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To: **The PA Senate Judiciary Committee**
 The PA Senate Republican and Democratic Policy
 Committees

Re: **Public Hearing – Prison Closings**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the upcoming prison closings. My name is Ann Schwartzman and I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society. The Prison Society is in support of the prison closings but we realize that the living conditions of the inmates must be considered and maintained. Our position is based on our mission of two centuries:

*To advocate for a humane, just and restorative correctional system,
and to promote a rational approach to criminal justice issues.*

The Prison Society provides programs and services such as parenting classes in prisons, mentoring in and outside prisons, busing services to families across the state to visit loved ones, trained volunteers who by statute are entitled to enter prisons to visit inmates, check conditions, provide for resources, and more.

The Pennsylvania criminal justice system houses 48,000 men and women at an annual cost of over \$2 billion, with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections having the third largest

budget of any Department in the Commonwealth. This current model has a population consisting of individuals with significant needs—health, housing, and employment amongst others:

- 70-80% have substance abuse issues
- 24% are mentally ill
- 10,000 are 50 years or older (defined as senior citizens) and growing with 5,000 lifers aging in place
- Thousands suffer from PTSD, trauma, and severe medical conditions such as Hepatitis C
- Many have poor school records and low reading levels
- Many lack job histories and skills
- Many are indigent or lived in poverty
- The majority are parents of young children.

At \$35,000-65,000 per day, we can no longer afford to incarcerate at the rate we have been, especially since the 1980's when the Pennsylvania prison population began to skyrocket. Prisons are not the sole solution or “magic bullet” to solve all of society's ills. On the contrary, not only are there financial costs, there are human and social costs to our communities, to the families and children of those in prison, the neighborhoods, and as we are seeing now, the tax base. Simply put, we cannot afford to continue to have so many tax burdens, when these burdens could be tax payers.

The Prison Society supports the closing of prisons because the system is too large, too expensive, and includes too many who should be in treatment centers or other settings rather than in prison.

The scheduled closings of two prisons impact the inmates, their families, the staff, and the communities. The transfers of over 2,500 - 3,000 inmates will not be easy. Moving for

anyone is a key life stressor, and being incarcerated adds to that stress. The PA DOC is providing useful and important information on these changes and what to expect, but fears continue and anxiety is mounting. Staff clearly has concerns as their lives are about to change with transferred jobs or changing positions. Communities too will face changes with the closure (but ideally this will result in a repurposed prison that is positive for local commerce.) This all requires time for adjustments and time to absorb the shock of change. More information, discussion, and especially patience during this process are critical.

The DOC has already announced that inmates who earned incentive-based transfers will be given choices. The DOC also states that transferred prisoners will be placed in comparable jobs and pay rates as often as possible. Yet, problems will arise and delays may follow for prisoners if they have to move. Phone lists and visiting lists are centralized and transfer electronically with the inmates, but inmate accounts can take two to three days to adjust. Also, inmates will be limited to two record boxes or one footlocker aboard the transfer bus, forcing them to ship property or send it home at their own expense or at the expense of their family.

For long-term offenders such as lifers, the transfers are even more unsettling. Some of the 5,000 life sentenced inmates have been incarcerated for decades, becoming accustomed to the rules and regulations of their current facility. Many are aging and are less adaptable, and experience physical problems such as walking, seeing or hearing which will exacerbate any move or transfer for the inmates as well as the staff.

For those currently enrolled in treatment programs, transfers could result in setbacks. Vocational programs vary from prison to prison so this may take additional time for availability, causing anxiety as these are vital for parole. Concerns also include the culture and the day to day life in a new and different prison, as well as medical care, procedures for visiting, commissary,

food, mail, and more. These concerns must be anticipated and dealt with. Therefore, we recommend that the DOC implement the procedures for transfers that are based on the experience and learnings from the prior closings of Cresson and Greensburg in 2013. Yet following those procedures will not be enough. We expect more concerns raised, especially if dayrooms and recreational areas are converted to living quarters as this social space can help reduce the stress.

We remember the transfers of inmates to Michigan and Virginia where we listened to strains the inmates experienced, especially when trying to keep in touch and visit with family members.

If the closings are going to cause decreases in the number of inmates incarcerated, then more resources are crucial for reentry services. The Community Corrections Centers that house approximately 4,000 were designed for the transition from prison to the community. Reducing the CCC's capacity by half, means more demands will be made for community supports and programs by those being released from prison. Resources for reentry must be given high priority in order to provide the much needed assistance as men and women often leave prison with few if any job prospects, little to no housing options, family responsibilities, and financial obligations including costs, fees, and fines.

We are encouraged by the prison closings as recognition that the system is too large, too costly, and too flawed; it does not provide the results we need to ensure public safety and better communities -- of people coming out who are ready to be productive citizens instead of recidivism statistics. Pennsylvania is over- incarcerating and has done so for decades. Prison closings are an important step in halting this practice. But to do this, the population should not just be shifted from prison to prison; reductions in the population are required. Now is the time to

consider and implement the relevant proposals outlined in the draft report of the Justice

Reinvestment Initiative JRI 2:

- Release those presently serving short sentences, primarily for drug and property offenses, at their minimum. In 2014, the state spent \$73 million incarcerating people with short sentences an average of 5.3 months beyond their minimum sentences.
- Institute presumptive parole for people serving a sentence of two years or less;
- Encourage the PA Board of Probation and Parole to accelerate releases on parole by earlier, focused efforts to develop home plans and connecting parolees without an acceptable home plan with community resources i.e. housing, employment, job training,

Other initiatives that would assist include:

- Assess the population- the elderly, those in need of substance abuse treatment, those with histories of trauma, those serving life for appropriate and sensible alternatives
- Establish medical release or medical parole for the elderly or those with chronic diseases
- Support children with incarcerated parents
- Prevent any mandatory sentences and adopt sentencing reforms
- Expand programs whose eligibility criteria are too restrictive such as Risk Recidivism Reduction Incentive and State Intermediate Punishments
- Support Clean Slate

Prison closings are one part of rethinking the system. There also must be systemic planning by all system stakeholders, because closing alone is not the answer. With this action, the Commonwealth should develop a comprehensive strategy to reduce the over-incarceration and reprioritize the limited resources that impact the state's dire budget issues. It impacts all of us and none of us can afford to wait.