Good morning, Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the fiscal year 2017 budget.

The New Jersey Department of Corrections’ FY 2017 state budget totals $962.5 million. This represents a $6.4 million net decrease from the FY16 budget.

I’m pleased to report that we continue to operate safer, smarter facilities with reduced violence, and the percentage of inmates returning to prison is at an all-time low.

The NJDOC total expenditures in FY 2015 were $1.019 billion, which is $80.6 million, or 7.4% lower than the 2010 expenditure level.

Our indicators are also positive in areas other than finance. Perhaps the single most important measure of success in the field of Corrections is the recidivism rate where we have seen the number of inmates returning to state prison within three years of being released drop from 48% in 1999 to approximately 32% in 2015. This is substantially better than the national average.
Moreover, a recent study found that during a 15-year period – 1999 to 2014 – New Jersey’s offender population was reduced by 31%, the largest drop in the entire nation. The state’s crime rates have continued to decline, as well. In fact, between 2011 and 2014, crime rates have fallen 20%, while incarceration rates have dropped by 9.5%.

These successes have come about as a result of strong management throughout the law enforcement field, in tandem with the policies of the Governor and the Legislature, as demonstrated through such initiatives as the Drug Courts, educational benchmarks and bail reform.

During Governor Christie’s State of the State address, he announced that Mid-State will re-open in early 2017 as a licensed Substance Use Disorder prison.

Mid-State, a 696-bed facility, will be the first licensed, clinically driven drug treatment program offered by the NJDOC and licensed by the Department of Human Services.

This is an important project because, by going through a licensed program, it puts inmates on track to lead a sober life and also gives them the ability to obtain general assistance (GA) benefits upon their release from prison.
In terms of reentry, the Department has had many accomplishments during the past fiscal year.

In the area of education, there were 341 High School Equivalency (HSE) diplomas issued to state-sentenced inmates.

The passing rate among inmates who took the HSE exam was 80%, which is among the most impressive rates in the state. In addition, 38 high school diplomas were issued during the 2015 calendar year.

Furthermore, more than 3,000 industry-based vocational certificates were awarded in areas such as horticulture, culinary arts and masonry.

Private foundations continue to provide funding to support the New Jersey-STEP program which provides access to post-secondary education for qualified incarcerated individuals.

We have also continued to work closely with the Veterans Administration, the Social Security Administration and the Motor Vehicle Commission to assist inmates in obtaining important identification documents.

Additionally, we finalized a process with the Department of Human Services that helps to ensure that inmates receive their Medicaid benefits immediately when released.
The J-Pay system has expanded into every NJDOC facility. This system allows for electronic money transfer to an inmate’s account and allows inmates to file electronic grievances, send and receive e-mail messages, purchase music, e-books, and other products using kiosks.

Our Office of Transitional Services, offers a variety of programs – including Thinking for a Change, Helping Offenders Parent Effectively, and STARS – designed to provide offenders with the necessary tools to successfully transition to the community.

All of these are essential elements to successful reentry.

And our department’s successes are not in the area of reentry alone. We have also made significant improvements in housing and operations.

For example, solitary confinement has become a topic of national concern, with discussions being held among correctional officials, inmate advocates and legislators around the country. The NJDOC does not use solitary confinement. We utilize restrictive housing which allows inmates the same access to medical and mental health services as inmates in general population. They maintain telephone and visit privileges and have access to social services, religious programs and recreation.
While we believe our practices are among the very best in the nation, we are constantly striving to improve wherever possible. After communicating with the American Correctional Association, unions, legislators and advocates, we made improvements that prioritized due process, including hearings, prior to the placement of an inmate in restrictive housing, as well as periodic reviews while an inmate remains in restrictive housing. In addition, we added therapeutic activities and congregate meetings to improve social interaction, and ensure that there is a process to assist with the inmate’s return to General population.

Regarding our Residential Community Release Programs, lab testing for all offenders in the RCRPs was expanded from a 3 to a 13 panel test. Of over 55,000 new tests conducted, less than 1% were positive.

We have also implemented a policy where we are conducting random re-tests of negative urine samples at the RCRPs for quality assurance purposes. We began this process in February 2016. As of April 21, we have retested 351 specimens and only received 2 positive tests.

In summary, I firmly believe an accurate measure of the NJDOC’s success is our ability to evolve and, with the assistance of the Governor, the Legislature, our unions and other departments, we continually improve our system.

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