

**Appropriations Committee
February 24, 2023
Testimony of
Angel Quiros, Commissioner
Department of Correction**

Good morning Senator Osten, Senator Hartley, Representative Walker, Representative Exum and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Angel Quiros, Commissioner of the Department of Correction.

I thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Correction. I am confident that with the support of the Governor, the Legislature, the Judicial Branch, sister agencies, community partners and the hard-working men and women of the Department of Correction, we will be successful in our efforts to fulfill our mission and our mandates within available resources.

Firstly, I would like to say a few words about the COVID 19 Pandemic. We all want to turn the page on the COVID 19 Pandemic, to return to life before the novel corona virus upended everything. However, even as it recedes in the community at large, the COVID 19 Pandemic continues to pose real and persistent challenges to our agency. Outside the walls of our correctional system, we see around us life starting to get back to a more pre-COVID rhythm with COVID becoming something to be managed and endured and not feared like the way we view and live with flu. However, the fact that many citizens have decided that they are tired of COVID and are "done" with it, as the Commissioner of the Department of Correction; I do not have that option.

We are sworn to provide a safe and secure environment for those under our care and I am responsible to not only the individuals who are incarcerated, but to my staff, and the community-at-large as well.

And although many wish we would relax our safeguards, we continue to remain vigilant against the spread of COVID-19 in our facilities. The virus still carries with it significant consequences for some who become infected and, additionally, a large outbreak among individuals under our care or custody and staff would put an enormous strain on the agency's resources and its ability to carry out the entirety of its mission.

To the credit of our agency and staff and to our partners at the Departments of Health, Emergency Management and Administrative Services and to the Office of Policy and Management, our efforts and actions to prevent and contain infection have proven to be effective. The rate of infection within our facilities has been, throughout the pandemic, significantly lower than that in the community. A fact even more impressive when you consider the congregate nature of a correctional setting and that less than 50% of the population of individuals under our care or custody has opted to be vaccinated. Vaccination, as you know cannot be mandated for those individuals under our care or custody.

In calendar year 2022 4,021 DOC staff members tested positive for COVID 19 and subsequently were out of work while they recovered. That equates to approximately 67% of our total workforce. This combined with sick leave for other reasons, workers compensation leave, military leave, FMLA and vacation and personal leave has created enormous pressure on our workforce and our operations. A more normal life rhythm may be returning to our state and its communities, but that reality has yet to manifest within the correctional system.

I am extremely proud of my staff and my agency in how it has performed during this unprecedented time, however, we are, unfortunately not “out of the woods yet” and I ask for your understanding and support as we continue to navigate the continuing impacts of this pandemic.

Despite the challenges of the Pandemic, we have continued to make progress in transforming our agency and creating for our state a Modern Progressive Correctional System.

As we have stated in the past, the overwhelming majority of individuals under my custody eventually leave prison and return to communities around the state. This is a fact and part of our reality. The success or failure of these individual’s ability to reintegrate into society has an enormous impact on the wellness of our communities and citizens. Providing opportunities for success for the individual is the only real solution to keeping our cities and towns safe and to keeping our judicial and correctional systems affordable.

Everything that our department does is centered around human dignity; human dignity as it applies to those in our care and custody, our employees, our community and to the criminal and social justice partners that we work with. It will be at the center of everything we do with our people, how we serve our community, the way we serve each other and the way we interact here at DOC.

It is necessary and appropriate for society to enact some level of punishment for those who break the law and commit a crime, but it is equally, if not more so, important for the state to do everything in its power to make sure that those individuals committed to our custody do not re-offend. Science and experience has shown us that when given the right care, support and opportunities, the vast majority of these individuals can and do return to our communities as productive members of society. Education, addiction services, mental healthcare, job training and workforce readiness training, maintaining and strengthening family and community ties and support systems and housing assistance as well as maintaining a well-trained, well-resourced and well cared for correctional staff and well-resourced and maintained correctional infrastructure are all critical components in helping these individuals turn around their lives and not reoffend. At the core of all of these is human dignity.

States have a constitutional and legal responsibility and obligation to provide individuals under custody with “reasonably adequate” healthcare “at a level reasonably comparable with modern medical science and of a quality acceptable within prudent professional standards”.

Our goal and our constitutional obligation is to provide a community standard of care for all of the individuals under our custody. We are currently reviewing all of our healthcare policies and practices and are basing our practices on national standards such as those used and publicized by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care, the American Correctional Association and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. We are seeking to employ Medical Management and Population Health Management systems which emphasize preventative care and chronic disease management. These efforts are underway, but will take some time to be fully implemented.

Facilitating care and maintaining the continuity of care post incarceration is a critical component of successful reentry. This includes helping individuals apply for health coverage and creating linkages to community health systems and providers to ensure that the investments and positive outcomes made in an individual’s health while in prison are maintained post incarceration. DOC

is actively working with its sister state agencies, including but not limited to the Departments of Social Services, Mental Health and Addiction Services, Public Health, and Veterans Affairs to ensure that continuity of care is maintained.

The Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Correction for the new biennium beginning July 1st, 2023 provides appropriate support to these aims and mitigates the FY 2023 structural deficit. Additionally, the budget supports the continued implementation of a taxpayer-supported telephone and electronic messaging system. The capability for the incarcerated population to stay better connected with members of the community has already had a significant impact: Comparing July 2021 to the month of July 2022, the number of monthly calls made and the commensurate minutes nearly tripled, as calls increased from about 420,000 to nearly 1.1 million, and the number of call minutes increased from just over 4.8 million to more than 13.0 million minutes per month. To help manage the surge in calls, the Governor's proposed budget includes \$888,011 for 15 correction officers in the department's security division. For the safety and security of both correction facilities and the community, the officers will monitor certain communication by or with incarcerated people.

The Governor's budget provides support for the continued implementation of Clean Slate: \$238,736 and four positions to establish an erasure unit within the department to carry out the paper management of inmate master files along with continued processing of erasures in the offender electronic case management system. Because of the manual nature of the workflow involving paper records and the limitations of the case management system, these positions are critical to complete this labor-intensive process. (The funding is offset by \$160,160 provided from Other Expenses in the FY 2023 midterm budget that is supported instead through IT Capital Investment funds.)

Our priorities for the new biennium include:

- Continuing our efforts to mitigate the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the individuals under our custody and on correctional staff and to support the state's greater pandemic efforts.
- To prepare our agency, staff and those under my custody, for life post pandemic as we transition from a pandemic COVID environment to an endemic COVID environment.
- Continuing and strengthening our commitment to enhance wellness initiatives that support all employees' and those under my custody – mind, body and spirit; to develop and implement progressive correctional practices and programs to increase successful reentry to our communities; to ensure safe and secure, efficient and effective operations throughout our agency; and to engage our community partners to assist in assuring positive outcomes, especially in employment, housing and education, and family unification.
- Continue to support staff wellness initiatives like the agency's Employee Assistance Unit and Employee Assistance Program to positively impact the effects of trauma in the workplace.
- Invest in the development of staff through training opportunities aligned with career pathways, evolving criminal justice initiatives and changes in correctional practices and methods as well as in the use of technology in corrections.
- Providing effective quality healthcare that meets or exceeds the community standard of care and correctional healthcare standards. We are working diligently to expand the care that we provide while also seeking to contain costs.

- Expanding and enhancing reentry efforts and activities. The path to successful reentry begins within our correctional facilities. We are able to assist in the reentry process through rehabilitative programming, education, substance abuse treatment and appropriate medical care, however, the data supports a comprehensive approach that combines both pre-and post-incarceration intervention.
- Expanding our use of technology, especially in the areas of communication, connectivity and automation.

With regard to our reentry efforts, we are thankful for the ARPA funds provided in the FY22-FY23 biennial budget for our TRUE and WORTH programs and for the creation of a Vocational Village program. We have been doing our due diligence and planning regarding this funding and these programs and are actively working with the Office of Policy and Management and our partners at the Office of Workforce Strategy on moving these initiatives forward. These efforts will bolster and enhance our reentry services and contribute to creating employment opportunities for the offender population post release.

With specific regard to the Vocational Village, the fact that this funding is a once in a career opportunity to create significant change is not lost on us. We view this funding as truly transformative and are taking all of the necessary steps to ensure that we get this right. We are working to integrate this concept into the fabric of our entire system. Our goal is to create a reentry continuum that starts upon an individual's entry into our system, beginning with health, mental health, addiction, education and criminogenic assessments, followed by appropriate treatment, rehabilitative programming and services and education and vocational and life skills training. If we do this correctly, and we believe we will, individuals entered into our custody will be placed on a reentry path from the very start of their incarceration that will provide them with opportunities for rehabilitation, education, life and vocational skills training and real world work experience. As I stated earlier, the vast majority of individuals entered into our custody return to the community.

The success or failure of an offender's ability to reintegrate into society has an enormous impact on the health of our communities and the lives of our citizens. Providing "opportunities for success" for offenders is the only real solution to keeping our cities and towns safe and to keeping our judicial and correctional systems affordable. Incarceration is expensive and so is not preparing offenders for reentry and not supporting their reintegration into society after incarceration. It is our sincere goal to provide them with every opportunity to make that return successful. It is an investment in the safety and security of our state and its communities and to the prosperity and economic development and opportunity for all of Connecticut's citizens.

Admittedly, we got off to a slow start with the Vocational Village - this is an important investment and what we are attempting to do is a significant change to our operations – appropriate and thoughtful planning needed to be completed before any implementation could be contemplated, let alone enacted. We are mindful of the time constraints associated with the ARPA funds and are confident that we will be able to complete our efforts within those constraints. I am happy to report that implementation has begun in earnest and I am very pleased with our current progress and pace.

During the last legislative session, I took a front-row seat in helping to negotiate and shape the final version of the Protect Act. In the true spirit of collaboration, through ongoing candid conversations, together we were able to produce a bill that was beneficial to the incarcerated population, while also embodying modern correctional practices, implemented in a manner that

provides safeguards for both the individuals under our care, as well as the brave men and women who are responsible for that care.

It is my duty as the Commissioner of the Department of Correction to ensure the safe, secure, and – equally as important - humane operation of our facilities. Additionally, it is essential to provide the incarcerated population with as many skills and necessary resources as possible in order to best prepare them for a successful return to their communities.

My job is about balance. We need to maintain the safety and security of facilities and protect the public AND humanely care for and rehabilitate the individuals under our care and custody. I remain strongly committed to achieving both of these outcomes and to the ideal of imbuing and embodying human dignity in all we do.

The department is dedicated to honoring the rights of crime victims and to making sure that high-risk offenders receive proper oversight and interventions as we continue our efforts to impact recidivism.

As we move through the remainder of this Fiscal Year and into the new biennium, please know that we continue to examine all aspects of our business model for opportunities to improve offender outcomes, increase operational efficiencies, reduce costs and improve and enhance safety and security for the citizens of Connecticut.

We remain committed to controlling costs and pursuing efficiencies, where possible, while continuing our primary mission of maintaining a safe, professional, humane, and efficient correctional system. DOC is dedicated to honoring the rights of crime victims, to making sure individuals receive the oversight and interventions needed to reduce recidivism and lower crime, and to helping individuals overcome addiction and continue on the pathway to recovery. We will continue to strive to improve public safety for the citizens of Connecticut, to ensure a safe environment for staff, and to provide those in our care with progressive opportunities to safely reintegrate into their communities as productive and successful members of society.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak with you today, and we would be happy to answer your questions.