delay treatment or avoid it entirely.

As discussed earlier, the Catch-22 that correctional officers find themselves in when confronted with PTSI symptoms is that they believe they can't reveal the problem and therefore can't address it. Any organization establishing a mental health awareness program must remain keenly aware of these beliefs as they design their program.

When labor and management can agree, progress can be substantial. The administration has the authority to establish whatever program they see fit, but to increase the chance for efficacy, employee buy-in is essential.

12 *Post, C., & Tripp, J. (2018, October 13). One Voice Leadership Meeting and National Survey Results Discussion [Conference Session]. National Medal of Honor Awards, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*

13 *Lerman, A. E. (2017). Officer Health and Wellness: Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey. https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/ executive_summary_08142018.pdf.*

CHAPTER 7:

Transforming Traditional Roles

Throughout this document there are frequent mentions of the need for a cultural change across corrections if we are serious about achieving sustainable reforms and if wellness is going to be at the heart of those reforms. The needed changes are not only structural and policy-based but psychological and strategic, driven by new approaches to corrections. This necessitates abandoning the traditional roles that are assumed behind the walls, the hard-edged emotionless screw, and the authoritarian uncompromising administrator. Rehabilitation should not be an afterthought but rather the preferred tool in the toolkit.

> *So our system is messed up in that we don't truly rehabilitate. And, in some cases we don't habilitate because some of these guys and gals have never had good role models; they've never had an indoctrination to the social contract.*
>
> —Sam

Admittedly this type of transformation will take years, and unless the administration buys in there will be no change. The changes that officers hope to bring to their jobs might make small differences around the edges but won't succeed in transforming the system if management is not a primary stakeholder believing in and championing those reforms. For that reason, the following example describes a technique used to "transform" the command staff's approach to management, hence the term "transformational leadership."

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Correctional staff across the nation have been forced to navigate a changing landscape where the very purpose and mission of corrections have been called into question. At the same time, many agency leaders have failed to establish a new set of organizational goals and articulate to their staff how those new goals will require changes in correctional operations. The reform models currently demanded by the public call for more than simply updating protocols but rather completely transforming the attitudes, correctional practices, and operations throughout correctional organizations.

To truly change the culture of corrections, American Military University faculty member Michael Pittaro urges correctional institutions to adopt transformational leadership. "Transformational leadership styles focus on team building, motivation, and collaboration with employees at different levels of an organization to accomplish change for the better." [1]

According to a 2012 National Institute of Corrections publication, transformational leaders generate energy that targets organizational change, progress, and development.[2] By setting their sights beyond daily operational management and promoting personal and professional growth for its workforce, transformational leaders are more capable of bringing about positive organizational change. Adopting this style of leadership will enable higher performance in correctional organizations by improving staff morale and creating a safer environment for everyone.

1 *Kranick, L. (2014, December 10). Transformational Leadership and the Impact on Morale, Satisfaction in Corrections. American Military University Edge. https://amuedge.com/transformational-leadership-and-the-impact-on-morale-satisfaction-in-corrections/.*

2 *Cebula, N., Craig, E., Eggers, J., Fajardo, M. D., Gray, J., & Lantz, T. (2012). Achieving Performance Excellence: The Influence of Leadership on Organizational Performance. US Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.*

Shifting to a transformational leadership requires a patient, dedicated, and comprehensive approach that begins with communication and transparency. More dedication needs to be centered around educating officers and staff about the need for changes, inviting their questions and input, and engaging them in a process by which operational changes are grounded in the context of the new goals and mission of the organization. Given the very dangerous working environment, it is also vital that correctional staff are not just educated on the ideological reasons for changing practices but that they are shown how the changes can be successfully implemented without posing any safety risks.

The traditional paramilitary structure of correctional agencies causes added tensions among staff who are excluded from decision-making processes and prohibited from providing input on the very policies they are required to carry out. In response to increasing pressures for criminal justice reform, there has been a tendency for administrators and management to engage with every possible stakeholder outside of the agency, particularly those with political and economic influence, while failing to engage the frontline workers who will ultimately be tasked with implementing and sustaining those reforms. The result of not engaging the workforce has resulted in low morale, with officers being resentful of changes that they have not been educated nor trained on and at times poses significant safety risks when operational policies are changed without consulting the very people who know the specifics how those reforms can safely be put into practice.

> "Getting officers more involved in the process and feeling like they're valued is incredibly important," he said. It can reduce burnout, improve the engagement of officers, reduce turnover, and create a safer working environment. An officer who is more engaged is more likely to work harder and be in line with the prison's mission of creating a positive change within the inmate population, said Pittaro." [3]

3 Kranick, L. (2016, March 16). Transformational Leadership can Improve the Culture of Corrections. American Military University Edge. https://amuedge.com/transformational-leadership-can-improve-the-culture-of-corrections.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

To some people EI comes naturally, but the rest of us have to work at it. Developing emotional intelligence is a life skill that can help in all situations, but especially those with high levels of intensity. It greatly enhances de-escalation skills, and therefore safety, on the beat.

When outnumbered, as officers usually are, they can easily become physically overwhelmed. It's their presence and ability to read a situation before it unfolds, to intervene and assume a leadership position and decrease the tension, that is the best survival tool. In order to control others' emotions in the tense situations, officers must first have good control of their own. The level of emotional self-control one can employ may be the difference between de-escalation and escalation.

> "Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Emotional intelligence is generally said to include at least three skills: emotional awareness, or the ability to identify and name one's own emotions; the ability to harness those emotions and apply them to tasks like thinking and problem-solving; and the ability to manage emotions, which includes both regulating one's own emotions when necessary and helping others to do the same." [4]
>
> ". . . experts say the ability to read, understand, and respond to emotions in ourselves and other people is a crucial factor in predicting our health, happiness, and personal and professional success…Taking the time to pause and think about what your best self would do in each situation may help you avoid letting your emotions control you. You are allowing yourself time to manage your emotions." [5]

4 Pittaro, M. (2018, February 26). Why Transformational Leaders Should Embrace Emotional Intelligence. American Military University Edge. https://amuedge.com/why-transformational-leaders-should-embrace-emotional-intelligence/.

5 Gabriel, E. (2018, July 26). Understanding emotional intelligence and its effects on your life. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/11/health/improve-emotional-intelligence/index.html.

BUILDING CULTURE STRATEGICALLY

The notion of Building Culture Strategically (BCS) is similar in nature to that of transformational leadership. The National Institute of Corrections' (NIC's) Institutional Culture Initiative suggests that efforts to understand and transform correctional culture will create safer and more secure environments, and ultimately improve the quality of life for everyone working and residing inside. [6]

BCS is applicable to all officers and command staff, but it is most advantageous when deployed by upper-level administrators who set policy and determine the department's priorities. The Center for Management and Organization Effectiveness contends that leaders have a special responsibility when it comes to transforming culture and securing the long-term success of their organization.[7]

Culture change is an undeniably grueling task, but rather than shy away from the difficult yet necessary work, management can take distinct steps to ease the process. Guiding principles, adapted from the CMOE, for leaders seeking to build culture strategically include:

1. Establish expectations. Keep everyone in the loop and updated.
2. Change the belief. Help staff understand the need for the shifting from a punitive to a rehabilitative model of corrections and articulate a vision of success that members can imagine themselves participating in.
3. Demonstrate patience and resolve. This is a major strategic shift, have patience with the team and be steadfast in terms of resolve to complete the mission. Doing so will instill confidence in the team and more acceptance and commitment to the strategy.
4. Manage resistance. Anticipate internal sources of resistance and be willing to confront resistance by showing how they create barriers to success and model ways to overcome resistance that demonstrate gains for everyone.
5. Exhibit discipline. When there is resistance remember the long game, project a commitment, and stay the course.

To truly take advantage of the unique opportunity in which there is bipartisan support for criminal justice reform, the deep-rooted problems of organizational culture entrenched throughout prisons and jails must be prioritized.

6 Flaherty-Zonis, C. (2007). Building Culture Strategically: A Team Approach for Corrections. Washington DC: US Department of Justice. https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/021749.pdf.

7 Stowell, S. How To Build A Strategic Culture. Center for Management and Organization Effectiveness. https://cmoe.com/blog/how-to-build-a-strategic-culture/.

CHAPTER 8:

A-Z Guide to Combating Correctional Stress; Components of a Comprehensive Mental Health Program

Every candidate for a job in corrections fills out that application knowing that the job comes with some inherent physical risks. That belief is reinforced at the academy, where new cadets will spend hours on physical self-defense tactics, weapons training, spatial self-defense, and physical fitness standards. In today's correctional training academies, however, little emphasis is put on the number one killer of correctional officers — stress. Eleven officers are killed in the line of duty every year, while an additional 156 take their own lives.[1] Physical self-defense training and tactics are important, no doubt, but recognizing and preparing for the mental ravages will not only help more staff survive and enjoy their careers; it will decrease officers' daily agony. Further, it is foundational for any rethinking of our prisons and jails as well as the criminal justice system more broadly.

> *Even if it was somebody that came in once a month, a counselor or whatever, or make it a standardized question sheet where someone comes in for a whole week and evaluates each officer. Disclaimer that this is confidential, I'm only here to help you, and nothing can be used against you in your job. A fitness-for-duty exam won't come from this; this is just to see how you're doing.*
>
> — John

As the criminal justice reform movement is taking shape with bipartisan efforts to promote change, the issue of staff wellness is just beginning to get the attention it has long deserved. Some departments have begun to adopt training protocols that address this issue and have started to implement various response teams to deal with the impact of critical incidents and long-term mental trauma. In the programs that do exist, however, the components needed to tackle this problem throughout an officer's career are often missing. As an example, we could not find a single department that offers counseling for retirees or mentors for family members. An officer's return to normal society can be a difficult transition, as evidenced by the 14% suicide ideation rate found in correctional officer retirees.[2] Further, officers' families suffer mainly in silence as they see the changes in their loved ones and have nowhere to go or anyone to talk to about it.

As noted throughout this paper, one of the biggest obstacles to officers and staff seeking help is fear of exposure. As a result, the level of confidence staff has in the confidentiality of their situation being maintained has a great deal to do with

1 *New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force. (2009). New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report. New Jersey Office of the Attorney General. https://www.state.nj.us/lps/library/NJPoliceSuicideTaskForceReport-January-30-2009-Final(r2.3.09).pdf.*

2 *Lerman, A. E. (2017). Officer Health and Wellness: Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey. https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/ executive_summary_08142018.pdf.*

whether or not they seek help. This will remain a constant until mental health injuries are treated as any other injury in corrections, not as a personal weakness but as an on-the-job injury. For this reason, departments should consider using outside vendors to supply training and treatment at least until staff have confidence that the agency can be trusted.

The design of any program must include the flexibility to adapt to new information as more surveys and studies are conducted to determine what's working and what isn't. As the taboo starts to lift and more officers and staff come forward seeking help, leaders will be better able to understand the issues and determine where the emphasis needs to be.

FROM A-Z HIRE TO RETIRE PROGRAM SHOULD INCLUDE:

1. Psychological background check before employment offered.
2. Academy training on stress management and emotional intelligence.
3. Provide informational pamphlets for all stakeholders.
4. Family counseling and involvement from the academy onward; establish support groups for staff families and loved ones.
5. Development of Employee Assistance Programs and Critical Incident Response Teams.
6. Assigning the staff member and family a mentor upon academy graduation.
7. Annual mandatory stress awareness and reduction training for management and staff.
8. Training on dealing with staff bullying, rumormongering, and negative attitudes.
9. Confidential third-party counseling.
10. Confidential placement for substance-abuse issues with third-party providers.
11. Separation from service exit interview for all retiring and vested employees.
12. Pre-retirement counseling and planning before retirement.
13. Confidential counseling available throughout retirement.
14. Leadership training for all DOC administrators and ranking officers.
15. Data collection to evaluate program success or weakness; raw numbers only.
16. Annual anonymous employee surveys on stress and job conditions.

17. Identify Quality of Life (QOL) opportunities that may help alleviate mandatory overtime and allow staff time off for family events or medical emergencies by using options such as shift swaps, sick leave/comp time banks, and FMLA, among others.
18. Employee recognition programs, employee of the month, time off for exceptional performance, CO of the year, correctional officers' week, family/co-workers barbecue, interagency competitions, sharpshooters, honor guards, darts, bowling leagues — develop staff camaraderie.
19. Community involvement; work with community leaders on issues like food drives, Big Brother Big Sister mentoring, helping our vets, clothing drives for the homeless or providing school supplies for needy kids. We need to change our image and the false perception the public has of us and doing good makes everyone feel good. It also provides an avenue for discussion and to change neutral or negative stakeholders into potential advocates.
20. Instate pre-shift briefing (roll call) for all staff as they enter and leave the correctional facility; updating them on the climate behind the walls, processing anything that may have transpired, and creating a point of contact before and after the workday.
21. Adopt minimum staffing levels to limit forced overtime and allow for increased movement plans and programming for those incarcerated.
22. Training academies institute a family day; have family members come to academy to discuss their concerns and dispel the many myths surrounding what officers do every day, and establish contact points for where they can reach out and talk to a mentor or stress team member when questions or situations arise that they feel they need counsel with.

RETIREMENT

The most underserved, unrecognized, and endangered among corrections staff — retirees — have been left out in the cold. In writing this paper, One Voice United searched and could not find a single program offered by any administration designed to help retirees' transition into a happy, healthy, and much deserved retirement. In this white paper we've shared what little is known about the horrendous statistics on retiree PTSI and suicide ideation.

People often hear about the problems that occur when the incarcerated population is just released back into the community without any skills to adapt to that drastic change. Yet our country has ignored the needs of those who have been in prisons or jails right alongside the inmates for decades. It is time to address those needs.

This A-Z Guide includes counseling before retirement with exit interviews and training on how to cope with the dramatic change of transitioning from officer to civilian life. The program suggests providing counseling throughout retirement if so desired. It is also important to create a database to track what happens to retirees to determine suicide rates and mortality.

CHAPTER 9:

Educate, Advocate, Participate

EDUCATE

We hope that this white paper provides some of the material, resources, and data that can help educate our country about the conditions officers and staff face and some of the ways we hope to improve them. One Voice United will continue our research and consistently seek out new approaches to advance our mission of improving the health of officers and staff. However, even the best research never reaches its potential impact if it is not shared widely. We ask you to join our mission at One Voice United by taking the next step and becoming an advocate.

ADVOCATE

Advocacy has many forms. To have our voices heard in the criminal justice reform movement means our days of being reactionary must end. Whether it's writing editorials, sharing information at work or through social media platforms, public speaking, calling radio talk shows, talking to your friends and neighbors — whatever way you can communicate the magnitude of the stresses we face and what needs to be done to address them, we welcome it.

> *PTSD for corrections should be recognized as a workman's comp related issue, where if you seek help you won't get paid a third of your check by getting a disability, instead you'll get most of your check while you're getting help and not go broke and not lose your home getting help. Some people may need an extended amount of time — you don't want to lose your home in the meantime while getting help because you can't afford it. That's stacking problems on top of problems.*
>
> *— John*

PARTICIPATE

The final phase in this program is the action phase. Consider becoming a mentor or a member of your local Critical Incident Response Team or Employee Assistance Unit. If your institution does not have these programs, go to your administration and ask to start them. One Voice United can help you source the materials, experts, and training needed to get you started or to enhance or add to your existing stress-awareness program. Union officials are especially well positioned to get this on the administration's agenda, and we welcome the opportunity to work with them.

LEGISLATION

(EDUCATE) PTSI is an occupational hazard and needs to be treated like one. Just as hypertension and heart attacks affecting COs are covered nearly universally under presumptive state workers' compensation statutes, so too should PTSI.

(ADVOCATE) By seeking sponsors for Presumptive PTSI Workers Compensation coverage for Correctional Officers, or by seeking to amend existing statutes to include this profession, OVU can help develop a vehicle to bring this issue into the spotlight. Every state legislature in the country has several elected officials who are veterans, or former police officers, firefighters, or EMTs. They will understand the issue and should be enlisted to help sponsor needed legislation.

(PARTICIPATE) When fashioning legislation and testimony, as leaders in our professions we must be certain to show not only how many staff are impacted, but how to decrease those numbers with training and programs. The statistics provided herein show the costs of not acting in terms of the economic strain on the system, but it cannot quantify the

psychological damage to staff or families. Anecdotal testimony by staff impacted can have a dramatic effect on elected officials and the potential for passage.

Pursuing PTSI legislation is also an opportunity to assemble a variety of stakeholders to support the training and structures needed to combat this. Who stands to benefit from increased mental health among our first responders, especially those of us in law enforcement? Everybody benefits. In corrections, not only do the officers, staff, administrators, and their loved ones benefit if our stress-management skills improve, so too do the offenders in our custody. Inmate advocates, reformers, their family members, and the religious community are all potential stakeholders that could, and sometimes do, openly support legislation that looks to address this issue.[1]

A clear indication that change is coming can be found in the words of the insurance industry and workers' compensation attorneys:

> "Clearly, voting for enhanced benefits, including special benefits, for first responders, is a bipartisan endeavor, and it takes great political courage for members of either party to voice concerns and objections in the face of an understandably popular and appreciated, not to mention politically well-organized, group of workers." [2]
>
> —Washington State Insurance Association

> "By September 2018, thirty states have proposed altering the workers' compensation law to add the presumption of PTSD for first responders. The National Council on Compensation Insurance has named this change the top trend in workers' compensation reform even though the bills are moving through the states very slowly." [3]
>
> —The Law Office of Joshua Borken, MN Attorney at Law

The momentum for reform needs to be harnessed to include policies and statutes to provide for the training and resources frontline staff need, and to recognize and provide coverage for the damages that are endured throughout and as a result of a career in corrections. That is why OVU believes that the pursuit of this legislation will serve the worthy purpose of opening dialogue, not only among policy- and decision-makers but throughout those impacted by the tentacles of the correctional system.

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1 Testimony before the Massachusetts Legislative Committee on Corrections in the fall of 2019 included inmates rights advocates and ministries in support of Presumptive PTSD Workers Compensation legislation for Correctional Officers.

2 Comparing & contrasting PTSD legislation in Washington and Florida. Washington Self Insurers Association. (2018, March 16). https://www.wsiassn.org/news-and-media/blog/comparing-contrasting-ptsd-legislation-washington-and-florida/.

3 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder May Become a Presumptive Condition For First Responders. Law Office Of Joshua Borken: Minnesota Workers' Compensation Attorney. (2018, November 16). https://www.minnesotacomp.com/blog/2018/11/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-may-become-a-presumptive-condition-for-first-responders/.

CONCLUSION

Compared to the general public, studies show that correctional officers across the country face a much higher likelihood of being diagnosed with or experiencing symptoms related to Post-Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI). This recognition of a serious and pervasive problem amongst employees illustrates the impact the correctional environment has on everyone involved and validates the long-held belief that more must be done to protect and improve the mental and physical health of those who work behind the walls. To raise this issue and develop plausible solutions, One Voice United is committed to developing and launching a national campaign that puts officer wellness front and center with policymakers, reformers, and the media. As stated above, we believe the lack of attention to officer wellness is a major gap in the criminal justice reform movement. To address this blind spot, One Voice United is calling on all stakeholders to use their collective power to bring officer mental health and well-being to the table and explore ways of building common ground solutions for addressing this issue.

Resources

Change and reform begin with education, and education begins with research, both academic and anecdotal. Please use these studies and statistics to enlighten co-workers, family, friends, and politicians. We are in the state we are because we have been silent for too long. It is time for all of us to educate, advocate, and participate.

STUDIES

Before 2011, very few studies had been conducted on correctional officer stress and PTSI. Unlike other first responders, very little was known about mental health and corrections. Fortunately, times have changed. Studies and surveys are being conducted. Several agencies are introducing EAPs, and stress-management training is being offered in more correctional settings.

We have included several studies to provide additional research to help everyone advocate for change. Although there are some slight variances in the statistics, they generally fall within the same parameters. Most of the differences can be attributed to the variety of demographics and geographical locations where the studies were conducted.

On several of these pages we have referenced the work of Dr. Caterina Spinaris, Executive Director and founder of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. All of us in corrections owe her a great deal of gratitude for her dedication to our profession, her tireless work and her incredible research and training. To avoid redundancy, her works are not listed below but are quoted and cited throughout this document. Thank you, Dr. Spinaris.

As we progress and more studies and surveys become available, we will make them accessible on the One Voice United website (onevoiceunited.org). Below are some of the more recent studies and citations. We hope you find them useful.

Below are key excerpts from studies referenced for further context

RESOURCES

CALIFORNIA CORRECTIONAL OFFICER SURVEY[1]

The CCOS was first conducted in 2006, and the instrument was then expanded and replicated from March to May of 2017. The most recent survey includes a sample of 8,334 officers and other sworn staff, providing a vast cross-section of officers across all of California's correctional institutions and parole offices.

Ten percent of correctional officers have thought about killing themselves. The rate of suicidal ideation is even higher for retired correctional officers (1 in 7). Of those who say they have thought about suicide, 31% report thinking about it often or sometimes in the past year. However, ***73% haven't told anyone***, meaning that many are suffering in silence. Concern about workplace safety translates into extremely poor sleep habits. ***Forty-one percent of officers report sometimes or often nodding off while driving***. The proportion jumps to 47% for officers who do not feel safe at work. For many, fatigue is constant: 39% of all officers and 47% of those who feel unsafe at work report feeling exhausted even after sleeping.

There are serious downstream effects of correctional work. The stress of working in corrections spills over to the families, friends, and loved ones of correctional personnel: ***41% believe they would be a better parent, spouse, or partner if they did not work in corrections; 53% report being harsher or less trusting towards friends and family since they took this job; and 65% of officers say someone in their lives has told them they judge others more harshly since beginning their career in corrections.*** Officers fear they do not spend enough time with their families. In fact, 66% of officers say that their work makes it hard to spend sufficient quality time with their families.

Officers want help managing their work-life balance. H***alf of active officers say they would be interested in getting confidential links to therapists or counselors*** who specialize in working with the families of law enforcement; ***43% say they are very interested in receiving training on how to better manage work-life balance.***

Officers perceive their superiors to be largely competent but also uncaring. ***While 82% of officers perceive their supervisors as competent in their role, half do not think their supervisors care at all about their feelings.***

Many express little loyalty to CDCR or to the profession. Nearly half say they would move from this correctional department to another if they didn't have to sacrifice their seniority, and ***69% say they would immediately accept an offer from a job outside of corrections if it had similar salary or benefits.***

Officers reported high levels of interest in receiving the following training:

- Stress-Management Training 88%
- Trauma/PTSI Training 82%
- Personal Nutrition and Exercise 86%

1 Lerman, A. E. (2017). Officer Health and Wellness: Results from the California Correctional Officer Survey. https://gspp.berkeley.edu/assets/uploads/research/pdf/ executive_summary_08142018.pdf.

Icon credit: California by Demetria Rose from the Noun Project.

RESOURCES

MICHIGAN CORRECTIONS ORGANIZATION, SEIU[1]

"Using established and psychometrically sound assessment instruments, rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, co-occurring Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression, and suicide risk were estimated. Health condition rates were found to be substantially elevated relative to rates typical in the general population and for other public safety professions. Statistically significant relationships were found between level of work-related exposure to violence, injury, and death (VID) events and mental health condition scores. Security level and years of correctional experience were found to moderate health condition rates significantly, with more years of correctional experience and higher security levels being associated with higher mental health condition rates."

"It was found that 33.7% of COs were estimated to be PTSD positive, and 4364% met criteria for individual diagnostic symptom clusters, as illustrated in Figure 4. Comparing estimated rates within high- and low-security subgroups revealed that COs working in high-security areas met criteria for PTSD at a substantially higher rate than those working in low-security areas. COs in the high-security subgroup showed a PTSD positive rate of 39.3%, while COs in the low-security subgroup showed a PTSD positive rate of 28.8%."

1 Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D. (2016). Prevalence of Trauma-related Health Conditions in Correctional Officers: A Profile of Michigan Corrections Organization Members. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach and Michael D. Denhof LLC. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MCO-Paper_FINAL.pdf.

Icon credit: Michigan by Brendan Flamand from the Noun Project.

RESOURCES

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS[1]

"The effects of work health are notably larger than the effects of exposure to traumatic events or working in a custody role, which means that ***the overall quality of the working environment has a greater impact on mental and physical health than exposure to danger or trauma.***" (Spinaris, Ph.D. page 28)

• PTSD	25%	all MDOC employees
• PTSD	41%	custody staff, male prisons
• PTSD	31%	custody staff, female prisons
• Major Depressive Disorder	16.6%	all MDOC employees
• Major Depressive Disorder	12.5%	civilian support staff, non-managerial
• Major Depressive Disorder	24%	custody staff, male prisons
• Major Depressive Disorder	13%	custody staff, female prisons
• Alcohol Abuse	20%	all MDOC employee
• Alcohol Abuse	26%	custody staff, male prisons
• Alcohol Abuse	16%	custody staff, female prisons
• Alcohol Abuse	16.6%	supervisory
• Alcohol Abuse **NATIONAL AVERAGE**	7.0 %	general population
• Alcohol Abuse	9.0%	first responders
• Suicide Ideation	9.0%	all MDOC employees
• Suicide Ideation	12%	custody staff, male prisons
• Suicide Ideation	8%	custody staff, female prisons
• Planning to Commit Suicide	1.1%	estimated 139 MDOC employees

> "The average MDOC employee's rate of death by suicide completion is extremely high, in line with prior findings [New Jersey New Jersey Police Suicide Task Force Report, 2009; Frost, 2019; Stack & Tsoudis, 1997]. Using the CSSR, .9% of the survey respondents were found to be at very high risk for suicide by indicating that they were currently and actively planning to complete suicide. Using weighted survey statistics, this number translated to 1.1% of the entire MDOC employee population. Using a different measure to assess suicide risk, the MCO 2016 study found that 4.6% of COs (custody staff only) were at high risk for suicide."

1 Spinaris, C. G., Brocato, N. (July 1, 2019). Descriptive Study of Michigan Department of Corrections Staff Well-being: Contributing Factors, Outcomes, and Actionable Solutions. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach and Gallium Social Sciences. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/MDOC_Staff_Well-being_Report_660565_7.pdf.

Icon credit: Michigan by Brendan Flamand from the Noun Project.

RESOURCES

Using weighted survey statistics, approximately 1 in 6 of all MDOC employees (16.6%) are estimated to meet criteria for major depressive disorder on a valid screening instrument. Examining depression rates by working group, about 1 in 4 custody employees working at male facilities (25%), and about 1 in 8 support staff (i.e., not managers) in headquarters (12.5%) meet criteria for major depressive disorder. Using weighted survey statistics, approximately 1 in 2 of all MDOC employees (50%) are estimated to score in the range of medium to high generalized anxiety on a valid screening instrument. This rate is 16 times the national average, and nearly 10 times the rates for military (all personnel, not just active combat).

Using weighted survey statistics, nearly 1 in 4 of all MDOC employees are estimated to meet criteria for PTSI on a valid screening instrument, with almost 1 in 2 (41%) of custody staff working at male facilities meeting criteria for PTSI. Every working group in MDOC was estimated to have PTSD rates higher than those of first responders (which are estimated to be 10%). The rates of PTSI at MDOC are nearly 7 times higher than the national average in the general population.

Using weighted survey statistics, nearly 1 in 5 of all MDOC employees are estimated to meet criteria for alcohol abuse on a valid screening instrument, with 1 in 4 of custody staff working at male facilities and about 1 in 6 managers/supervisors in headquarters meeting criteria for alcohol abuse. The national rate of alcohol abuse in the general population is estimated to be 7%, making MDOC's overall rate 2.7 times higher than the national average. It is also 2 times higher than the estimated rate among first responders (9%). Weighted survey estimates indicate that approximately 9% (about 1 in 11) of all MDOC employees reported scores indicative of suicidal ideation on a valid screening instrument, and a need for immediate mental health support. And of greater concern is that a total of ***34 (1%) survey respondents reported they are currently and actively planning to complete suicide.***

Using weighted survey statistics, ***we estimate that approximately 1.1% (n = 139) of all MDOC employees are currently and actively planning to complete suicide.*** There have been three known completed suicides of MDOC staff in 2019 to date; all three were male COs working in male facilities (Working Group 3). As is demonstrated in Figure ES2, the pattern that emerges across all these results indicates that mental health outcomes are clearly worse among custody staff, which includes Working Groups 1 (women's facility, custody staff) and 3 (all other facilities, custody staff).

Security level and years of correctional experience were found to moderate health condition rates significantly, with ***more years of correctional experience and higher security levels being associated with higher mental health condition rates.*** Pre-correctional military experience and gender showed little to no effect upon mental health condition rates. These findings reinforce a growing perspective among researchers that COs suffer health detriments due to high stress and potentially traumatic occupational experiences comparable to those more widely known to occur for police officers, firefighters, and combat military personnel.

RESOURCES

NIJ NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE[1]

"For example, although police officers are exposed to many occupational dangers such as gangs and physical retaliation from community members [Anson, Johnson & Anson, 1997; Jones & Newburn, 2002], when compared to the dangers confronting COs, marked contrasts exist. Brower [2013] suggests ***that the daily dangers and pressures "faced by COs far exceed those experienced by police officers" (p. 5). Whereas the dangers faced by law enforcement personnel are periodic, those faced by COs are constant. In fact, COs experience continued exposure to violent and dangerous offenders throughout the entirety of their work shifts.***"

"Many scholars conclude that employment as a CO is among the most dangerous and life threatening of all professions . . . Given how COs are heavily relied upon to supervise inmate behavior, establish order in their facilities, and maintain wider institutional security, it is paramount that correctional practitioners, researchers, administrative officials, and other interested stakeholders begin developing more effective and widely used strategies for enhancing the general well-being of this critically important workforce."

"This synthesis of the literature on CO safety and well-being revealed three distinct dangers confronting officers: work-related, institution-related, and psycho-social. To date, work-related dangers have received the most attention in the research literature, because these issues are intrinsic to the correctional context. These dangers include exposure to infectious and communicable diseases, prison gangs, disruptive inmate behaviors, the presence of contraband, inmates with mental illness, and riots.

The second category of dangers related to CO safety and well-being encompasses institution-related dangers, which are largely influenced by the prison administration. Examples include role conflict and ambiguity, as well as low pay, extended work hours, and insufficient staffing and resources. In today's correctional environments, as documented by the research on institution-related dangers, officers are being asked to accomplish more with fewer resources, which elevates their mental health risks.

A final category of work-related dangers threatening officer well-being comprises psycho-social dangers, which are arguably the most understudied and underappreciated aspects of correctional work. Researchers know relatively little about the impact of work-family conflict on COs. Some studies have explored this phenomenon [Crawley, 2004], but there is a need for greater academic attention in this area."

1 Ferdik, F. V., & Smith, H. (2017). Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

RESOURCES



NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY [1]

"Between 2010 and 2015, at least 19 current or former correctional officers employed by the Massachusetts Department of Correction (MA DOC) died by suicide."

Suicide rate among MA DOC correctional officers is 92.9 per 100,000 officers. Massachusetts (GP) has one of the nation's lowest rates, at 10.4 per 100,000." ***(Note: In 2017 the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention estimated a national rate of 14/100,000 for the general population.)*** The national average for correctional officer suicide is 34.8 per 100,000 officers. According to this study, the rate of suicide of Massachusetts correctional officers is 9 times higher than the general population and nearly 3 times higher than the national average for correctional officers. Suicides among MA DOC employees have occurred across all ranks, early in the career and post-retirement, and across varied correctional settings, but officer suicides have been concentrated at three facilities (MCI-CJ, SBCC, and BSH).

- Average Age: 41 (range: 23 – 61); Average Years of Service: 15 (range <1 – 32)
- Rank (12 Officers; 3 Sergeants; 2 Captains; 2 Deputy Supt+)
- 14 had worked at a single facility (5 had worked at multiple facilities)
- 14 died from gunshot wounds, 2 died by hanging, 3 died of drug overdoses
- 1 Homicide-Suicide / 1 Attempted Homicide-Suicide
- 8 of the 19 (42%) were veterans
- 14 of the 19 (74%) were not married at the time of their death
- 8 of the 19 had never married
- 10 of the officers had children at the time of their death; custody issues emerged as
- particularly acute in several of the cases
- 13 of the 19 (2/3) had criminal justice system contact, some pre-employment, some since employed at the DOC. Very few convictions (typically arraignments for OUI)

One Voice Initiative Survey, August 2018 [2]

- 94% believe there needs to be agency-wide training on mental health awareness and stress management.
- 91% believe that PTSI is a "serious and pervasive issue within corrections."
- 81% say more efforts are needed to encourage communication, increase respect, and ultimately break down the notion of hostility between officers and those incarcerated.
- 15% believe the correctional profession is respected and recognized as an important branch of the law enforcement community.

1 Frost, N. A., & Monteiro, C. E. (2019). Correctional Officer Suicide and Officer Wellbeing [PowerPoint slides]. Northeastern University. https://www.uml.edu/docs/1345_natasha%20frost_tcm18-280421.pdf.

2 Post, C., & Tripp, J. (2018, October 13). One Voice Leadership Meeting and National Survey Results Discussion [Conference Session]. National Medal of Honor Awards, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Icon credit: Massachusetts by Linseed Studio from the Noun Project.

RESOURCES

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY[1]

CO Depression — About 50% of the COs gave responses that may indicate the presence of moderate depressive symptoms, while about 8% indicate they may have serious depressive symptoms.

CO PTSI — The responses to the PTSI symptoms scale indicated that 23% of COs gave responses that may indicate a high likelihood of the presence of PTSI-like symptoms.

> "COs felt as though speaking up about a problem would not matter because nothing would change as a result."

> "Job-related demands: We assessed resource insufficiency, possibility of conflict, perceived dangerousness of job, hypervigilance, incivility, and emotional workload. COs reported feeling that perceived dangerousness of job was high, with a mean score of 4.00. ***They also felt they needed to be on guard and alert at all times***, reporting a mean score of 4.07 on the hypervigilance scale. These would suggest that ***COs feel as though their job is more dangerous than other jobs, and that they felt as though they could not turn their back without putting themselves or others in danger.*** These findings are not surprising given the normal demands of working as a CO in a correctional institution. Additionally, although the mean score for overall resource insufficiency was moderate (2.77), the mean score for the question pertaining to resource insufficiency/understaffing was 3.13, suggesting the ***COs felt that understaffing and a lack of resources was a problem***."

1 Fritz, C., Hammer, L., Guros, F., & Meier, D. (2013). Work Stress, Well-Being, and Work-Life Balance [Survey of Oregon State Correctional Officers]. Portland State University.

Icon credit: Oregon by Leonardo Schneider from the Noun Project.

RESOURCES

WASHINGTON STATE SURVEY[1]

- Prison employees work under an almost constant state of threat to their personal safety, and about a quarter of them routinely experience serious threats to themselves or their families.
- Almost half have witnessed co-workers being seriously injured by inmates.
- More than half have seen an inmate die or have encountered an inmate who recently died.
- The vast majority have dealt with inmates who were recently beaten and/or sexually assaulted.

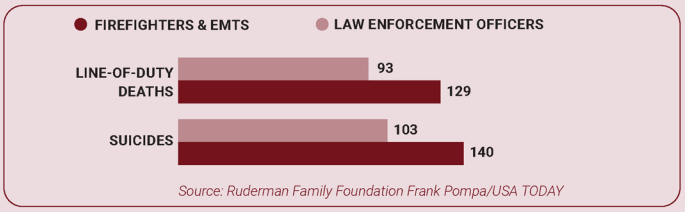
PTSI rates were higher among women, Black employees, and employees with more than 10 years of experience. PTSI scores, using criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, didn't differ based on where the employee worked, such as a minimum versus maximum security facility. James and Todak note that the research included a small sample of 355 employees of one labor union at the Washington State Department of Corrections, and recommended further study of the issue.

FIRST RESPONDER/LEO COMPARISON

FIRST RESPONDER DEATHS

The number of firefighters, EMTs and officers who took their own lives outnumber all line-of-duty deaths in 2017.

- 800,000 Police Officers: 140 suicides
- 1,610,000 Firefighters & EMTs: 103 suicides
- 440,000 Correctional Officers: 156 sucides



Source: Ruderman Family Foundation Frank Pompa/USA TODAY

> "... Correctional officers suffer health detriments due to high stress and potentially traumatic occupational experiences comparable to those more widely known to occur for police officers, firefighters, and combat military personnel." [2]

1 Hatch, A. (2018, July 13). PTSD rate among prison employees equals that of war veterans. WSU Insider. https://news.wsu.edu/2018/07/13/ptsd-rate-among-prison-employees-equals-war-veterans/.

2 Spinaris, C. G., Denhof, M. D. (2016). Prevalence of Trauma-related Health Conditions in Correctional Officers: A Profile of Michigan Corrections Organization Members. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach and Michael D. Denhof LLC. https://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MCO-Paper_FINAL.pdf.

Icon credit: Washington from the Noun Project.

OTHER RESOURCES

"*Stress Management for the Professional Correctional Officer*,"[1] written by psychologist Dr. Donald Steele, who has spent a career counseling correctional officers. This manual is a great guide for officers on how to deal with the day-to-day stresses of a career in corrections.

Family Members: As we have seen, a career in corrections can take a toll on officers, staff, and administrators. It can have a tremendous impact on your family and loved ones as well. Family members are often like passengers on a plane that faces considerable turbulence at various times during the flight. They can feel it happening, they can see it happening, but they are unable to control it or change course. To make matters worse, in this flight simulation the pilot, the officer, often fails to tell you that turbulence is coming, and it can blindside our families.

This booklet is designed to help our families cope with the issues we bring home to them; to identify signs of choppy weather ahead on the flight. To have a mentor to talk to when questions arise and to better understand what our job entails and how it can affect us.

1 "Stress Management for the Professional Correctional Officer" Psychologist Donald Steele, Ph.D., Steele Publishing, 2008 for more information or to order copies contact Dr. Steele at dkphiker@gmail.com

Icon credit: Paper Clip by Locad from the Noun Project.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Potter.
Mr. Purtill, you may begin.

STATEMENT OF PATRICK D. PURTILL

Mr. PURTILL. Mr. Chair, Ranking Members, and the distinguished Members of Congress, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I want to begin by noting that President Trump made an excellent choice when he selected William Marshall to serve as the Director of the Bureau of Prisons, and I have high hopes he'll succeed in that post. As we've heard, the most immediate challenges he faces are staff retention and recruitment, the degraded condition of BOP facilities and, I would add, the increasing financial cost of incarceration generally.

Over the past 10 years, BOP staffing has dropped significantly. Staffing shortages often require substantial use of overtime, including mandatory overtime and the use of augmentation. BOP faces a $3 billion price tag for deferred maintenance, and those repairs needed across all its facilities. Staffing shortages and poor facilities undermine employee retention rates and create security and safety issues for staff and inmates alike. These challenges are complicated by the fact that the number of prisoners in BOP facilities and the cost to incarcerate them has risen dramatically over the years.

Understanding Congress' efforts to reduce unsustainable levels of Federal spending, I'm going to limit my remarks to recommendations that can be implemented under current law using current funding levels.

First, remember that corrections officers are first responders, and that we can make better use of them. The COs are law enforcement professionals who perform many of the same functions as police officers. Equally important, they're critical to the rehabilitation process and have a direct impact on recidivism.

In fact, no one has more insight into an inmate's likelihood of successfully reintegrating into society than the COs who interact with them on a daily basis. The COs' experience and insights should help inform public policy, and the BOP should incentivize and empower the COs to have a stake in the prisoners' rehabilitation, as well as in the security of the facilities.

Second, home confinement to free funds up at the BOP. The BOP must reduce its per-inmate average cost of incarceration while not undermining public safety. I stress that, while not undermining public safety. Recent experience demonstrates that this can be done within certain careful parameters.

The 2020 CARES Act allowed Federal prisons to serve a portion of their sentence in home confinement. Former Attorney General William Barr set the criteria for home confinement eligibility. It required being in low or minimum security, having a clean misconduct record, no history of violence, sex, or terrorism offenses, a viable reentry plan, a minimum-or low-risk score on the BOP's PATTERN risk assessment tool, and having served a significant portion of their sentence.

These criteria allowed a substantial number of prisoners to be moved to home confinement without undermining public safety. In fact, after release from home confinement, those with a CARES as-

signment had a 3.6 percent recidivism rate over one year, whereas those without a CARES assignment had a 13 percent recidivism rate.

According to the most recent data available, about 54 percent of the current Federal prison population are classified as minimum or low risk for recidivism by BOP's PATTERN risk assessment tool. I'm certain that not all these people meet the CARES Act criteria for home confinement, but many could be placed in home confinement without jeopardizing public safety and thereby realizing a substantial cost savings to the BOP.

Third, close outdated and dilapidated BOP facilities. The BOP needs to review its physical footprint, as we've heard. Since modernizing, any Federal operation often runs up against political pressures. Unify.US would recommend forming a commission patterned after the DOD Base Realignment and Closure Commission to review the BOP's facilities requirements and to right-size the Bureau after accounting for its staffing and its budgetary needs. This would free up revenues for maintenance and modernization of the BOP's remaining facilities.

Beyond cost savings, there is some evidence that this could also help reduce recidivism. Evidence from Colombian prison construction suggests that prisoners that were quasirandomly assigned to newer and, therefore, slightly better prisons were up to 36 percent less likely to recidivate.

Fourth, continue implementation of the First Step Act. During President Trump's first administration, he championed supporting successful reentry and supporting law enforcement with passage of the First Step Act. Through its oversight function, Congress should continue to ensure that the BOP expands recidivism reduction programming and that eligible individuals receive appropriate FSA incentives. Also, the BOP should especially focus on increasing access to evidence-based recidivism reduction programs.

In closing, by improving facilities, by improving respect for and the resources available to corrections officers, and by safely transitioning inmates least likely to commit new crimes back into society, BOP, Congress, and the Trump Administration can go a long way toward solving our corrections crisis while ensuring public safety.

Thank you very much. I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Purtill follows:]

Testimony before the Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and Subcommittee on Oversight
U.S. House of Representatives

May 6, 2025

Patrick D. Purtill
Executive Vice President & General Counsel
Unify.US
and
Charels Evans Hughes Lecturer & Co-Director of the Washington Study Group
Colgate University

"Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons."

Mr. Chairmen, Ranking Members, and distinguished Members of Congress:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the challenges and opportunities facing the federal Bureau of Prisons. I appreciate your convening this hearing.

My name is Patrick Purtill. I am the Executive Vice President & General Counsel of Unify.US, a newly established nonprofit organization that brings together faith-driven and economic conservatives to find common-sense solutions to some of today's most pressing problems. Our work focuses on three broad issue sets: economic opportunity, families & communities, and freedom & justice. And our work covers federal as well as state level policies. In addition to my work at Unify.US, I am the Charles Evans Hughes Lecturer in Policial Science at Colgate University.

The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of either institution.

I have spent a good deal of my career working in the field of criminal justice policy. As Special Assistant to the Deputy Attorney General at the U.S. Justice Department, I served on the Attorney General's Prisoner Reentry Working Group, President Bush's Prisoner Reentry Initiative Group, and the Strategic Management Council's Subcommittee on Violent Crime and Gangs. I have also served in the office of United States Attorney for the District of South Carolina, as a clerk to a federal judge, and as an advocate for policies that increase public safety.

I want to begin by noting that President Trump made an excellent choice when he selected William Marshall to serve as Director of the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). He has a big job ahead of him. But his extensive and varied experience in law enforcement and corrections gives me great hope he will succeed where others have struggled. The most immediate challenges he faces are

staff recruitment and retention, the degraded condition of BOP facilities, and the increasing financial cost of incarceration.

Challenges Facing BOP

Staffing: Understaffed prisons with overburdened employees create security and safety issues for staff and inmates alike. Over the past ten years, BOP's staffing has dropped significantly. In 2014, BOP employed 19,238 corrections officers. Today, BOP has 15,992 corrections officers. Last year, BOP had its best hiring year in a decade; adding nearly 4,000 new hires that, when coupled with roughly 2,800 separations, left BOP with a net gain of nearly 1,200 new employees. However, recruitment and retention of staff remains a pressing and perennial issue for the agency.[i]

According to the Department of Justice's Office of the Inspector General (OIG), BOP's staffing shortages have a cascading effect on institution operations, often requiring substantial use of overtime, including mandatory overtime, and the temporary reassignment of non-Correctional Officer (CO) staff to work in CO posts (a practice known as augmentation). This use of augmentation affects the ability of these non-COs to conduct their routine duties, which include performing maintenance, providing healthcare, and teaching inmate programs, including First Step Act programming to reduce recidivism. Moreover, the routine use of overtime, whether voluntary or mandatory, can have a negative impact on staff morale and attentiveness. This, in turn, undermines institution safety and security and degrades employee retention rates.[ii]

Deferred Maintenance: according to the DOJ OIG and recent testimony by Kathleen Toomey, Associate Deputy Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons, the BOP faces $3 billion in deferred maintenance and major repairs needed across its facilities.[iii] An OIG audit similarly found maintenance problem across its inventory of prisons. According to the Inspector General Report, three of the facilities were in such poor condition that they had to be partially or fully closed.[iv]

Increased BOP Population and Incarceration Costs: Finally, the number of prisoners in BOP facilities and the cost to incarcerate them have risen dramatically. In 1980, the federal prison population was 24,640. Over the next thirty years it rose to a peak of 219,298 in 2013 and has since declined to 156,254.[v] A significant portion of this decline is due to accelerated use of home confinement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The average cost of incarceration per Federal inmate in Fiscal Year 2013 was $29,291.25 ($80.25 per day) and the average annual cost to confine an inmate in a Residential Re-entry Center was $26,612.15 ($72.91 per day).[vi] Based on FY 2023 data (the most recent available), the average annual cost for a Federal inmate housed in a Bureau or non-Bureau facility was $44,090 ($120.80 per day) and the average annual cost for a Federal inmate housed in a Residential Reentry Center was $41,437 ($113.53 per day).[vii]

With Congress' current efforts to reduce unsustainable levels of government spending, it is likely safe to assume there is little to no room in the Federal budget for significantly increasing BOP's funding level. Therefore, I will limit my remarks to recommendations to address staffing, facilities, and incarceration costs that can be implemented under current law using current funding levels.

Remember Corrections Officers are First Responders[viii]

COs are law enforcement professionals responsible for maintaining order and security within correctional facilities, and their role is integral to the broader law enforcement community. Corrections officers perform many of the same functions as police officers, including maintaining order, preventing disturbances, and ensuring the safety of everyone within the facility. But equally important, they are critical to the rehabilitation process and have a direct impact on recidivism. Since every case of re-offending means another victim, another court case, and another prison cell, ensuring we have a well-trained and motivated corrections officer corps is a key part of any effective public safety strategy.

COs should be included more in the corrections process and their experience and insights should inform public policy. BOP should incentivize and empower COs to have a stake in the prisoner's rehabilitation as well as in the security of the facility. No one has more insight into an inmate's likelihood of successfully reintegrating into society than the COs who interact with them daily. Reminding ourselves and the public of COs broader role in the corrections system could help improve BOP's ongoing recruitment and retention issues as well as advance the rehabilitative element of BOP's mandate to promote public safety by reducing criminal recidivism.

Expanded Use of Home Confinement to Free Funds

To address its staffing and facilities issues in an environment of limited budgets, BOP must reduce its current costs and reallocate any savings to address its most pressing needs. To do this, BOP must reduce its per-inmate average cost of incarceration while not harming public safety. Recent experience demonstrates this can be done within certain parameters.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), passed on March 25, 2020, allowed individuals in federal prisons to serve a portion of their sentence in home confinement. Former United States Attorney General William Barr set the criteria for home confinement eligibility[ix] under the CARES Act. AG Barr required the following criteria for eligibility: being in low or minimum security; having a clean misconduct record; no history of violence, sex, or terrorism offenses; a viable re-entry plan; a minimum or low risk score on the PATTERN risk assessment tool; and serving a substantial portion of their sentence (at least 50% or 25% with 18 months or less remaining).

These criteria allowed a substantial number of prisoners to be moved to home confinement while maintaining BOP's public safety mandate. After release from home confinement, those with a CARES assignment had a 3.6% recidivism rate over one year whereas those without a CARES assignment had a 13.0% recidivism rate.[x]

In effect, like telemedicine, the CARES Act was a natural experiment that worked and could serve as a model to free up BOP resources to focus its limited bed space on those convicted of serious crimes and who have a higher risk of recidivating. According to a December 2024 BOP report, about 54% of the 143,291 persons in federal prison who had been assessed with the Prisoner Assessment Tool Targeting Estimated Risk and Needs (PATTERN) as of December 31, 2023, were classified as minimum or low risk for recidivism.[xi] While not all of these persons

would meet the CARES Act criteria for home confinement, the large number of persons deemed as minimum or low risk to recidivate coupled with the demonstrated success of those released under the CARES Act suggests that BOP could expand the use of home confinement without jeopardizing public safety.

BRAC Process for Outdated and Dilapidated BOP Facilities

President Ronald Reagan's Grace Commission was a "Private Sector Survey" on cost control that concluded that "savings could be made in the military base structure" and recommended establishing an independent commission to study the issue. Public Law 100–526 endorsed the review and authorized the "special commission to recommend base realignments and closures" to the Secretary of Defense.

In light of the budgetary, maintenance, and human resource pressures facing BOP, it is clear BOP needs to review its physical footprint. Using current authorities under the First Step Act and other legislation, BOP could move low risk prisoners to home confinement by applying the Barr CARES Act standards. Doing so would permit BOP to better utilize its corrections officers to supervise higher risk inmates and maintain institutional security.

Modernizing any federal operation often runs up against political pressures. As such, we would recommend forming a commission patterned after the DoD Base Realignment and Closure Commission to review BOP's requirements and "right size" the Bureau of Prisons after accounting for its staffing and budgetary needs.

Non-partisan recommendations to the Attorney-General to close specific BOP facilities that are no longer cost effective to maintain would free up revenues for maintenance and modernization of BOP's inventory of facilities. Reinvesting those funds into better BOP facilities would improve the conditions for the incarcerated and BOP staff, without the need for increased appropriated funding.

Beyond cost savings, there is also some evidence that this would increase public safety by reducing recidivism. Evidence from Colombian prison construction suggests that prisoners quasi-randomly assigned to newer (and generally better) prisons were up to 36% less likely to recidivate.[xii] Charles Fain Lehman of the Manhattan Institute notes that "[W]hile the applicability of this finding to the U.S. is limited, and its mechanisms ambiguous, it suggests that improving prison conditions may benefit society in the long run, too."[xiii]

Continued Implementation of the First Step Act and the Second Chance Act

During President Trump's first administration, he emphasized supporting successful reentry and supporting law enforcement with passage of the First Step Act (FSA). This law promotes successful reentry by creating additional incentives to participate in recidivism reduction programming. Through its oversight function, Congress should continue to ensure BOP expands programming opportunities and that eligible individuals receive appropriate FSA incentives. BOP should especially focus on increasing access to evidence-based recidivism reduction (EBRR) programs.

Conclusion

While it may appear that the challenges facing the new BOP Director are so significant that they cannot all be addressed at once, the contrary is true. By improving facilities, improving respect for and the resources available to COs, and safely transitioning inmates least likely to commit new crimes back to society with the tools to be successful, BOP, Congress and the Trump administration can work hand in hand to solve our corrections crisis while promoting public safety.

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[i] U.S. House Appropriations Committee Oversight Hearing – Federal Bureau of Prisons, February 26, 2025, The Honorable Kathleen Toomey, Associate Deputy Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons. https://appropriations.house.gov/schedule/hearings/oversight-hearing-federal-bureau-prisons.

[ii] U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General, *Top Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Justice–2024*. https://oig.justice.gov/reports/top-management-and-performance-challenges-facing-department-justice-2024.

[iii] U.S. House Appropriations Committee Oversight Hearing – Federal Bureau of Prisons, February 26, 2025, The Honorable Kathleen Toomey, Associate Deputy Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons. https://appropriations.house.gov/schedule/hearings/oversight-hearing-federal-bureau-prisons.

[iv] U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General, *Top Management and Performance Challenges Facing the Department of Justice–2024*. https://oig.justice.gov/reports/top-management-and-performance-challenges-facing-department-justice-2024.

[v] Federal Bureau of Prisons, Total Prison Inmates, May 1, 2025. https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/population_statistics.jsp#pop_report_cont.

[vi] Annual Determination of Average Cost of Incarceration, Federal Register, 79 FR 26996, p. 26996, 05/12/2014. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2014/05/12/2014-10859/annual-determination-of-average-cost-of-incarceration#:~:text=The%20fee%20to%20cover%20the%20average%20cost,Fiscal%20Year%202013%20was%20$26612.15%20($72.91%20per.

[vii] Annual Determination of Average Cost of Incarceration Fee (COIF), Federal Register, 89 FR 97072, p. 97072, 12/06/2024. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/12/06/2024-28743/annual-determination-of-average-cost-of-incarceration-fee-coif#:~:text=Based%20on%20FY%202023%20data,$41%2C437%20($113.53%20per%20day).

[viii] *See*, United States Department of Labor, Wahe and Hour Division, *Fact Sheet #17J: First Responders and the Part 541 Exemptions Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)*, revised September 2019, which lists first responders as "police officers, detectives, deputy sheriffs, state troopers, highway patrol officers, investigators, inspectors, correctional officers, parole or probation officers, park rangers, fire fighters, paramedics, emergency medical technicians, ambulance personnel, rescue workers, hazardous materials workers and similar employees" for purposes of the Fair Labor Standards Act. https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/17j-overtime-first-responders#:~:text=%C2%A7%20541.3%20provides%20that%20police,personnel%2C%20rescue%20workers%2C%20hazardous%20materials. See also, 29 C.F.R. § 541.3.

[ix] William Barr, *Memorandum from the Attorney General: Increasing Use of Home Confinement at Institutions Most Affected by COVID-19*, April 3, 2020, found at: https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000171-4255-d6b1-a3f1-c6d51b810000.

[x] Jason Gwinn, PhD, *Cares Act: Analysis of Recidivism*, March 2024, U.S Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Information Technology & Data Division, Office of Research & Evaluation (www2.fed.bop.gov/202403-cares-act-white-paper).

[xi] U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2024, NCJ 309537, *Federal Prisoner Statistics Collected Under the First Step Act, 2024*.

[xii] Santiago Tobón, "Do Better Prisons Reduce Recidivism? Evidence from a Prison Construction Program," Review of Economics and Statistics 104, no. 6 (Nov. 14, 2022): 1256–72.

[xiii] Charles Fain Lehman, *Modernize the Criminal Justice System: An Agenda for the New Congress*, The Manhattan Institute, April 2023. https://manhattan.institute/article/modernize-the-criminal-justice-system-an-agenda-for-the-new-congress

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you, Mr. Purtill.
Mr. Wilde, you may begin.

STATEMENT OF CODY WILDE

Mr. WILDE. Good morning, Chair Biggs, Chair Van Drew, Ranking Member McBath, Ranking Member Crockett, and the Members of the Subcommittee. I'm Cody Wilde, Senior Vice President of the correctional programs at Prison Fellowship, and I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Prison Fellowship is the Nation's largest Christian nonprofit, equipping the church to serve currently and formerly incarcerated people, their families, and to advocate for justice and human dignity. Established on the belief that all people are created in God's image and that no life is beyond his reach, Prison Fellowship takes a restorative approach to those affected by incarceration.

We strive to make prisons safer and more rehabilitative, advance criminal justice reform, and support incarcerated people, their families, and their communities. Robust programming, including faith-informed, volunteer-led initiatives, is essential for creating a safer correctional environment and preparing individuals for successful reentry. Research shows that incarcerated people who participate in educational or vocational programming are 43 percent less likely to recidivate.

While many State correctional systems have embraced partnerships with external organizations to provide these opportunities, the Bureau of Prisons has historically been more cautious. The First Step Act of 2018 encourages collaboration with community- and faith-based groups to provide evidence-based recidivism reduction programs and productive activities.

However, the current vetting progress for external programs exceeds what the law requires, unintentionally excluding no-cost mission aligned programs like the Prison Fellowship Academy. The incoming BOP director has an opportunity to remove unnecessary barriers and realize the full intent of the First Step Act by welcoming qualified partners who can expand the in-prison programming.

At the same time, any discussion about program access must be grounded in the broader challenges facing corrections today, such as significant staffing shortages that impact the ability to implement and sustain rehabilitation effort. With prison staffing at its lowest point in over two decades and continued high incarceration rates, facilities face serious operational and safety strains.

Officers often endure long shifts and high stress, contributing to burnout and health risks. Addressing these issues through fair compensation, mental health supports, and strong recruitment practices is vital, as is leadership development to foster healthier cultures inside of prison walls.

In response to these pressures, programs like those offered by Prison Fellowship can play a critical role in supporting both staff and incarcerated individuals at no cost to the BOP. Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange equips correctional executives with tools for building restorative prison cultures and has trained over 680 leaders across 47 States, with an additional 149 currently enrolled.

We also offer transformative programs like Prison Fellowship Grow, a year-long, cohort-based course rooted in Christian principles of human flourishing. While faith is not required for participation, the program is designed for those who are curious about or open to learning more about Christianity.

The Prison Fellowship Academy is our most intensive in-prison program, offering men and women a voluntary, holistic journey of life transformation. Over the course of the year, participants are mentored by staff and volunteers as they develop and practice the biblically based values of good citizenship, community, affirmation, productivity, responsibility, restoration, and integrity. A recent study in Texas found a 53.8 percent reduction in recidivism among academy graduates.

Finally, Angel Tree supports family connections by partnering with churches to serve children of incarcerated parents year-round, helping restore relationships and providing hope to the 1.5 million children with a parent currently in prison.

In total, our programs reach over 600,000 individuals in more than 1,200 facilities annually, supported by 7,600 volunteers, and serve more than 271,000 children each year.

At a time of limited budget and rising needs, it's essential to adopt cost-effective, volunteer-driven programs that reduce recidivism, support staff, and foster rehabilitation, and we are ready to partner with the BOP to expand access to these proven initiatives to help create a more restorative and effective Federal system.

Thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wilde follows:]

PRISON FELLOWSHIP

Seek justice. Love mercy. Restore hope.

Testimony of Prison Fellowship
Before the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and Subcommittee on Oversight of the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary
Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons
May 6, 2025

Dear Chairman Biggs, Chairman Van Drew, Ranking Member McBath, Ranking Member Crockett, and Members of the Subcommittees,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for this hearing on "Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons".

Prison Fellowship is the nation's largest Christian nonprofit equipping the Church to serve currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families, and to advocate for justice and human dignity. Established on the belief that all people are created in God's image and that no life is beyond His reach, Prison Fellowship takes a restorative approach to those affected by incarceration. Prison Fellowship was founded in 1976 by Charles Colson, a former aide to President Nixon who served seven months in federal prison for a Watergate-related crime. Today, we strive to make prisons safer and more rehabilitative, advance criminal justice reforms, and support incarcerated people, their families, and their communities.

Issues Impacting Rehabilitation in Federal Prisons

At Prison Fellowship, we believe that a robust programming offering, including faith-informed and volunteer-led initiatives, is essential to cultivating a safe and rehabilitative correctional environment. Access to these programs is not only critical to the well-being of incarcerated men and women but also supports their successful reintegration upon release. Research has shown that individuals who participate in educational or vocational programming while incarcerated are 43% less likely to recidivate.[1]

Many state departments of corrections have successfully partnered with external non-profit organizations to supplement their own funded or contracted program delivery. This emphasis on partnership with non-government organizations has not historically been reflected in the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Congress recognized the value of greater collaboration and included provisions in the First Step Act (FSA) to encourage the BOP to engage with qualified external providers, including community and faith-based organizations.[2] The FSA emphasizes the value of Evidence-Based Recidivism Reduction (EBRR) programs and Productive Activities (PA), highlighting services such as job training, cognitive behavioral programming, and family development often delivered by third-party groups.

However, despite these intentions, proof of expanded partnerships has been limited. The BOP has implemented an evidentiary review process for external programs that goes beyond what the statute requires, which has made it more difficult for outside organizations to participate. In contrast, BOP-operated programs funded by taxpayer dollars are not subject to the same evidentiary standards. For

[1] Lois M. Davis, *Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus on Going Forward*, RAND Corporation, (August 2019), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE342/RAND_PE342.pdf; Robert Bozick, et. al., *Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Post-Release Outcomes?*, RAND Corporation (July 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP67650.html.
[2] FIRST STEP ACT of 2018, S. 756, 115th Cong. § 102(5)(A) (2018).

example, Prison Fellowship's in-prison program, The Prison Fellowship Academy, was not approved as an EBBR or PA, based on concerns about the resource requirements for implementation and determination that comparable programming was already available internally. This outcome highlights a missed opportunity to leverage a proven, no-cost resource that aligns with the goals of the FSA and supports rehabilitation efforts. Amid evolving federal funding priorities, it is more important than ever to leverage partnerships with external providers that support rehabilitation and public safety and reflect statutory intent. The incoming BOP Director has an opportunity to remove unnecessary barriers and realize the full intent of the FSA by welcoming qualified partners who can expand in-prison programming.

The conversation about program access must also be understood within the broader challenges currently facing correctional systems nationwide, including persistent staffing shortages. In 2022, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that state prison staffing had fallen to its lowest level in over two decades, with a 10% decline since 2019 alone.[3] As staffing levels decrease while prison populations remain high, facilities face operational strain, safety concerns, and disruptions to rehabilitative programs and visitation.[4]

Correctional officers serve an essential public safety role, yet they experience higher rates of PTSD, suicide, and reduced life expectancy compared to other law enforcement sectors.[5] Many officers are required to work extensive overtime, sometimes serving seven consecutive days with 16-hour shifts, contributing to burnout and safety risks for both staff and incarcerated individuals.[6] Supporting correctional staff through fair compensation, mental health resources, and comprehensive training is critical to maintaining safe facilities. Recruitment efforts should not only focus on filling vacancies but also prioritize selecting individuals with the aptitude, resilience, and values needed to foster a rehabilitative environment. Regular training and clear professional standards further strengthen operations and workplace culture.

Beyond frontline staffing, strong leadership is essential for meaningful cultural transformation. Correctional leaders, particularly wardens, shape institutional culture, implement policy, and drive reform. Yet leadership development often overlooks the cultivation of a positive organizational culture. Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange program addresses this need, however, despite multiple invitations, no BOP correctional leaders have participated. At a time when the agency faces funding pressures and operational challenges, investing in leadership development is a critical step toward building more resilient, rehabilitative institutions.

Solutions to Strengthen Rehabilitation and Correctional Culture

Amid these challenges, proven, faith-informed models that can foster a more constructive prison culture exist. Prison Fellowship has developed several innovative programs that address both individual transformation and institutional leadership. For nearly 50 years, our staff and volunteers have been going

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[3] Shannon Heffernan & Weihua Li, *New Data Shows How Dire the Prison Staffing Shortage Really Is*, The Marshall Project (Jan. 2024), https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/01/10/prison-correctional-officer-shortage-overtime-data.

[4] Erica Bryant, *Corrections Staffing Shortages Offer Chance to Rethink Prison*, Vera Institute of Justice (Nov. 2024), https://www.vera.org/news/corrections-staffing-shortages-offer-chance-to-rethink-prison; Amanda Hernandez, *State prisons turn to extended lockdowns amid staffing shortages, overcrowding*, Stateline (Dec. 2024), https://stateline.org/2024/12/03/prison-lockdowns/.

[5] *Id.*

[6] Vera, *The Prison Experience of Corrections Staff*, Vera Institute of Justice, https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/examining-prisons-today/the-prison-experience-for-corrections-staff (last visited April 2025).

into correctional facilities, sharing the Gospel, helping forge community, and offering the hope of true transformation. Through intensive in-prison programming, we nurture incarcerated individuals' spiritual growth with Bible studies and a wide range of biblically based curriculum. Our goal is for incarcerated men and women to experience the life-changing love of Christ and to prepare them to be leaders in their communities, whether inside or outside of prison. This work is funded entirely through the generosity of private donors and foundations, never by government funds.

Starting with Prison Fellowship Grow, a cohort-based, year-long program rooted in Christian principles of human flourishing. While faith is not required for participation, the program is designed for those who are curious about or open to learning more about Christianity. Courses are held twice a week and led by trained volunteers from local churches, under the oversight of Prison Fellowship's Prison Ministry Managers. Grow cultivates personal growth, moral development, and renewed purpose—foundations that support successful reentry.

The Prison Fellowship Academy is our most intensive in-prison program, offering men and women a voluntary, holistic journey of life transformation. For a year, participants are mentored by staff and volunteers as they develop and practice the biblically based Values of Good Citizenship: community, affirmation, productivity, responsibility, restoration, and integrity. Through targeted curriculum, compassionate coaching, and restorative community, participants replace criminal thinking with renewed life principles. Academy graduates emerge as change agents, prepared to contribute positively to both prison and society. The public safety results of this offering are clear - a recent study in Texas showed a 53.8% reduction in recidivism among Academy graduates compared to a similar group.

At the leadership level, Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange equips correctional executives with the vision and tools to build restorative environments. Grounded in four key areas—Restorative Mindset, Strategic Planning, Implementation Skills, and Transformational Leadership -- the program has trained over 680 leaders from 47 states, with an additional 149 currently enrolled. Participants report measurable improvements in safety, staff morale, and rehabilitative outcomes in their respective correctional environments.

Finally, Prison Fellowship Angel Tree recognizes the vital role of parents in a child's life, even during incarceration. Through partnerships with local churches, Angel Tree strengthens relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, offering year-round support to families. Today, approximately 1.5 million—or 1 in 49—children in America have a parent in prison, and 5.2 million have experienced parental incarceration at some point.[7] Angel Tree provides hope, fosters reconciliation, and helps build bridges that promote healing for families impacted by incarceration.

Conclusion

Our prison events, classes, and programs reach more than 600,000 prisoners each year in over 1,200 prisons across all 50 states. We have 7,600 Prison Fellowship volunteers across the United States who

[7] G.E.M, *Love Beyond Bars*, Girls Embracing Mothers (Dec. 2022), https://girlsembracingmothers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Love-Beyond-Bars-GEM-Report_v5.pdf; Laura M. Maruschak, et. al., *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, Bureau of Justice Statistics (March 2021), https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmcspi16st.pdf.

PRISON FELLOWSHIP

Seek justice. Love mercy. Restore hope.

make it possible to serve people in prison and more than 271,000 children of incarcerated parents annually.

By combining in-prison curriculum for incarcerated individuals with leadership development for correctional staff, Prison Fellowship helps lay the foundation for a safer and more rehabilitative federal prison system. Our mission is to encounter Jesus with those impacted by incarceration and we have witnessed firsthand how faith-based programming offers hope and a pathway to transformation for our brothers and sisters behind bars. We stand ready to partner with the BOP to expand access to proven initiatives and help create a more restorative and effective federal prison system.

Sincerely,

Cody Wilde
Senior Vice President, Correctional Programs
Prison Fellowship

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Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you Mr. Wilde. Mr. Milton, you may begin.

STATEMENT OF KANDIA MILTON

Mr. MILTON. Good morning, Chairs Biggs and Van Drew, Ranking Members McBath and Crockett. Thank you for convening this important joint hearing.

My name is Kandia Milton, and I serve as Government Affairs Director for *Dream.Org*, an organization committed to advancing meaningful and lasting bipartisan criminal justice reforms. At the heart of all our work is a commitment to centering on the voices of those directly impacted by the justice system.

I came to you this morning not only as a policy advocate, but also as someone who has lived experience within the Federal prison system. I previously served as Deputy Mayor and Chief of Staff for the city of Detroit, and after accepting responsibility for a serious bad decision I made in office, I served time in a Federal correction facility.

While I had always understood on an intellectual level the need for prison reform and the importance of supporting successful reentry, it was my time behind the walls and the stories of those I met inside that opened my heart and gave purpose to the work I do every day.

It is deeply troubling that the many challenges we discussed and faced during my incarceration, which ended in 2011 and these problems remain unresolved today. In fact, by many accounts, the conditions have worsened. This is not only a disservice to the correction officers and those who are incarcerated but also to the communities to which they will one day return. There are large problems, pressing problems at the Bureau of Prisons.

First, there are the catastrophic infrastructure issues. The BOP has 121 institutions that include 3,600 buildings. According to the Inspector General, they are all in need of serious attention. As of February 2024, the BOP estimated that the major repairs needed across a facility would cost $3 billion. According to OIG audits, it has determined that all 121 of the BOP's institutions require maintenance.

Despite the need for investment and critical infrastructure across the entire BOP, there continues to be talk of investing more money in building new facilities, including an unnecessary budgeted $505 million prison proposed to be constructed on top of a former coal mine in Eastern Kentucky.

Second, the BOP is critically understaffed. The Associate Deputy Director Kathleen Toomey, in her testimony before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies in February, concluded that the BOP is short over 4,000 officers, while other press reports suggest that the Bureau is over 6,000 officers understaffed.

The problem of retaining officers has been further complicated by a directive that ended retention bonuses. A BOP spokesperson suggested this impacts up to 25 percent of some employees' pay, and the *Federal News Network* reports that this decision has already resulted in more correctional staff leaving the positions, thus exacerbating staffing crisis. Furthermore, understaff results in higher

overtime costs and the use of regular staff, including medical staff, and augment correctional officer shortages.

Third, the problem of halfway houses. The Bureau has available beds but has not filled them, and left thousands of people who have earned credits under the First Step Act or Second Chance Act to qualify for release, but still remain in prison. This is also legally problematic in the case of the First Step Act earned credits, multiple courts have concluded that the plain meaning of the statute demands release, and there are pending litigations on this topic as well.

As an organization that led the efforts to pass the First Step Act, we emphatically support its full implementation, which to date the BOP has failed to do. We agree with Attorney General Pam Bondi who said, during her confirmation hearing,

> We must fix the Bureau of Prison and followup with the promises of the First Step Act by building more halfway houses.

Finally, the culture related to its operations. Most recently, these problems resulted in the closure of FCI Dublin, a prison so notorious that nearly 100 cases, including a class action lawsuit, are in the process of litigation today. This speaks to the need to fund the bipartisan Federal Bureau of Prisons Oversight Act.

The problem—oh.

Mr. VAN DREW. You're over the time.

Mr. MILTON. Have I gone over time? Sorry, Mr. Chair. Sorry, Members of the Committee.

I stand down and avail myself to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Milton follows:]



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Title: Testimony of Kandia Milton
Position/Title: Government Affairs Director
Before the: Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and Subcommittee on Oversight of the Committee on the Judiciary
Hearing Title: Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons
Date: May 6, 2025

Good morning Chairmen Andy Biggs, Jefferson Van Drew, Ranking Members Lucy McBath and Jasmine Crockett, and to members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and the Subcommittee on Oversight - thank you for convening this important joint hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about the operations of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, particularly its management of individuals in its care and custody.

My name is Kandia Milton, and I serve as the Government Affairs Director for Dream.Org—a bipartisan organization committed to advancing meaningful and lasting criminal justice reforms. At the heart of our work is a commitment to centering the voices of those directly impacted by the justice system.

I come before you not only as a policy advocate but also as someone who has lived experience within the federal prison system. I previously served as Deputy Mayor and Chief of Staff for the City of Detroit. After accepting responsibility for a serious bad decision I made in office, I served time in a federal correctional facility. While I had always understood, on an intellectual level, the need for prison reform and the importance of supporting successful reentry, it was my time behind the walls - and the stories of those I met inside - that opened my heart and gave purpose to the work I do every day.

It is deeply troubling that many of the challenges we discussed and faced during my incarceration which ended in 2011 remain unresolved today. In fact, by many accounts, conditions have worsened. This is not only a disservice to correction officers, and those who are incarcerated, but also to the communities to which they will one day return.

There are a large number of pressing issues at the Bureau of Prisons (BOP):

First, there are catastrophic infrastructure issues. The BOP has 122 institutions that sit on 46,000 acres with 3,600 buildings and, according to the Inspector General, they all need serious attention:

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"As of February 2024, the BOP estimated that the major repairs needed across its facilities would cost $3 billion. During an OIG audit, we determined that all 123 of the BOP's institutions required maintenance (one has closed since this report)"[1]

Despite the need for investment in critical infrastructure across the entire BOP, there continues to be talk of investing money in the building of new facilities.[2]

Second, the BOP is critically understaffed. Associate Deputy Director Kathleen Toomey, in her testimony before the subcommittee on commerce, justice, science, and related agencies in February concluded that the BOP was short over 4,000 officers[3] while other press reports suggest that the bureau is over 6,000 officers understaffed.[4] The problem of retaining officers has been complicated by a directive that ended retention bonuses.[5] BOP spokesperson Donald Murphy suggested this impacts up to 25% of some employees' pay[6] and The Federal News Network reports that this decision has already resulted in more correctional staff leaving their positions exacerbating the staffing crisis.[7] Finally, being understaffed results in higher overtime costs and the use of regular staff to augment[8] correctional officer shortages. As correctional officer Jon Zumkehr put it:

"This is not strategic cost-saving, This is blind slashing of essential funding that will cost taxpayers more in the long run. The overtime costs alone to cover vacant positions, combined with increased recruitment expenses, will far exceed any immediate savings"[9]

Third, is the problem of halfway housing. The bureau has available beds, but has not filled them which has left thousands of people having earned the credits under the First Step Act or Second Chance Act to qualify for release but who still remain in prison. This is legally problematic in the case of First Step Act earned credits, multiple courts have concluded that the plain meaning of the statute demands release[10] and there is a pending ACLU class action on this topic as well.[11] As an organization that led the efforts to pass the First Step Act, we emphatically support its full implementation - which to date the BOP has failed to do - and we at Dream.Org agree with Attorney General Pam Bondi who said during her confirmation hearing:

"We must fix the Bureau of Prisons and follow through on the promise of the First Step Act by building new halfway houses."[12]

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[1] https://oig.justice.gov/tmpc/challenge-1#:~:
[2] https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article294653689.html
[3] https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP19/20250226/117920/HHRG-119-AP19-Wstate-ToomeyK-20250226.pdf
[4] https://www.forbes.com/sites/walterpavlo/2025/04/04/bureau-of-prisons-is-a-powder-keg-with-problems/
[5] https://www.forbes.com/sites/walterpavlo/2025/02/26/bureau-of-prisons-to-cancel-staff-retention-bonuses/
[6] https://www.corrections1.com/federal-prison/bop-slashes-retention-bonuses-cutting-pay-for-thousands-of-prison-staff
[7] https://federalnewsnetwork.com/pay/2025/03/days-ahead-of-coming-bop-pay-cuts-some-employees-already-resigning/
[8] https://federalnewsnetwork.com/pay/2025/03/employees-at-the-bureau-of-prisons-try-to-deal-with-agency-side-pay-cuts/#
[9] https://www.forbes.com/sites/walterpavlo/2025/02/26/bureau-of-prisons-to-cancel-staff-retention-bonuses/
[10] https://www.prisonology.com/blog/bop-ordered-to-transfer-prisoner-home-after-first-step-miscalculation
[11] https://www.aclu.org/cases/crowe-v-federal-bureau-of-prisons#
[12] https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2025-01-15_-_opening_statement_-_bondi.pdf

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Finally, there are operational culture problems. Most recently, these problems resulted in the closure of FCI Dublin, a prison so notorious that nearly 100 cases, including a class action case, are in the process of litigation.[13]

These problems are incredibly important. The Federal Bureau of Prisons is responsible for the safety and health of approximately 156,254 incarcerated people, 35,764 total staff including 12,662 correctional officers. In addition, many thousands of incarcerated people are released from federal prisons every single year and how they return is critical to the public safety of our communities. The investment in good facilities, good correctional programming, and retaining and hiring excellent correctional staff are about investing in the growth and development of people and pays off both inside our facilities and in our communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.

[13] https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/fci-dublin-prison-closed-abuse-worse-1235033085/

Mr. VAN DREW. Mr. Milton, thank you for your time and being here.

We're now going to proceed under the five-minute rule with questions, and I'm going to recognize the gentleman from the great State of Wisconsin, Mr. Tiffany.

Mr. TIFFANY. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Wilde, what has the response been both federally and States that you worked in with faith-based organizations like yourself? Tell us the response that you get.

Mr. WILDE. One of the things that I know about corrections is that people tend to be very pragmatic. Does this work? What we've seen is a large expansion of our programs—our Warden Exchange program. Like I said, we just had our largest cohort ever. The 149 correctional leaders are going through it right now. Our Prison Fellowship academies, our Grows, and our Angel Tree program have continued to expand. As I mentioned, we're in all 50 States. So, I'd say the response has been very good.

Mr. TIFFANY. Where you find governments that are not as welcoming, what do you hear from them?

Mr. WILDE. We operate in States as diverse as Washington and Oregon to Texas, Florida, North Dakota, Nebraska, California, and all of them.

As I said, they tend to be very pragmatic, ask the question, Is it voluntary? The answer is, yes. Does it work? It does. So, we're allowed to operate. Over time, we're able to really affect the prison culture, which we hear both from the staff as well as leadership.

Mr. TIFFANY. Are there any changes needed by Congress to help you further your mission?

Mr. WILDE. Thus far, we have not been able to operate our in-prison programs, our Academies or our Grows within the Bureau of Prisons. We think that both those programs, as well as our Warden Exchange Program that helps assist correctional leaders at no cost to the State, can be a tremendous asset and a force multiplier to help solve some of these problems facing the Bureau.

Mr. TIFFANY. Mr. Purtill, we heard earlier from the Ranking Member in regards to President Trump is failing. Do you agree President Trump does not care about prisons? That's what we heard, is that he does not care about prisons by one of the Members up here.

Do you agree with that?

Mr. PURTILL. I do not, respectfully, sir, do not agree with that. We worked extremely closely with the first Trump Administration on crafting the First Step Act, and I can tell you that they were very involved, very concerned. It would not have happened without Mr. Trump's personal leadership. It simply doesn't comport with what I've experienced.

Mr. TIFFANY. Do you think President Trump should continue with the status quo? Because that's what I'm hearing is that he doesn't care about prisons, we should leave things as is.

Do you think we should leave the status quo?

Mr. PURTILL. No, sir. I think there is much here—as this Committee well knows, there is much here that under the Bureau of Prisons that needs to be addressed.

It can be addressed in terms of what Mr. Trump tried to do in his first administration, and that I have every reason to believe he's going to try to continue in his second.

Mr. TIFFANY. Give me something that's primary in your mind that could be a good change for Federal prisons.

Mr. PURTILL. Well, to go back to what—to my testimony, I do think that focusing Federal prisons—Federal prisons are in a unique position in terms of corrections facilities across the country. They are best equipped to deal with some of the prisoners that are really most dangerous, most likely to commit new crimes, to recidivate.

That's really—a friend of mine at *The Heritage Foundation*, John Malcolm, likes to say, "prison beds are some of the most expensive hotel rooms in the country. I want to reserve them for the people who are most dangerous to society."

Doing all that we can to make sure that this is the population within the Federal prisons, because they are most—they're just better equipped to deal with it than any other system in the country.

Mr. TIFFANY. In my home State of Wisconsin back when I was in the State legislature, we had a youth correctional facility that the ACLU came in and sued to prevent them, the staff, they restricted the staff from using certain measures that they had used for a long, long time.

The day that the judge accepted the ACLU's brief and said, "We're going to accept the policies that you're suggesting for us," the young people in the correctional facility went on the roof of the facility and taunted the guards, saying, "You can't touch us."

Is it surprising to you that a couple years later that a staff youth counselor was killed in that facility?

Mr. PURTILL. In all honesty, sir, I couldn't address that. I don't know anything about the facts of the—

Mr. TIFFANY. Have you seen instances where an organization like the ACLU has sued and prevented staff from being able to do their jobs using the proper restraints? Have you seen that nationally?

Mr. PURTILL. There's a lot of questions in that issue. It's BOP's job to ensure both the safety of the staff as well as the inmates, and limiting them to be able to do that is always dangerous.

Undermining the respect that law enforcement should be given leads to the sense of the idea that people are taunting guards and things like that, and that this also undermines security.

I also think that we have to remember that when people are within our custody, we have to do everything to make sure that we're remembering to treat them as people and remembering that they still have rights while they're in there. It's a very difficult challenge that the BOP has to make sure that they're balancing both of those sides.

Mr. VAN DREW. Your time is expired.

Mr. TIFFANY. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you. Next, we will hear from the gentleman from the great State of Georgia, Mr. Hank Johnson.

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My daddy rose to the No. 3 spot in the Bureau of Prisons back in the early 1960s. He was head of—his responsibility was pardons, classifications, and paroles. He became a corrections officer, one of the first Black corrections officers in the country back in 1950, when he was—actually, 1949, when he was recruited out of Morris Brown College in Atlanta to go to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary and become one of the first Blacks to be a corrections officer.

He became the first parole officer out at Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was transferred to back around 1952–1953. The BOP, Bureau of Prisons, kind of runs in my blood. He used to work at the Federal Home Loan Bank Building, what it is now, but that used to be the Bureau of Prisons, just a stone's throw away from here.

I'm alarmed that we will be having this hearing today and we don't even have the current BOP Director to testify. If Republicans actually cared about oversight, they would have the Director here or reschedule for a date that he was available.

President Trump fired the former Bureau of Prisons Director on inauguration day and a third of the BOP senior leadership quit. In its misguided efforts to chase efficiency, the Trump Administration ended a long-running incentive pay plan, cutting officers' and other employees' pay by 25 percent, which will only worsen the existing staff shortages. It's not just human infrastructure that's in disrepair. It's also the physical infrastructure, which has been a problem for years.

Mr. Purtill, you are aware that in May 2023, the Office of the Inspector General published an audit of the BOP's efforts to maintain and construct institutions, and that audit described hazardous and crumbling infrastructure, including infrastructure problems that have led to the closure of the BOP facilities, correct?

Mr. PURTILL. Correct.

Mr. JOHNSON. You are also aware that the BOP leadership has expressed concern about underfunding for maintenance and repair efforts and a resulting backlog of projects, right?

Mr. PURTILL. I know that they have a significant backlog in deferred maintenance.

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. Milton, how does the failure to maintain the BOP facilities affect the health and safety of the BOP staff and inmates?

Mr. MILTON. Thank you for the question. If I may take some liberties and also express gratitude for your grandfather's—

Mr. JOHNSON. My daddy.

Mr. MILTON. I'm sorry, your father's legacy. Certainly, the facilities have put the health—

Mr. JOHNSON. When you say grandaddy—that makes me feel good.

Mr. MILTON. I'm sorry.

Mr. JOHNSON. That must mean I'm looking young up here.

Mr. MILTON. You look so young that it had to be your grandfather.

Mr. JOHNSON. Well, I'll tell you, I do want an answer to that question, but I'll contact you later. I want to proceed on.

Mr. MILTON. OK. Sorry, sir.

Mr. JOHNSON. I'm getting flustered now.

Instead of putting money into our existing prisons to fix them, this week Trump ordered Federal agencies to rebuild and open Alcatraz, which closed in 1963 and is now a tourist site.

Alcatraz was shut down because it was too expensive to run, and all its supplies had to be brought by boat to the—I mean just total—the place doesn't need to be reopened, but it's a vanity project for the President.

He would waste money there, Mr. Purtill, and he also wasted money that could have gone to enhance facilities at the existing BOP facilities, but he poured money into a failed effort to make Guantanamo Bay a place where it could accept a bunch of—some being American citizens who were later deported to El Salvador. We don't need a BOP that manages facilities that are the same as what we have in El Salvador.

I'm out of time now so I will yield back, but we have dysfunction in the BOP at this point.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentleman yields back. With that, I'll ask the gentleman from the great State of Alabama, Mr. Moore.

Mr. MOORE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Trump Administration reversed several of the Biden–Harris, BOP-related policies through Executive Orders. Most notably, President Trump signed an Executive Order 14168, requiring that all Federal inmates be housed according to their biological sex, and ending any provision of taxpayer-funded gender-affirming care for any Federal inmates.

Mr. Purtill, how did the previous administration of the Bureau of Prisons justify allocating limited taxpayer resources toward gender transition?

Mr. PURTILL. In all honesty, sir, I couldn't answer that. I don't know what their justification was.

Mr. MOORE. What would be a better use of those funds?

Mr. PURTILL. What I will say is that I strongly support the current Executive Order that housing should be based on biological sex. There's a lot of agreement across multiple corrections systems, not just at the Federal system that this is the way to go.

I believe that's the way California currently operates. If you can get agreement between an Executive Order from the Trump Administration and Governor Newsom's Administration, there's probably—we can safely say there's some bipartisan consensus on that issue.

I do think that for facilities, both security and for the safety, especially for the inmates, that this is the correct policy.

Mr. MOORE. Yes, I would agree 100 percent.

One thing you mentioned in your testimony—and we looked at this in the State of Alabama—is the in-home confinement as opposed to having them locked up in a prison, a Federal prison in this case.

Can you elaborate a little bit on the cost-effectiveness of that? That was something Bill Barr and the CARES Act, they kind of came out with. It seems like to me that makes a lot of sense for the taxpayers and for the inmates.

Mr. PURTILL. Yes, I agree, the cost of savings there is enormous. It's just over $44,000 a year to house an inmate in a Federal correction institution today. I don't have numbers handy, but I'll get

them to you on exactly what the differential there would be on home confinement, but it is substantial.

As long as you approach that topic from a public safety standpoint, that you're very careful about who moves to home confinement, that the bar requirements were very well thought through.

That they also ensured that we maintained—the rehabilitative piece of corrections is extremely important. The punitive piece is also important, and requiring a significant portion of their sentence to have been served was what Mr. Barr was trying to get at with that piece.

That's a very viable option, given that 54 percent of the current Federal prison population is deemed low risk to recidivate by BOP's own pattern tool.

Mr. MOORE. Yes, I agree 100 percent. Like I said, if they're nonviolent, maybe there's an opportunity to revisit their case and say, Hey, you can be confined at home.

In the State when we were doing the study, it seemed like we could house them for a month for the cost of one day in a prison. So, we were looking at it as we were overcrowded as well.

So, a really quick we question. Mr. Potter, I want to ask you this: The 119th Congress has already acted with the introduction of H.R. 1046. It's actually the Marc Fischer Memorial Act.

Are you familiar with that?

Mr. POTTER. I am not familiar.

Mr. MOORE. OK. What happened, we actually had a Bureau of Prison employee that was just going through the mail, and it had so much fentanyl on it that it killed him.

We're looking at ways that we can actually have this mail screened offsite. That probably is something we're trying to get. We have 56 cosponsors right now. We're working on moving that through. Hopefully we can make some—any of you familiar with that at all? OK. It's something they asked me to talk about, and I wanted to make it aware to the panel that we're talking about that.

Mr. Wilde, what is the No. 1 thing that you see when you're—what really changes when you start meeting with folks who are incarcerated and through your process? What do you think is the most impactful thing that we can do to help folks not recidivate?

Mr. WILDE. The Prison Fellowship utilizes what we call an ecosystem model. It's recognizing that within a correctional environment there are multiple stakeholders. Through programming like the Prison Fellowship Academy and the Warden Exchange, correctional leaders as well as the incarcerated population can actually go on parallel journeys and not look at one another as the problem, but both become participants and partners in how we create a more rehabilitative and constructive culture to both live and work in. We utilize all kinds of programs that bring multiple stakeholders together.

Mr. MOORE. Do you see your recidivism rates drop dramatically?

Mr. WILDE. Our recidivism rates within the State of Texas are over—it's a reduction in over 50 percent from a control group within that State.

Mr. MOORE. One of the things we've done in Alabama is actually skills training in prison so that as those individuals are incarcer-

ated, they actually develop the skill, whether it be a mechanic certification, HVAC, honestly, all kinds of industry they can go into. We've seen that have a tremendous impact as well as faith.

With that, Mr. Chair, I yield back. I'm out of time.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you.

Ms. CROCKETT. Mr. Chair, I do have an unanimous consent: "Under Trump, U.S. Prisons offered gender-affirming care." This is a *The New York Times* article from October 16, 2024. Thank you.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. VAN DREW. Next, if I've got this right, Ranking Member, we have Mr. Raskin from the great State of Maryland.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you, Chair Van Drew. Mr. Potter, is there evidence that private prisons are run better than Bureau of Prison facilities?

Mr. POTTER. There isn't any evidence that I've ever seen.

Mr. RASKIN. Mr. Milton, the President wants us to hand out hundreds of millions of dollars in bonuses and incentive pay to ICE agents. The number we saw the other day, we discussed it here in Committee, was $858 million to ICE agents, which, according to Mr. Moskowitz's calculations, came to something like $45,000 per employee of ICE.

Yet, at the same time we are reading articles about how retention incentives are being cut right now for the Bureau of Prisons staff up to 25 percent, effectively reducing their salaries when you look at it from an annual perspective.

What kind of effect is this having on Bureau of Prisons' corrections officers?

Mr. MILTON. Thank you for the question, Ranking Member Raskin. What we've come to realize when we talk about officers, correction officers tend to be among the lowest paid.

When those bonuses were removed, it certainly did—should I say the incentives were removed, it disincentivized a number of correction officers. Certainly, it has an impact on morale.

We believe that investing in correction officers will also increase morale and have a better impact on those who are incarcerated as well.

Mr. RASKIN. The President has told us recently that the border has never been safer. Can you think of any reason why we should be spending hundreds of millions of dollars on bonus pay for ICE employees while we're reducing retention bonuses and incentive pay for Bureau of Prison employees?

Mr. MILTON. No, sir.

Mr. RASKIN. What's that going to do to retention, moving forward?

Mr. MILTON. I'm sorry?

Mr. RASKIN. What's it going to do to our ability to retain the best Bureau of Prison employees?

Mr. MILTON. Certainly, it makes it a challenge. Removing those bonuses can speak to a lack of willingness to invest in, in this case, people.

One of the things that's missing in the conversation is that whether we're talking about people who are incarcerated or, in this case, correctional staff, these are people. At the center of all the solutions, we should be placing people at the forefront.

As much as we're talking about the facilities, in this case, bonus pay, it's really about the morale of people and how it's impacting those who are directly impacted.

Mr. RASKIN. All right. It's going to be profoundly demoralizing to the staff there now. We've heard also about an increase in lockdowns taking place because you've got the people who are the most effective and necessary employees resigning because their pay is being cut.

These lockdowns can last weeks, even months I've heard in some cases. What impact does the lockdown have on prison safety, on access to programming, and on the mental health of incarcerated people?

Mr. MILTON. Yes. Well, when lockdowns happen, there is a decrease in access to medical care. There's a decrease in access to families. You can't reach out to families. Families don't know what's going on during those lockdowns.

It creates a panic and tension within the facilities. Then certainly, implementing the lockdowns certainly places pressure on staff as well. It creates a system where folks are now ill at ease during that process.

Mr. RASKIN. There's this rhetorical lip service to the people who have the toughest jobs actually in the prisons managing very difficult conditions. Yet, the President issued an Executive Order wiping out collective bargaining purportedly for more than a million Federal workers, including all these Bureau of Prison employees.

What effect will that have on the staffing crisis, and what does it do to the morale of people who work as correctional officers?

Mr. MILTON. Certainly, collective bargaining establishes a formal process for advocacy for people, for the workers. By removing that formal process, where folks can sit at a table across from each other and find common ground on issues that are impacting the quality of life, it certainly removes that opportunity to do that in a formal way.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you. The gentleman from the great State of Arizona, Andy Biggs.

Mr. BIGGS. Thanks, Mr. Chair. Thank you to our panel again.

So, Mr. Purtill, you wrote, "COs should be included more in the corrections process, and their experience and insight should inform public policy."

Mr. Potter, do you agree with that?

Mr. POTTER. Absolutely.

Mr. BIGGS. Mr. Purtill, you also wrote, "No one has more insight into an inmate's likelihood of successfully reintegrating into society than the COs who interact with him daily."

Do you also agree with that, Mr. Potter?

Mr. POTTER. Absolutely.

Mr. BIGGS. Can you give me an example on where—an idea that you think, as you represent COs, both on the policy and, in particular, if you have a policy on how to address inclusion of COs into the procedure of determining reintegration into society?

Mr. POTTER. Yes. I believe any time there's a consideration for early release, I think you should include those men and women

that know firsthand how that person has conducted themselves throughout their time.

I can tell you from my own personal experience, I've worked with many people that I totally believe should have gone home, they were ready to go home, but I was not allowed to weigh in on that decisionmaking.

I do believe that when you talk to those that are closest and that spend the most time with these individuals, sometimes 16 hours a shift, sometimes longer, they know more about that individual than anybody else in the system.

Mr. BIGGS. Mr. Purtill, how would you integrate a CO into that process?

Mr. PURTILL. I do think coming up with a mechanism to have their voices input into that. That they can both be on an individual level within the institution on what that individual person is—what their likelihood is to recidivate and what security level they need to be housed at and all those things. That can be taken, become part of the case file for the individual incarcerated.

I also think that there are voices at a more broader policy level could also—

Mr. BIGGS. Let's get on the adjudication of whether someone should be released early in reentry first before we get to broader policy.

Mr. PURTILL. Sure.

Mr. BIGGS. What I would suggest is that there's an action item for maybe all four of you is to come up with a process and a procedure to include, be more inclusive of COs. If I could, I'd ask you to get on that, and get us something back. Maybe Mr. Potter and Mr. Purtill, in particular, can sit down and do something, because one of the ways that this happens is if Congress is aware of it and can actually build on that. I would challenge you to do that.

Mr. Wilde, what do you think are the factors that are most likely predicted whether an inmate will return to prison?

Mr. WILDE. We often say that nothing magic happens on release. What you were doing the day before is a good indicator of what you'll do afterwards.

We've been purposeful in trying to implement communities of practice where people practice values of what we call good citizenship. They're seeking out prosocial community, that they're taking responsibility, they're transitioning from being consumers to producers. No longer does the world happen to an individual but they happen to the world.

That those are some of the greatest factors. We are situated to come alongside and provide those skills as well as support for people's change journeys.

Mr. BIGGS. You've indicated that you've had challenges perhaps working with the BOP and getting into the system and using your program. Again, I would urge, Mr. Purtill, that if we don't come out of here with at least a few action items today, we will not have achieved as much as we need to.

I would encourage us to find a way to work with both the COs and the faith-based to see how we can integrate them more fully into helping.

Mr. Milton, do you think that might be helpful?

Mr. MILTON. It sounds like a good solution.

Mr. BIGGS. Man, I've never heard anybody say that about any of my ideas before. Glad to hear that, Mr. Milton.

I appreciate your efforts, and I hope that we can actually begin to take some steps to get some action items done and completed to facilitate certainly the reduction of recidivism, because I think that would make all us happier.

So, with that, I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. I thank the gentleman.

I will now ask the gentleman from the great State of Tennessee, Mr. Cohen.

Mr. COHEN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's an honor to be here on the dais with a high IQ Ranking Member.

None of you are from the Bureau of Prisons, as I've read over here, and that's a little disappointing there's nobody here from the Bureau of Prisons.

Let me ask, does anybody have any idea how many trans people were in the prison system, the Federal prison system, normally the population, percentage-wise? Nobody has any idea? Anybody have any idea about what problems existed with the trans people in the prisons? If they were not done according to their biological sex, but whatever way they did it, were there problems and what occurred? Is it not an issue?

Trans people in the prison system is not a big issue to any of your opinions, is that right? Nod or something.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Will the gentleman yield for the answers if you don't have them?

Mr. COHEN. Yes, I will yield.

Mr. GOLDMAN. There are 156,000 inmates in the Bureau of Prisons. NPR has calculated there are 23 that would be impacted by this Executive Order. That is .01 percent of the inmates, and yet, this is what our Republican colleagues want to talk about.

Mr. COHEN. That is a great deal greater number than are in the NCAA. I think there are only eight in the NCAA. It's a much more pressing issue than the NCAA.

Anyway, that was just—does anybody in this group—and I know you are trying to do good work and all that, and I think that's important—feel that the First Step program is working or have any opinion about the First Step program? Mr. Purtill, do you have an opinion about the efficacy?

Mr. PURTILL. I have a very strong opinion about the First Step Act. It's working. There is much more that still needs to be done on the implementation side, but that it was well-founded in how it was structured, and the Bureau of Prisons is moving forward with trying to do that.

Increasing the recidivism reduction programming, especially the evidence-based programming, within the facilities is critically important. Most of these folks are coming back home into our community, and we want to make sure that we've done everything that we can both to rehabilitate them, which is part of the mandate of any corrections system.

Mr. COHEN. I was pleased, as a Member of this Committee, during Trump one that I supported that, one of the few times I've supported Mr. Trump. In Trump two, he seems to have forgotten about

it a bit, because Ms. Peters, who he fired on day one as head of the Bureau of Prisons, was very much involved in implementing the First Step program. Since then, they're on the third interim director, I think. It's a very difficult job and an important job.

Mr. Wilde, you're at Prison Fellowship. How many times in your Prison Fellowship have you had people who become religious and either convert their religion or accept religion or something else?

Mr. WILDE. In all our programs, they are open to people of any faith. There is no religious preference. That's never a criterion to get in, to graduate, or to participate. We say that our programs are a place for anybody to belong, regardless of what they believe.

If a person does come to faith in Jesus, it's because they are compelled by something beautiful that they saw and how people love them with where they're at.

Mr. COHEN. Does that happen very often?

Mr. WILDE. I would say so, but there are also people who go through our programs who are Muslim who graduate as a Muslim, who are better citizens.

Mr. COHEN. I saw a movie last week. It's an old movie from Mr. Goldman's hometown. The movie was called, "Cafe Society." In "Cafe Society," there's—it's a Woody Allen movie. There was a Jewish gangster, and he offed a few people.

He was in prison, and he was talking to his sister on the phone and told her how he was converting and becoming Christian. Catholic, he was becoming. He said that he was going to be executed in three days and he thought it gave him something to look forward to. He didn't want to think of that being the end. She commented, "Jews don't necessarily do that, but if they did have that idea that you went somewhere after you were killed they'd get more customers."

There is something to it and there's something to look forward to if you do accept Jesus or accept some different perspective, especially if you're in prison.

Do any of you all have any opinion about prison guards and the difficulty? How many times are prison guards attacked by prisoners? Is that a very common occurrence? Mr. Potter?

Mr. POTTER. Yes. I can tell you that I have been attacked, but mostly, when something else is going on, and we try to calm the situation or break the situation up. It's an unintended consequence, but it's a consequence, and it happens.

I've had a number of things happen throughout my career. I had two neck surgeries, cervical neck surgeries, and had a shoulder surgery. It does happen as part of what we do.

Mr. COHEN. I'm over time, so I can't ask you about Alcatraz, which could be Mar-a-Lago West. Thank you.

Mr. VAN DREW. I thank the gentleman.

I now recognize the gentlelady from the great State of Florida, Ms. Lee.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here with us today. I believe that criminal justice reform is one of the critical issues for this Committee to work on and appreciate you all being here.

Most recently, I was honored to introduce the Fresh Start Act, which is a bipartisan bill that supports helping individuals re-

integrate back into society and gaining access to employment, housing, and educational opportunities, and want to thank my colleague, Representative Kamlager-Dove, for co-leading this effort with me.

In addition to advancing reform, it's critical that Congress continues to conduct meaningful oversight from the Bureau of Prisons to ensure our correctional facilities are secure, cost-effective, and safe for our correctional officers.

I'd like to begin, Mr. Purtill, by going back to something that you just commented about, which was you referred to evidence-based recidivism reduction. I would love to hear your thoughts on some of the tools and strategies that are evidence-based that help us reduce rates of recidivism.

Mr. PURTILL. Sure. We do know a fair amount about when people are more likely to recidivate. We know that employment is one of the most important factors that someone can ever have in determining whether or not they are going to recidivate once they're released from prison.

That the evidence-based—there are criminologists who are in a better position to speak to exactly what goes into evidence-based programming than I am. I know that the Bureau has a process by which they examine programs before they determine that they're evidence-based.

In terms of oversight, really encouraging the Bureau of Prisons to get more of those programs online, get them approved, get them into the facilities, get them behind the walls, and get them working, I think is critically important.

I know that some things—and I'm very sympathetic to the idea that we need these programs to be evidence-based, because sometimes some of the activities that get labeled as recidivism reduction are probably not all that effective. It's important to have that distinction drawn.

Ms. LEE. Thank you.

Mr. Wilde, from the inmate rehabilitation standpoint, have staffing shortages affected the availability of programming and those types of opportunities for those who are incarcerated?

Mr. WILDE. Yes. In several locations where staffing is low, you have to be able to escort volunteers. You have to ensure that as people are coming in to offer those programs, that they are kept safe and secure as well. Yes, staffing shortages do impact programs.

Ms. LEE. Mr. Potter, shifting gears a little bit, last Congress I introduced the Lieutenant Osvaldo Albarati Stopping Prison Contraband Act that would have increased penalties for smuggling cell phones into prisons and will provide oversight of the Department of Justice to ensure these policies, when in place, are being upheld.

Can you speak about the issue of increased contraband being smuggled into prisons and specifically the dangers associated with cell phones.

Mr. POTTER. Yes. There's been all kinds of contraband that have been smuggled into prisons one way or the other, whether it's over the fence or through the gate.

Cell phones, in particular, are, in my mind, pretty dangerous because there's a way of communicating from across the compound.

There's a way of communicating with folks outside to do all kinds of nefarious things.

It's not just communication to see how you're doing. Most times those cell phones lead to—also, it's a level of contraband that's bought and sold that also leads to higher tensions and things like that.

Ms. LEE. In particular, when we are analyzing officer safety and how to ensure that we are doing everything possible to ensure the security and safety of correctional officers, are cell phones one of the tools that can be utilized to actually develop plans or threats against correctional officers and others who are working in prison security?

Mr. POTTER. I believe so, yes.

Ms. LEE. Now, what are some of the things that you think we could do to help deter or reduce the amount of contraband entering into our prison systems?

Mr. POTTER. Well, there's a lot of innovation that's taken place over the past several years, and there's a lot of facilities and a lot of States that are taking those steps like cell phone detection and drone detection and things like that.

When people come in, if you can detect what kind of contraband they're bringing in, or if there's contraband coming from over the fence or however, if you can identify what that is or stop it or disable it, those are all mechanisms that are extremely useful.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. I thank the gentlelady.

Next, I recognize the gentleman from New York, Mr. Goldman.

Mr. GOLDMAN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would ordinarily appreciate this hearing very much, because the Bureau of Prisons is a critical component of the Department of Justice that is woefully underfunded and struggling to implement their mission.

We must be living in Fantasyland. We're trying to have a normal hearing doing oversight of the Bureau of Prisons when the President and Elon Musk are taking a hatchet to the Bureau, canceling the collective bargaining agreement for all the correctional officers, eliminating retention bonuses for the correctional officers while making sure that every masked undercover Gestapo agent with ICE gets a $40,000 bonus.

In fact, the bill you passed last week, the Republicans passed last week, would give $12 billion in pay increases and bonuses to ICE and CBP, and nothing to the Bureau of Prisons. Yet, my colleagues sit over there acting as if they're really interested in correcting the Bureau of Prisons and all the problems that we have there.

Then, put some money where it is, because we all know that's how you correct the problem. That's how you implement the First Step Act. That's how you implement and fund the Federal Prison Oversight Act, a bipartisan bill that we passed last Congress that has not been funded and can't do anything.

You're passing a partisan reconciliation bill. You have the purse strings. Yet, we're supposed to sit here thinking that you're really serious about making sure that we're helping the corrections officer. It's just bogus.

Let's take the Metropolitan Detention Center in my district in Brooklyn. Since 2020, there have been 17 inmates that have been killed. The staffing shortages are devastating and have been devastating. There have been numerous, numerous lockdowns simply because there are not enough staff. Inmates are kept in isolation for multiple days at a time because of staffing shortages.

There was a crackdown by the FBI and the Department of Justice in March. Twenty-five inmates were arrested for all sorts of various smuggling efforts, violence, violent assaults with scalpels and, as my colleague from Florida said, "smuggled in cell phones." There's not enough staff to actually monitor what is going on.

What did they do at MDC? Well, under President Biden, they implemented a retention bonus of 35 percent. That enabled them to hire 87 additional people for that one location, the most in years and years. It decreased lockdowns. Since August 2024, there have been three days of lockdowns due to staff shortages.

You would think that's a productive way of boosting employment, boosting staffing, which I think every single one of our witnesses has said is an essential part of addressing the problems in the Bureau of Prisons.

What does President Trump do? Gets rid of the retention bonuses, gone, gets rid of the collective bargaining agreement.

How on earth do you think you are going to increase staffing by taking away all the correction officers' benefits, by taking away their retention bonus, which proved to be successful and is necessary. Yet, we're here talking about implementing recidivism programs. It's a joke.

So, Mr. Biggs, you asked for some action items. I'll give you some action items.

Mr. BIGGS. Can I ask you a question, Mr. Goldman?

Mr. GOLDMAN. After I give you the action items, I'm happy to have a colloquy.

(1) Restore the retention bonuses so that we can hire more corrections officers to implement all of the laws that we want to implement in a bipartisan way, and so we can keep the inmates safe;

(2) restore the collective bargaining agreement rather than unilaterally canceling a negotiated collective bargaining agreement that gives the corrections officers very important protections; and

(3) fund the First Step Act, let's fund the Federal Prison Oversight Act, which has not been funded.

There are three action items that you can take back to Mr. Trump to try to actually address the issues at the Bureau of Prisons. I am happy to yield to you.

Mr. BIGGS. Can you tell me—you mentioned that the Brooklyn facility had 17 homicides among inmates from 2020–2024. What administration controlled the BOP that entire time? Did you do anything? You didn't do jack crap.

I yield back.

Mr. GOLDMAN. You have no idea what I did.

Mr. VAN DREW. Your time is expired. All right. Next, we have the Chair of the whole Committee, Mr. Jordan.

Chair JORDAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Purtill, any idea how many inmates in Federal prison are not U.S. citizens?

Mr. PURTILL. I actually do not know that, sir. I'm sorry.

Chair JORDAN. Mr. Potter, would you hazard a guess or know?
Mr. POTTER. I do not know.
Chair JORDAN. Mr. Wilde?
Mr. WILDE. I do not know.
Chair JORDAN. Mr. Milton?
Mr. MILTON. No, sir.
Chair JORDAN. I think you all testified there are staff shortages. The gentleman from New York just talked about staff shortages.

Maybe if there weren't 24,000 Federal inmates who are not U.S. citizens, maybe we wouldn't have a staff shortage. Maybe if the administration before this one hadn't just released into the country people who came here illegally and actually detained them, they wouldn't have committed some of these crimes and wouldn't be in Federal prison.

Do you think maybe that would help with the situation on staffing that you all brought up that the gentleman from New York just raised? Mr. Purtill, I'll start with you.

Mr. PURTILL. I do, sir. I'm assuming that most of those are under an immigration detainer for when they do come out.

Chair JORDAN. I don't know about most of them, but that's a question I'd have, too. Do you understand that? Are they under a detainer, when they're released that at least ICE will have the ability to go—they're not just going to be released into the country? Do you know?

Mr. PURTILL. That's my assumption, but I do not know those numbers.

Chair JORDAN. Mr. Potter, do you know if that's actually the case with these 24,584 Bureau of Prison inmates are not U.S. citizens? Do you know what percentage represents of the Federal inmate population?

Mr. POTTER. No, I do not.

Chair JORDAN. Sixteen percent. Maybe we wouldn't have a staff shortage if this had been dealt with in the previous administration. This is something President Trump is trying to deal with going forward. Sixteen percent.

Do you know if there are detainers for these individuals who would be subject to that going on currently, Mr. Potter?

Mr. POTTER. No, I don't know.
Chair JORDAN. Mr. Wilde?
Mr. WILDE. I don't know.
Chair JORDAN. Mr. Milton, any idea?
Mr. MILTON. No, sir.

Chair JORDAN. Well, what we do know is what happened a few years back. I think this goes clear back to the Obama Administration. I sent a detainer to the Board of Prisons—or the Bureau of Prison, excuse me, regarding the individual who wound up killing Kate Steinle. Sure, many of you remember this situation.

The BOP didn't honor that, instead released this individual to San Francisco, to law enforcement there, who then—to the jurisdiction there, who then released this guy to the streets who wound up killing Kate Steinle.

This is something that we should look at here, this huge part of the population in our Federal prison who are not citizens. Again, I appreciate we've known about Prison Fellowship forever and the

good work you do. We appreciate the work you're doing with inmates.

This is one thing, one area where we could make some changes. Again, the Trump Administration is seeking to do that, and certainly not following—well, we're not having near the amount of migrants come to the border now that were coming in the previous administration, but certainly not releasing people into the country like was done before, which then gave the opportunity for this situation to happen with some of these individuals.

Any comments on that? Mr. Potter.

Mr. POTTER. They may help the situation, but I think restoring collective bargaining unit rights is an important issue. Treating people like professionals is also important.

Do I think it will solve the staffing problem? I don't think it will solve the staffing problem. I think there's a systematic issue here. When it comes to how you value the people that work there and how they feel valued is what's going to keep them there.

Chair JORDAN. Fair enough. Any other thoughts from the rest of the panel? If not, I'll yield my time back.

I'll yield my remaining time to the Chair. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks for this hearing and thank all of you for the work you do.

Mr. VAN DREW. I will—you'll yield the time to me. I will yield to Mr. Biggs.

Mr. BIGGS. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I do want to point out, in relationship to the gentleman from New York's comments, I take what he says with gravity and seriousness, but I know one thing: When his side of the aisle controlled the House, the Senate, when they controlled the Presidency, when they controlled the Bureau of Prisons, we had massive amounts of problems with the Dublin Corrections Facility.

We investigated and kept going at it, and eventually that had to be closed. They didn't do anything to fix that. That's my point. I think that there's something we could—you can piss each other off all you want, but if you're going to get something done, you got to find a place that you can work together and get it done.

Some of the rhetoric I've heard today indicates my colleagues just don't want to do that, and that's a shame.

Yield.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentleman yields.

Ms. CROCKETT. Mr. Chair, I've got an unanimous consent.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you so much. This is the GAO report that says that there was a 33 percent decrease in noncitizens incarcerated in BOP from 2017–2022.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you.

Mr. VAN DREW. I now recognize Mr. Moskowitz from the great State of Florida.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Before I begin, I have a unanimous consent request.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record an article by Emma Buker titled "DOGE, Musk oversight of Federal workforce causing frustration for FCI Thomson staff."

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. I have another unanimous consent request.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. You want me to read it or—

Mr. VAN DREW. Not really, but go ahead.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. Can I text it to you later? All right. So, unanimous consent request, obviously. I'll give them to you, Mr. Chair. I'll skip that.

All right. Let's begin on my time. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate this hearing. It's always a pleasure to go after Chair Jordan.

I've been listening to my colleagues talking about investment and personnel shortages. Of course, we're talking about that in a time where DOGE has its fingerprints over all the agencies, including your own.

At a time when we're talking about personnel shortages, we're actually firing people. We're convincing them to leave. We're retiring them, right? Don't get me wrong. Like, you guys need more resources, right? You need more people. You got crumbling infrastructure, right? We need to be tough on crime, tough on criminals. I got all that.

There definitely needs to be serious reforms, right? This is a serious conversation. Earlier I was listening to the Ranking Member and she brought up something about Trump talking about Alcatraz.

Of course, look, this is just another distraction to divert attention away from the tariffs or rising prices or the struggle on Main Street. Since we're having a hearing on prisons, it's lucky timing for me.

Three times more expensive than any prison to operate in 1959, Alcatraz was, OK? It needs about $250 million to shore up the infrastructure and utilities. All food and water have to be barged in. Sewage has to be barged out. The facility is almost 100 years old.

I don't get it. In the days of DOGE where we're cutting budgets, we got to find savings, now we're going to what? We're going to cut Medicaid and SNAP so that we can pour money into Alcatraz?

First, have you been to Alcatraz recently? It literally is—it's a rust box walking around. You need a tetanus shot just to go into the building. Do we still give tetanus shots or has RFK gotten rid of those? I can't keep up.

So, listen, where did the President get this idea all of a sudden, right? Where did he get the idea? Perhaps, he was watching "Escape from Alcatraz," right? I brought boards, because some people are visual learners. Perhaps he was watching "Escape from Alcatraz," by Clint Eastwood.

Actually, the funny part about that, it was actually on television in South Florida. It was on *PBS* South Florida over the weekend when Trump was at Mar-a-Lago. In fact, he made his announcement just hours after it aired. You know *PBS*, the programming that he's trying to get rid of, so just in case you're keeping up, right? It's two dolls for girls and zero Elmos, OK?

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it wasn't that. Maybe he was watching "The Rock," with Sean Connery. You know this one. This is where Sean Connery goes back to Alcatraz, because he originally escaped Alcatraz and he needed an expert on chemical weapons.

Maybe the President was just Netflixing and chilling, like watching "The Rock," which is not to be confused with "The Rock," right? That's a different person.

Then the President is really excited about these sharks, right? He's talking about all the sharks and the person escaped. He lost his clothing. So, sharks, they don't have laser beams on, they don't have laser beams, but maybe the sharks are going to be there.

This is just all ridiculous. All of a sudden after that, we heard like, Oh, we're going to tariff the movies. Well, hold on a second. Why would we tariff the movies? This is where the President is getting his ideas from. We can't tariff the policy idea making of the Presidency.

I know what my colleagues are going to say. They're going to say, Jared, just let the President cook. This is 4D chess he's playing.

I'm going to say, but maybe he's just watching late night movies. Perhaps he's just watching late nights movies. In fact, we're told he got this movie tariff idea from no other than Jon Voight, the guy who was in that great movie "Anaconda." I don't know if you've seen that.

This is the ridiculousness that's going on. I want to end with this: Mr. Purtill, you run a faith-based organization, right? No? Oh, it's Mr. Wilde. You run a faith-based organization. Sorry.

Do you think it's a good idea to reopen Alcatraz? Do you think the faith-based community has been pounding the table to reopen Alcatraz?

Mr. WILDE. Prison Fellowship's stance is that prisons should be safe, effective, efficient, and uphold human dignity.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. OK, let me make it easier for you. All four of you, which one of you think we should reopen Alcatraz? Just raise your hand.

OK. For my colleagues who sometimes are a little slow, no one raised their hand, OK, nobody, not a single witness. None of your witnesses here think we should reopen Alcatraz.

We have real problems in the prison system. It does need reform. It does need money. We can work on that together. The President puts out Alcatraz as a distraction. Thank you.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentleman yields. I am going to yield to myself. I had prepared remarks but before we get into them, so much has been said on the other side, I just want to address some of that.

First, I want to say, Mr. Moskowitz, you really do have talent. You really do have potential as a full-time standup comic for real. You're good. You're good. It's fun. It really is enjoyable.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. The President provided the material.

Mr. VAN DREW. No, I think you have got some of your own material too, and you embellish a little bit but it's still fun.

Second, on a serious note, earlier in the meeting we were discussing, the Ranking Member for the Committee of the whole, something about deporting babies and U.S. citizens and ICE and detaining criminals.

Let's be clear. First, that's not your issue. It's not why you're here. I'm sorry we had to digress on that. This is not a reconciliation meeting. I really do want to talk about the Bureau of Prisons and how we can make it better.

I really started the meeting out by saying I was extending my hand to see. We're going to disagree on some stuff, but let's see if we can work together to make it better because what those folks are going through isn't good. We can do better.

Quite frankly, it's been going on for years on both sides of the aisle. Let's not anybody be holier than thou on this, OK? We're not deporting babies, by the way. I have to bring it up, because it's said.

We're not deporting—and I know somebody is going to disagree with me on the other side, probably the Ranking Member, and that's fine—U.S. citizens. There were a lot of folks that shouldn't have been in the United States of America that were committing crimes and doing bad things that nobody appreciated, obviously, that committed murders, disfigured people, raped people, and hurt people. Some of them were on the terror watch list. We're not speaking about immigrants. We love immigrants, but we don't like those people.

Yes, the border is much, much better now than it was. Yes, sometimes we might need some help from the Bureau of Prisons. Ultimately, it makes it a lot better for them too, not have having lots of bad folks come into the United States.

I just want to, again, focus on associating myself with the remarks of Mr. Biggs. We really want to try to do something together here. It's my goal. I know it's hard, and I know it's highly partisan, but I think there are some areas—we're not going to agree on everything. We know it.

We have divergent ideas for the future of the United States, but there may be a few points where we can come together to try to make it better, and that's what I hope for and that's what I hope we would do.

Finally, Mr. Goldman made a remark, too, about—I think I heard it right and if I didn't I apologize but I believe I did, about jack-booted Gestapo agents as far as ICE.

The men and women who work for ICE are oh so similar to people that work for Corrections. They're just doing their job. They want a safe America. It's a hard job. It's a brutal job. It's not easy. They've been understaffed, abused, and mistreated for years.

I don't like it in Corrections. I don't like it in ICE. We shouldn't do it to anybody. So no, they're not Gestapo agents, and that's abusive and inappropriate to refer to them so much, and I do call out Mr. Goldman for doing that. I wish he was here.

Finally, really quickly, because I used up a lot of my time, but if you'd give me a brief answer.

Mr. Wilde, what structural or policy reforms would give you and your teams the stability and the access to really serve incarcerated individuals?

The work you do, I like. It was referenced before by Mr. Cohen, when you believe in something and you believe you can get better. I've been around Corrections a lot, and some of the most successful work that I have seen done is faith-based, whatever the faith is. Just the faith that there's something greater and bigger and better for all of us, quite frankly. We all need that, including those of us who sit up here.

Tell me, how can we make it better?

Mr. WILDE. First, we would ask for the full implementation of the tenets of the First Step Act.

Prison Fellowship is situated to be able to provide these services to those who live in prison, those who work in prison, family members, and to create better neighbors inside and outside.

We believe that we have something really important and valuable to be able to offer to this conversation, and we're ready to do that. With the First Step Act, we would encourage the inclusion of other faith-based organizations.

Mr. VAN DREW. I hope that this Committee in some way can help. That's something I believe, I'm hopeful that across party lines that we can agree on, that there's a place for God to help people rehabilitate, regardless of what, "D" or "R," is next to our name.

Mr. VAN DREW. Mr. Potter, would you agree—and I think this is what I got from your testimony, and then I'll be done, but I want to just summarize it. You can say yes or no—that we don't actually listen to the correctional officers enough? We always do this. In everything that government does, we don't listen to the people who are most directly affected. Do you believe within the current budget we actually could make it a lot better?

Finally, recidivism—that's a hard word for me—do you agree that the quality of facility actually affects that? I know it's three questions. Real briefly.

Mr. POTTER. Yes. I do believe—

Mr. VAN DREW. Sorry. I'm looking at you. Yes, go ahead. You're correct. You're correct.

Mr. POTTER. OK. Yes. I do believe that listening to the men and women that do the work is extremely important and the second largest stakeholder in the system, so any reform that's going to happen is going to affect them as well.

Mr. VAN DREW. Thank you, Mr. Potter. I yield back. With that, I will recognize the gentlelady from the great State of Georgia, Ms. McBath.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you, Chair.

First, I do want to say, in listening to all of you today, there are resounding themes that we hear from each and every one of you about what we should be doing and the problems that we're facing within the BOP. I do appreciate that Mr. Biggs, our colleague, is looking for action items, but actually the action items are already right before us. Let's make sure that we are fully funding the BOP and the First Step Act and also the Federal Prison Oversight Act.

I'd like to ask each of you gentlemen, just yes or no, would you agree that these programs are a step in the right direction? Mr. Milton?

Mr. MILTON. I agree wholeheartedly.

Ms. MCBATH. Mr. Wilde?

Mr. WILDE. Absolutely.

Ms. MCBATH. Mr. Purtill?

Mr. PURTILL. I do. I think implementing the First Step Act is critically important.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you. Mr. Potter?

Mr. POTTER. I absolutely agree.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you. Because we agree as well. My questions briefly are going to be for Mr. Milton and also for Mr. Potter today.

Mr. Milton, we know the Federal oversight—Prison Oversight Act, we know it needs to be instituted, we know it needs to be funded. Nothing can be done until those things are done. Can you tell us, do you believe that it would have prevented another occurrence such as the widespread abuse that we saw that occurred at FCI Dublin if it was instituted?

Mr. MILTON. I believe it could have, Ranking Member, avoided that, particularly as we talk about the transparency that's built into the Oversight Act, the independence is built into the Act, could have sent early warning signs to this honorable body to do something about it.

Ms. MCBATH. Uh-huh. Thank you.

Mr. Potter, you talked about the human toll that you spoke of in terms of covering the BOP staff. Can you kind of talk about the solutions that we might be able to encapsulate to find these solutions? What can we do basically to improve the mental health and the wellness of our corrections officers and staff that are in the BOP?

Mr. POTTER. In any good wellness program, the employees have to be able to help create what that looks like for them. In every instance and every different State, one wellness program might look different than the other. It shouldn't be something that's just implemented by the administration and then they're dragged into it and convinced that it's a good wellness program. They have to be hands on, they have to help develop that wellness program from the ground up.

There also needs to be a cultural survey. I totally believe that the Bureau of Prisons needs a complete cultural survey to be able to identify where those needs are going to be, and that should be done by a third party, someone who's trusted. I do believe in oversight as well.

Ms. MCBATH. Thank you.

Mr. Purtill, what you said in your opening remarks, I really want to thank you, because a lot of the funding that we secured—bipartisan funding that we secured under the Biden Administration under the CARES Act is what has been able to facilitate a lot of what we were trying to do to restore faith in our Board of Prison system. I want to thank you for acknowledging that funding through the CARES Act is what—we were on the right track at that time.

Mr. Potter, one last question for you. Would these solutions for correctional officers make our prisons safer and better places for inmates as well?

Mr. POTTER. Yes, I believe it would.

Ms. MCBATH. Could you kind of expand on that for us, please?

Mr. POTTER. Remind me of exactly the question that you're asking.

Mrs. MCBATH. OK. The solutions that you spoke about in terms of really helping to support in covering the Board of Prisons' staff, to improve the mental health problems that we have with our staff in the Board of Prisons and the correction officers, would these so-

lutions for correctional officers make our prisons safer and better places for inmates as well?

Mr. POTTER. Yes, thank you. I do believe it would, because when someone comes to work and they're healthier, they're going to conduct their jobs in a much different way. When people come in and they're exhausted and they're not healthy, well, they're not going to be able to do the things we're asking them to do when it comes to helping those incarcerated find success as they leave. I do think it has a direct impact on how somebody comes to work and how they're treated and their mental health State.

Ms. MCBATH. In closing, we're hearing from every witness here, whether invited by the Republicans or the Democrats, all of you are calling on us to get the BOP the funding that it needs, fully implement the First Step Act, and fund the Federal Prison Oversight Act. I thank you for that.

I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentlelady yields. I recognize the gentleman from the great State of Missouri, Mr. Onder.

Ms. CROCKETT. Mr. Chair, before we do that, I've got a UC, unanimous consent request. "What happens with U.S. citizen children caught up in Trump's deportation." That's a *CNN* article. I've got another one. It says, "Newborn U.S. citizen and Guatemalan mom detained." That's an *NBC* article. My last one is, "Judge says 2-year-old U.S. citizen appears to have been deported with no meaningful process." *Politico* article. Thank you so much.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. BIGGS. Mr. Chair, I have a UC as well.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. BIGGS. "Federal women's prison in California plagued by rampant sexual abuse to close." Thanks.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection. Mr. Onder, you got your chance.

Mr. ONDER. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, Mr. Chair—

Mr. VAN DREW. Dr. Onder, I guess I should say.

Mr. ONDER. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, you had Mr. Goldman's quotes slightly off. You quoted him as saying "jackbooted Gestapo agents." No, he called our hard-working men and women of ICE masked Gestapo agents. With that kind of attitude toward Federal law enforcement, no wonder in 2023 the Bureau of Prisons had a 21 percent unfilled position rate.

In 2022, the California Department of Corrections report found that 34 percent of transgender offenders who requested transfer to women's prisons were registered sex offenders. In the U.K., that was more than 70 percent. California was allowing men who were convicted of raping women to suddenly identify as transgender and then be moved to women's prisons, where many times they continued their abuse.

Female inmates like Dana Gray, who woke up in the middle of the night to a 6′1″ male roommate pushing his intact genitalia in her face. Alissa Kamholz as a child was routinely raped by her stepfather and his Hells Angels buddies. She eventually was convicted and sentenced to prison under the Three Strikes Act, and she referred to prison—Federal prison as her safe space where men couldn't hurt her anymore. Then—I'm sorry, California prison.

That was until one of the men who was among the abusers was placed in her room at Central California Women's Facility. The same prison had placed condoms in every day room.

The issue of men and women's prisons, the United States is behind the times. In the U.K. in 2023, there was a reversal of course and the U.K. banned so-called transgender women who have male genitalia from being placed in women's prisons. During the debate in the U.K., a prison manager was on record saying that the majority of transgender women, so-called, began identifying as transgender after they interacted with the criminal justice system.

You would think that the 2003 law, the Prison Rape Elimination Act would protect female inmates from male abusers. The Obama Administration perversely used this very law as authority when he introduced a policy through the Transgender Offender Manual that required an inmate's transgender status to be considered when deciding whether to place them in a women's prison.

The Biden–Harris Administration further abused the intent of PREA by his new version of the Transgender Offender Manual that allowed inmates to receive hormone therapy sex transition surgeries and other medical treatment related to their gender identity. At a time when we have a $36 trillion debt and a deficit over $1.5 trillion a year, the Biden–Harris Administration is paying for sex change operations in our Federal prisons.

I would ask each of you, in your opinion, first Mr. Potter, does allowing men identifying as women to serve in women's prisons make prison rape more or less likely?

Mr. POTTER. I would only be able to guess on that and say more likely, I would assume.

Mr. ONDER. Yes. Thank you. Do you believe women in Federal prisons deserve to be protected from prison rape under PREA?

Mr. POTTER. Absolutely.

Mr. ONDER. Same question for you, Mr. Purtill. In your opinion, does allowing men who identify as women to serve in women's prisons make prison rape more or less likely?

Mr. PURTILL. Well, as I said earlier, I think it makes—it places women in a much more vulnerable position, whether it's physical violence, sexual violence—

Mr. ONDER. In your opinion—

Mr. PURTILL. As you heard today, there are so many issues facing the Bureau of Prisons, this population is infinitesimal.

Mr. ONDER. Right. It's a small population. At the same time, one offender, one convicted rapist being released into a women's prison among inmates who are smaller, more vulnerable, less muscle mass and so on could do a lot of damage even though it's a relatively small problem?

Mr. PURTILL. Yes. No, I agree. I didn't mean to minimize it.

Mr. ONDER. Yes, no, I know you're not. Again, our Democratic colleagues do minimize the problem, oh, it's only X number of people. They're about—well over 2,000 inmates who identify as transgender in the Federal prison system. Not all of them are men in women's prisons by any means, but the potential is there.

I believe it's not—our Democratic colleagues say somehow—they're implying somehow we Republicans are obsessed with this

issue. They began it under Obama, they continued it under Biden. We're returning to sanity under President Trump.

Thank you very much for your testimony. I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentleman yields back. I recognize the Ranking Member of the Committee, Ms. Crockett, from Texas.

Ms. CROCKETT. Mr. Chair, before I begin, I've got two UCs: "Video shows masked ICE agents detain two outside Douglas County Courthouse," and "ICE Agents in Ski Masks Snatch Migrant Out of Lawyer's Car."

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you so much.

Mr. BIGGS. Mr. Chair, I have a UC.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. BIGGS. The Department of Justice statement by Colette S. Peters, Director of Federal Bureau of Prisons, to this Committee July 23, 2024.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Mr. VAN DREW. I now recognize Ms. Crockett.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. OK. I don't really know where to begin. We've got a lot of ground to cover in about five minutes, so let's go. I've got three statements that I want to know if you agree or disagree with, and I want to just go down the row, yes or no. Does cutting pay typically assist in recruiting a workforce, yes or no?

Mr. MILTON. No.

Mr. WILDE. No.

Mr. PURTILL. Generally, no.

Mr. POTTER. No.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you. It sounds like a low IQ implementation to me. Let's go to the next one. Does poor working conditions assist with recruitment, yes or no?

Mr. MILTON. No.

Mr. WILDE. No.

Mr. PURTILL. No.

Mr. POTTER. No.

Ms. CROCKETT. Sounds like another low IQ implementation to me. Finally, I'm going to start with Mr. Potter because I don't know how this is going to go. Does union busting help with recruitment?

Mr. POTTER. No.

Mr. PURTILL. I know nothing about unions whatsoever. I'm sorry.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK.

Mr. WILDE. I don't know anything about unions either.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK.

Mr. MILTON. No.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK. So, again, another low IQ implementation.

I just want to be clear that the American people should know that these are all Trump 2.0 policies. When we say that he's failed, let me tell you, we've got receipts and those are some of the receipts.

When we start talking about this pay, I think that we've talked about the fact that there was up to a 25 percent cut in recruitment bonuses—or retention bonuses, but I want to make sure that people understand the numbers. I want you all to know what the numbers are.

It looks like on average in 2023, the average CO for the BOP made $57,000. Now, we're talking about potentially up to a 25 percent cut in that. Now, let's transpose that what they don't want to talk about is what we did last week, which was reconciliation, where in their bill they decided that they wanted to add this big number as an increase for bonuses for ICE agents. What that translates to was bonuses of approximately $44,000 for each ICE agent.

We're talking about ICE agents getting an additional $44,000 per person while, on average, when we talk about our COs at the BOP only making 57,000 and talking about cutting up to 25 percent of that and that is why we're outraged. That is why we say that this is a joke, because you can't sit here and continuously underfund an agency and then expect it to overperform.

Let's talk about the underfunding. We have talked about immigration for a reason, not because we think that it makes sense to just talk about immigration all day every day. It seems like our colleagues on the other side of the aisle want to do it. It is relevant to this conversation. You know why? Because, according to this particular document from *The Guardian*, it says, as it relates to a partnership between BOP and ICE, two agencies that have generally operated separately, means people accused of civil immigration violations are being imprisoned in harsh environments of the Federal penitentiaries run by prison guards.

Right now, I believe that the most recent number that I had was that they had approximately 700 people that were being held for ICE within the Bureau of Prisons. Guess what? Do you think they gave the BOP any extra dollars to be able to take care of those folks? They didn't. I'll help you.

It says Congress provided no increase to the BOP's salaries and expenses account in Fiscal Year 2024, despite the staffing crisis that has been linked to prisoner deaths and a cascade of operational problems at the agency.

We talked about rape, so let me get to rape. It seems like it's a bit of hypocrisy, but that's not anything new to say that you want to protect victims of rape and sexual assault and then allow Trump to gut funding for the Prison Rape Elimination Act Resource Center, a center that trains prison sexual assault auditors, tracks the results of the Prison Rape Elimination Act investigations, and provides resources to imprisoned sexual abuse survivors.

My question is—and I ask everyone if you can answer—can we all agree that rape and assault of prisoners is vile and completely unacceptable?

Mr. MILTON. I agree.

Mr. WILDE. I agree.

Mr. PURTILL. Of course.

Mr. POTTER. Absolutely.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you so much. The last thing that I'll say is that, according to the BOP, there have been a total of two individuals that have received gender-affirming surgery while in the BOP custody. There has been a total of four that were referred and were determined to be medically ineligible.

We're going to have all this talk and all these fights about trans folk, and we're talking about literally two surgeries. I'll yield.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentlelady yields. I will recognize the gentleman from the great State of North Carolina, Congressman Knott.

Mr. KNOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chair. In response to what we just heard, I think that the discussion on immigration is relevant for a number of reasons, many of which were not mentioned by Ms. Crockett. It's by some estimates concluded that the previous administration spent hundreds of billions of dollars on illegal immigration. The discussion that we are having today centers on $10-, $20-, maybe even $30 billion.

The previous administration spent money on educating, transporting, medicating, housing illegal immigrants at the taxpayers' expense, and as we now know, the Bureau of Prisons expense. It's a disgrace. You all are due more funding, sure. Illegal immigrants are due far less funding.

One of the points that I'm hearing over and over and over today is the point about the need to rehabilitate. While that is certainly one consideration that we should all be focused on, perhaps the main point of consideration that the Bureau of Prisons is there to protect the American citizens from dangerous criminals. Yes, rehabilitation of the criminal is key, but protection of the public is first and foremost.

To that end, one of the unfortunate realities that we have in this country is that we have a tremendous crime problem. Just as one example, in the year 1990, just 4,500 people died because of drug overdoses. Depending on which statistics you look at, averaging it out, sometimes it's up to 125,000–130,000 people have died from drug overdoses from the years 2020–2024.

Whether it's gangs, cartels, or other organized criminal organizations, they have, in large part, arrived here and embedded themselves in the country because of the open border welcomed approach to illegal immigrants that the Democratic Party has championed.

As a Federal prosecutor, I saw that the crime not only was exacerbated outside of jails; I saw the crime reach far inside of jails as well. I know that you all need no education when discussing the dangers that criminal gangs and organizations pose inside and outside of jails.

My question is, Mr. Purtill, to you first. How can we assist the BOP in combatting the ongoing criminal activity inside the Bureau of Prisons, specifically as it relates to an ongoing connection to outside organizations? When I was sentencing people, there was often no interruption in criminal activity, whether it's cell phones, bribing prison officers, whatever it may be.

What can we do to assist you or the BOP in stopping criminal activity once someone is sentenced?

Mr. PURTILL. Well, I think that Mr. Potter might be better equipped to answer that question.

Mr. KNOTT. He's getting it next.

Mr. PURTILL. Good. I will definitely take a crack at it. Don't mean to dodge.

I do think that controlling—the key thing there is controlling the communications process. That is how ongoing criminal enterprises are still able to operate, even though we've got people incarcerated

in our facilities. I do think that the porousness of some of our facilities to communications devices is coming in, as well as contraband, many other forms of contraband coming in, but those—the other forms of contraband don't really get to the issue that you're talking about in the same way as the continuing activity.

It's really the communications piece, and I think that's a combination of better security within the facilities. It's probably technological fixes as well in terms of what you can do in terms of signal damping and things like that.

Mr. KNOTT. Sure. Mr. Potter, same question.

Mr. POTTER. Yes. I would agree with everything that's been said. There's a lot of mechanisms you can use to prevent something from coming in and detected once it's in. The staffing level makes a huge difference the way you monitor, the way you track, the way you—

Mr. KNOTT. Does the danger that facility officers face deter people from staying a long time? Does that make sense? Does the threat inside the facility weaken the environment that people are working in?

Mr. POTTER. Yes. If it's more dangerous inside, of course, it makes it much more—and the risk versus reward.

Mr. KNOTT. Yes.

Mr. POTTER. You have to reward people in the right way if you want them to come into that.

Mr. KNOTT. Sure. If I could just get very quick answers. What's the total amount of dollars that you think is needed to fix the Bureau of Prisons? Not just the facilities, but total repair.

Mr. POTTER. I would not have a guess. Billions.

Mr. KNOTT. $10 billion, $15 billion?

Mr. POTTER. I wouldn't have a guess.

Mr. KNOTT. How about you?

Mr. PURTILL. It would be a genuine guess.

Mr. KNOTT. Just give me a guess.

Mr. PURTILL. We know we've got $3 billion in deferred facilities costs, so that's baked into the cake. We know that we've got 4,000–6,000 full-time employment positions that aren't filled.

Mr. KNOTT. $10 billion?

Mr. PURTILL. In all honesty, I would have to—I couldn't even hazard a guess, but I do think that there's—even realigning what we currently do in spending, I think there's a lot of good things that can be accomplished.

Mr. KNOTT. Sure. Mr. Wilde, I don't mean to jump over you, but I'm assuming you don't have an answer for that.

Mr. Milton, if I can get one answer, what's the number that you would put?

Mr. MILTON. I fall into the same category. I don't know that I'm in position to give a number, but I do know that it takes significant investment.

Mr. KNOTT. Mr. Speaker, I yield back.

Mr. VAN DREW. The gentleman yields. I recognize, last but not least, by any means, the gentleman from the great State of Texas, Mr. Gill.

Mr. GILL. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the witnesses for being here and testifying and taking the time.

Mr. Purtill, thank you as well. I want to start with you. Given the decline in personnel across BOP facilities, and we've got nearly 4,000 vacancies, do you believe it was a wise decision for the previous administration to put any resources at all toward gender-affirming care for BOP inmates?

Mr. PURTILL. As I said earlier, I think that it's such a small percentage of the population, it's not the core issues that BOP is facing.

Mr. GILL. Right. I certainly believe it's not a core issue we should be spending money toward.

Is it also the case that the BOP facilities are experiencing widespread deterioration and are in need of maintenance?

Mr. PURTILL. Yes. According to the attorney general's inspector—the department's Inspector General, literally every single facility faces deferred expenses—deferred maintenance expenses.

Mr. GILL. Do you think that there's additional stress that comes with perhaps some of the logistical challenges and safety concerns of housing transgender and inmates with the opposite sex, and perhaps maybe that contributed to some of the low retention rates and hiring rates experienced at the BOP?

Mr. PURTILL. In all honesty, I couldn't say. Once again, I think that there's so many issues that go into the staffing issue. Did it play a part? Very well could have. There are so many factors there.

Mr. GILL. What about some of the antilaw enforcement rhetoric that we hear on the other side of the aisle, including from the former Vice President who once praised the defund the police movement, do you think that has contributed at all to some of the staffing challenges at BOP?

Mr. PURTILL. Well, the fact that law enforcement, prosecutors, and corrections officers, that there's been an unfortunate trend, we've seen it in law school recruiting for prosecutors, that there's been an unfortunate trend to kind of demonize the entire field. Regardless of wherever that has come from, that has been harmful. It's unfair to the people who go into that line of work.

Mr. GILL. What role do you think DOGE can play in identifying waste and fraud at the BOP?

Mr. PURTILL. That is beyond my ken. I'm so sorry.

Mr. GILL. Any guesses?

Mr. PURTILL. Well, as I tell my kids, as with any very, very large institution there's going to be waste and fraud, even when vast majority of people are working in good faith. It never hurts. It's always good to pop the hood and check the oil and take a look at what's going on.

That the DOGE process could—it may turn out to be very, very beneficial. A lot of it is going to be able to inform you in your oversight activities to make decisions going forward.

Mr. GILL. Got it. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, with that, I'll yield the remainder of my time back to you.

Mr. VAN DREW. I thank you. With that little bit of time, first, I really do appreciate you all being here. It's a long, long day. I didn't even give you a chance for a break and I probably should have. I was remiss, but it was—because now we're done.

Second, I'll say as I did before, I hope that we can move forward in some areas, in some ways, find common ground.

Third, and the one thing I will mention with the little bit of time left, I've actually interviewed some corrections officers at multiple locations who have come to me in my office. I wouldn't call them whistleblowers because they didn't trigger the Whistleblower Act, but told me stories saying that there's like one or two people in the whole country with transgender issues. They're still doing intake. It cost a lot of money on those that want to change their sex, that want to be transgender. This is from corrections officers who directly work there, who have good reputations whom I know were explaining what's going on.

First, that costs money. Second, the other issue and the reason that it costs money is because, as you know, I mentioned—in fact, my facility back home has to cater to some of that because when they mix with the rest of the population, unfortunately, there are issues for them, for their own security and safety. It makes things more complicated. It makes issues—more violence is prone to happen. It also costs more because of the specialization they need, both medical, if they go through it all the way, as well as correctional; in other words, they need more protection, and they need to have special status and special help.

So, yes, it does cost money. No, it's not just like one person in all 50 States. It's not. In fact, if you talk to most of them, almost any facility will tell you some of the issues they're having with that.

The real issue is—I don't know how else to say—I'm not saying they should be, but they still have their desires very often, and it really is tough on the women. If we care about women, then we should care about this issue and some of the terrible things that are happening.

With that, it concludes today—

Ms. CROCKETT. Mr. Chair, I have two UCs. I'm sorry. The first one, I ask unanimous consent to enter into the record an article, "Transgender inmates are more likely to be victims of sexual assault." This was by *CBS News*.

Mr. VAN DREW. That's true.

Ms. CROCKETT. To the extent of 35 percent of the victims of rape are transgender inmates.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Ms. CROCKETT. Then the final one is courtesy of Mr. Wilde. This is from *prisonfellowship.org*. *Prison Fellowship*, the Nation's largest Christian nonprofit serving prisoners, former prisoners, and their families is applauding a major funding increase for PREA, which as of now, this administration has actually defunded all the PREA resource centers.

Mr. VAN DREW. Without objection.

Their care costs a lot, protecting them costs a lot because they are apt to have this problem, and in some cases preventing a certain percentage of them from doing harm costs a lot.

With that, it concludes today's hearing. We thank our witnesses for appearing before the Committee today.

Without objection, all Members will have five legislative days to submit additional written questions for the record, and witnesses, or additional materials can be recorded as well.

Without objection, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:43 p.m., the Subcommittees adjourned.]

All materials submitted for the record by the Members of the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and the Subcommittee on Oversight can be found at: *https://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=118184*.

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