Good afternoon, Chairman and members of the distinguished committee.

I am Marcus Hicks, Acting Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Corrections and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the work of the Department and the proposed FY 2019 budget.

Before I begin, I would also like to introduce members of my staff who are here with me today: Acting Chief of Staff Suzanne Lawrence, Deputy Commissioner Bettie Norris, Assistant Commissioner Gary Alpert, Special Legal Advisor Melinda Haley, and Director of Financial Management Bob Biluck.

Our mission at the New Jersey Department of Corrections is to protect the public by operating safe, secure, and humane correctional facilities. We do this through effective treatment of offenders and by providing services that promote successful reentry into society. Our budget allows us to accomplish these goals.

The NJDOC FY 2019 state budget totals $973.5 million. This represents a net decrease of $1.5 million from the FY 2018 budget.

The NJDOC total expenditures in FY 2017 were $1.003 billion. As recently as FY 2014, total expenditures were $1.037 billion, which represents a reduction of $34 million, or 3.3 percent.

The Department projects that in FY 2018, overtime hours worked will be approximately 710,150 hours, which is a significant reduction of more than 31.5 percent from FY 2010 overtime hours of 1,037,000.
Our operational indicators remain favorable as well. Since 2014, the inmate population has dropped by nearly 13 percent – from an average of nearly 23,000 inmates in 2014 to approximately 20,000 in 2018.

These numbers can be attributed to the successful programs enacted by the Legislature such as “Ban the Box,” state-funded one-stop career centers, Drug Courts, our close working relationships with other law enforcement entities, and the NJDOC’s extensive reentry programs and educational initiatives.

The Governor’s 2019 budget provides funding for Mid-State Correctional Facility, the state’s first licensed, clinically-driven Substance Use Disorder treatment program for male inmates.

Upon entering the NJDOC system, each inmate is clinically assessed for substance use and those identified to have a Substance Use Disorder will undergo a more comprehensive assessment to evaluate the level of treatment needed.

If a male inmate qualifies, they can voluntarily join the Substance Use Disorder treatment program at Mid-State Correctional Facility, which has a capacity of nearly 700 beds.

Female inmates who qualify for substance use disorder treatment are offered an equivalent licensed program at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

I would like to thank Governor Murphy, the Department of Human Services, the Gateway Foundation, and Rutgers University for helping to ensure the success of this program.

This new approach to incarceration allows us to transform behaviors related to substance use and relapse, better preparing offenders for successful reentry into society.

Reentry is also being addressed through a new post-release employment initiative designed to eliminate socioeconomic inequalities often encountered by those released from custody. The Governor’s 2019 budget includes funding for the Pre-Release Employment Navigation and
Reentry Program. The program, which is made possible through a partnership between the NJDOC and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, provides inmates with additional employment readiness and support prior to their release date.

This program is achieved through hiring employment navigators to assist with locating employment vacancies, completing job applications and submitting resumes.

As part of the initiative, the NJDOC will also organize job fairs to bring employees into the correctional facilities to expose them to the pool of job-ready candidates and create on-site employer interview opportunities for inmates within the release process.

The Department of Labor will assist with establishing and updating a list of employers utilizing the data which informs of the top 50 high-demand jobs. They will also provide information on work opportunity tax credits and federal bonding for all prospective employers.

By creating a Departmental standard with this program, we actively engage employers, trade unions, and labor supporting agencies and increase self-sufficiency among the formerly incarcerated which increases successful reentry while decreasing recidivism rates.

The NJDOC also offers many programs through the Office of Transitional Services to provide offenders with tools to successfully reenter the community, such as Thinking for a Change; Successful Transition and Reentry Series; Cage Your Rage; Successful Employment Through Lawful Living and Conflict Management.

Additionally, the Essex County Reentry Pilot Program offers a Staying Connected initiative that is designed to assist soon to be released inmates with educational services, employment, health care, identification, housing, anger management, and life skills training.

The NJDOC also prepares inmates for reentry by encouraging parent-child relationships while they are incarcerated through programs, such as Helping Offenders Parent Effectively and Family Reunification and Transition.
Recently, we opened the Children and Family Environment center at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women to foster the bond between mother and child in a child-friendly atmosphere where the inmate can interact with her child in a safe and inviting space.

Another initiative is related to our JPay system. A total of 445 JPay kiosks have been installed across all 13 NJDOC facilities to give inmates access to the JPay system, which streamlines the offender trust account process. During the past year, the NJDOC has loaded almost 3,500 debit release cards.

As of January 1, 2018, 93 percent of the inmates have registered on the JPay kiosks. Other available services include inmate banking, email, music, E-books, E-cards, grievance applications, games, and Media Device Players.

Commissions received by the NJDOC from the JPay system are used for purchases that directly benefit the inmate population, including registration fees to take various vocational licensure exams, receive ID cards and birth certificates, and law library computer equipment.

We are also preparing offenders for reentry through educational initiatives. There were 441 High School Equivalency (HSE) diplomas issued to state-sentenced inmates – an increase of 27 from last year. The passing rate among inmates who took the increasingly rigorous HSE exam remained steady at 79 percent. In addition, 56 high school diplomas were awarded in Fiscal Year 2018.

There has also been a resurgence of vocational programming in order to provide opportunities and experiences that will ensure the inmate population develops the skills and knowledge needed to become successful. During FY 2017, 4,968 vocational training certificates were issued.

In addition to these programs, in collaboration with Rutgers University, Raritan Valley Community College, and Princeton University this consortium offers post-secondary courses to our population. As of Fiscal Year 2017, the Department averaged 597 inmates throughout seven facilities who were enrolled in college credit bearing courses.

Additionally, the education unit manages one of the public safety initiatives from the NJDOC, which is Project PRIDE. The goal of this program is to educate audiences on the harsh realities of making destructive decisions. The inmate speakers who participate in Project PRIDE have
volunteered to share their choices and consequences of their actions as a way to give back to the communities.

The NJDOC strives to be a leader in cutting edge technology to enhance the safety of both the public and offender populations.

An initiative to upgrade each facility’s video surveillance system continues. This project will replace stand-alone analog systems with complete digitally networked IP video components.

In regards to the safety of our inmates, I do want to specifically address the new initiatives and procedures we have in place at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women.

We have engaged the National Institute of Corrections, a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, which provides specialized services and best practices to corrections from a national perspective.

In coordination with the NIC, we have presented our supervisors of custody and civilian staff with increased training and best practices for working with female offenders.

Specifically, our training with the NIC highlights the importance of understanding and acknowledging differences between men and women offenders and the impact of those differences on the development of gender responsive polices, practices, and programs in our facilities. This training was well received by all participants.

We are also providing a comprehensive education to the inmate population on the Prison Rape Elimination Act. Through this initiative, inmates will have access to in-person training, handbooks, and educational videos on how to report sexual abuse and misconduct.

Procedurally, we’ve expanded the ways in which an inmate can file a grievance. In addition to filing through our JPay kiosks and working with an independent ombudsman, inmates can also call into a Special Investigations Division hotline. A resource hotline for survivors of sexual abuse is available, as well.
We are also in the process of implementing an Early Warning System to assist in the monitoring of NJDOC Staff. This application, which is modeled after similar mechanisms used by other correctional agencies and newly defined Attorney General Guidelines, will alert to patterns and conduct and be evaluated so that appropriate action can be considered.

Additionally, we are reinstating a Board of Trustees at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. This Board, which will be comprised of members from the community, will act in an oversight capacity to increase our vigilance at the facility.

Through these and other initiatives, we continue to strive towards the highest standards of professionalism as we rise to the challenges of modern correctional management.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department’s budget. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.