



PENNSYLVANIA STATE CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

2421 North Front Street
Harrisburg, PA 17110-1110

(717) 364-1700 Phone

(717) 364-1705 Fax

Patrolling the Toughest Blocks in the State

WWW.PSCOA.ORG

Jason Bloom, President
jbloom@pscoa.org

Timothy Walsh, Executive Vice President
twalsh@pscoa.org

Larry Blackwell, Vice President
lblackwell@pscoa.org

Robert Storm, Vice President
rstorm@pscoa.org

John Chernavage, Secretary/Treasurer
jchernavage@pscoa.org

Joint Senate Policy and Judiciary Committees
State Correctional Institution Closings
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Good Morning Chairman Argall, Chairman Greenleaf, Chairwoman Boscola, Chairman Leach, and committee members. Thank you for taking the first steps to bring transparency to the Wolf Administration's announcement of their intention to close two State Correctional Facilities (SCIs) by June 30, 2017.

My name is Jason Bloom and I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA) representing the approximately 10,000 members of PSCOA.

As I come before you today, I am struck by the irony that my predecessor sat in this seat nearly four years ago to the day to talk about the same issue. Four years ago, the Corbett Administration had announced plans to close SCI Cresson and SCI Greensburg with absolutely no notice given to the local communities or the employees working in the SCIs. At that time, we chronicled the lack of consideration the Department of Corrections (DOC) showed to our officers, who risk their lives every day and to their loved ones.

Officers had to uproot their families; some had just bought homes. And, I'm sure I don't have to tell you that closing SCIs has such a profound economic impact on their communities.

At that hearing, we asked that any future closings be transparent and properly vetted. Further, the PSCOA even suggested an idea that would have provided opportunities for all stakeholders to provide input.

In 2005, the federal government implemented the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission to provide an open process to carefully and thoughtfully evaluate the closing of military bases. The commission recognized that while the military value of a base was of compelling importance, so too was the closing's effect upon host communities and personnel. The commission conducted community meetings in various locations that had been identified for possible base closure.

It solicited comments and suggestions from community leaders, area businesses and employees. When the base closures were announced, the communities and employees affected, at least, had fair warning

and were given an opportunity to present their case for keeping their base open. Community leaders were able to plan for the worst-case scenario.

Unfortunately, our suggestion was ignored. And here we sit four years and a day later asking the same questions.

I should note that in New York, state law requires a one-year notification prior to the closing of a state prison facility.

A transparent approach is long overdue in our Commonwealth when it comes to decisions that affect communities, businesses and thousands of families.

Frankly, this process is worse than what took place in 2013. We believe the department knows which institutions it intends to close. But strangely, they've released a list of five prisons, from which two will be selected for closure.

Naturally, this decision has left five communities twisting in the wind for several weeks.

Talk about powerless. All five on the list are forced to wait. They can't make their case. No hearings have been held.

In short, this is a sham that is poorly thought out and plays with the lives of countless Pennsylvanians. Shame on the Department of Corrections for doing this. Since when is transparency a bad thing?

PSCOA members still have many questions and concerns about their futures.

Where will I be assigned? How far will I have to drive each day? Will I have to move? What happens to the value of my home? Will I even be able to sell it for what I owe on it? If I do move, what are the schools like? Will my spouse be able to find a new job? Can my current vehicle handle the drive or will I need to purchase a newer model or one that gets better mileage?

These are all very legitimate questions for hardworking men and women to answer under the very best of circumstances. Being forced to make these decisions while working dangerous jobs in a compressed timeframe is reprehensible.

Imagine if the department had adopted our suggestion and created a transparent process that provided plenty of advance notice. Our members and their families could've better prepared. Important financial decisions could've been put on hold.

Instead, they've been blindsided.

Again.

As PSCOA president, I'm very concerned about the safety inside the remaining SCIs once two prisons are closed. Squeezing more of our existing inmate population into fewer prisons is a recipe for disaster. I think it is legitimate to remember that the Camp Hill riots of 1989 stemmed from overcrowding in that SCI.

We believe the Wolf Administration has extremely optimistic projections about the state prison population. Our system remains over-capacity at 103.7 percent, according to the DOC's own population figures. This number would be even higher at 104.7 percent if the Commonwealth wasn't paying counties to house hundreds of additional inmates.

As an aside: Why would we close two prisons if we cannot house the inmates we already have?

We all know that prisons are, by their very nature, dangerous and volatile environments. A recent report released by Auditor General DePasquale found that over a recent 15-month period there were an average of 65 direct assaults on DOC employees and 136 fights between inmates (which DOC employees must break up) *per month!*

I'm concerned that assaults on our officers will increase as our SCIs become more overcrowded by closing two prisons.

This Administration owes the people of Pennsylvania a more detailed explanation of where the displaced inmates will be housed. News reports have stated that SCI Camp Hill will increase its prisoner population by 1,000 inmates but, according to a recent article in the Patriot-News, these inmates will not be transfers from existing SCI facilities, but rather will be newly-incarcerated inmates that will remain at Camp Hill.

Why were these "new" beds at Camp Hill not utilized previously to house the nearly 500 inmates housed in county jails? What about SCI Graterford and the opening date of SCI Phoenix? How many beds will be at the new facility? Will SCI Graterford close immediately after SCI Phoenix opens? Will another SCI be closed when Phoenix opens that we aren't aware about? Will this add more capacity to the SCI system? Essentially, the Wolf Administration should "prove" to the people of Pennsylvania why two prisons should be closed.

We do understand that Pennsylvania faces the prospect of another dire fiscal year and that the Legislature and the Administration will be looking for savings wherever they can be found. We caution, though, against achieving this at the cost of public safety and the safety of our officers.

The PSCOA knows there are cost savings that can be derived from the DOC budget, but we believe that any savings must come from a comprehensive look at the entire SCI system. We are willing to work with Secretary Wetzel and the administration to identify potential savings and would welcome such an opportunity.

Most importantly though, a decision with the magnitude of closing two state prisons must be done in the most transparent manner possible with input from local officials, DOC employees, the Legislature and the general public. We are asking that the Wolf Administration delay its Jan. 26 announcement and allow those five communities to make their case to remain open. Having such valuable input from local communities, our officers and their families can only help this process.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I hope we don't find ourselves in a familiar setting in the future.

I'll be happy to answer your questions.