

Budget Testimony
Spring, 2015

Good Afternoon, Chairman and members of the Committee.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the fiscal year 2016 budget.

In a nutshell, The Department of Corrections' FY16 State budget totals \$969 million. This represents a \$2 million net decrease from the FY15 budget.

Once again, during this past fiscal year, our department was successful in reducing custody and civilian overtime by an additional 7% from 637,000 hours in 2013, to 594,000 hours in 2014. As a point of comparison, DOC overtime exceeded one million hours in 2009. The 594,000 hours in 2014 represents a decrease of approximately 44% from 2009. In addition, our proposed FY16 appropriation of \$969 million is \$119 million or 11% lower than our 2009 appropriation.

Our staffing has dropped by more than 1,000 positions or 12% over that same time frame. At the same time, I believe we are operating safer and smarter facilities with reduced violence, and the percentage of inmates returning to prison is at an all-time low.

The number of inmates returning to state prison within three years of being released has dropped from 48% to approximately 32%, since the turn of the century. This recidivism rate is significantly better than the national average, and thanks to the Governor's and the Legislature's commitment to reentry, I believe we should continue to see a reduction as a result of initiatives, such as the drug courts, Right to Compete and educational benchmarks.

With this decline in population, NJDOC strives to maintain a 97% filled rate in its general population beds. In order to maintain this rate, the department has implemented consolidation initiatives over the past several years that have enabled us to close units and maximize efficiencies and reduce overtime costs.

In addition to saving overtime, this practice has allowed us to undertake much - needed renovations in our facilities. In fact, as part of our consolidation program, we closed MidState Correctional Facility and have begun the renovation process.

Also in the area of Operations, in 2014, governors across the country were required to certify full compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) or face financial penalties.

I think that we can all be proud of the fact that New Jersey was only one of two states that certified compliance with the PREA standards, and a comprehensive independent audit validated New Jersey's certification of compliance.

Another major success has been the implementation of the "JPay" contract. This system streamlines the entire inmate account process and allows for the electronic transfer of money into an inmate's account. In addition, the vendor provides a debit release card for offenders, allowing them easy access to their funds after release.

JPay kiosks are currently being installed in all of our facilities. In the near future, inmates will be able to file grievances, send and receive email messages and make purchases using these kiosks.

With regard to our reentry efforts, success for an offender is predicated on several variables. Among the most important are sobriety, education, access to community resources and family reunification.

Alcohol and drug addiction are common denominators among our offender population. We seek to address this problem through several means. Our Therapeutic Community, with 1,332 beds, represents the first phase in the continuum of care. We also provide AA and NA classes, as well as the Living in Balance program, which provides treatment sessions for persons addicted to alcohol or drugs. Additionally, there are 1,300 beds in our halfway houses dedicated to drug treatment.

As a result of recently passed legislation, (S2380,) we partnered with the Department of Human Services to license the drug programs in the halfway houses.

This will allow inmates to obtain certain benefits that they were not eligible for previously, such as General Assistance (GA) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). We are continuing to work with DHS to establish licensure for drug programs in all correctional facilities.

We have also been successful in the area of Education, for example, the rate of inmates released with a GED or higher level of education in 2011 was 48% by 2014, that rate increased to 63%. Last year, the GED exam was replaced by the new Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) exam. We administered our first (TASC) exam in May 2014. Since that time, we have awarded 332 high school equivalency diplomas with a passing rate of 74% which is higher than the state passing rate of 67%.

In addition to GED and high school diplomas in CY 14, we awarded over 3,900 industry-based vocational certificates in areas such as cosmetology, forklift training and fiber optic cabling.

We also offer access to higher education for qualified incarcerated individuals with funding provided through private foundations.

In the area of Transitional Services, we offer the STARS program which is designed to address each major reentry barrier faced by the returning offender.

We also provide departing inmates with a package that contains a number of documents that are critical to an inmate's success upon release, such as a photo ID, final discharge paperwork, a copy of current charges, a medical records summary and a two - week supply of medication, just to name a few.

In an effort to better connect inmates to community resources and their families prior to release, the department will be engaging in a pilot program to provide reentry services at the county level. This program is aimed at mitigating some of the barriers faced by inmates by giving them easier access to services in their community, such as financial assistance, employment services and housing resources. It will also put them closer to their families to enhance the reunification process.

In closing, the DOC works collaboratively with many other agencies. We work with our medical provider, Rutgers University Correctional Health Care (UCHC), to continually improve inmate healthcare through the use of technology and research. UCHC has been successful at managing the needs of the aging population and those with HIV, mental illness and other chronic medical conditions, while continually finding ways to improve service and reduce costs.

Additionally, we work closely with the Veterans Administration, the Social Security Administration and the Motor Vehicle Commission to assist inmates in obtaining important identification documents. We also work with DHS to ensure that inmates receive their Medicaid benefits immediately upon release.

Through these and other initiatives, the Department of Corrections is committed to ensuring public safety, rehabilitating the incarcerated and functioning in an efficient, cost-effective manner.

I will now be happy to answer any questions you may have.