

TO: General Assembly Judiciary Committee
RE: Public Hearing on Criminal Justice Reforms –
Workforce Investment for a Safer Connecticut
DATE: November 27, 2007

Chairman Lawlor, Chairman McDonald, and members of the Judiciary Committee;

My name is I am Catherine Osten, and I am testifying today on the need for greater investment in Connecticut's criminal justice and support workforce. It is my honor to be able offer my experience and share my values as your Committee addresses proposals for reforming the state's criminal justice system.

I am a Correctional Lieutenant and have invested eighteen years of service in the Department of Correction to the people of Connecticut. I have had personal experience working at seven facilities; Niantic CI, Brooklyn CC, York CI, Corrigan CC, Radgowski CC, Gates CI and Bergin CC.

I am also the elected President of the Corrections Supervisors' Council in CSEA/SEIU Local 2001, the union representing public sector workers throughout our state. Our Council includes six hundred professionals in the DOC, representing lieutenants, training officers, captains, and counselor supervisors.

My fellow members and I believe the solution for safer communities across Connecticut requires investing the resources needed to achieve three fundamental goals:

- 1. Appropriate staffing levels for safe and secure facilities;**
- 2. Effective mental health services training for DOC professionals and access to pre- and post-incarceration supportive housing for inmates with mental health disorders; and**
- 3. Improved communications among the state's criminal justice and public safety agencies.**

First, I would like to address the need to increase supervisory staffing for Connecticut's prisons. Specifically, we believe a minimum of 70 additional lieutenants, 10 captains, and 10 counselor supervisors are needed to provide a minimum level of safety and security for the workforce as a whole and for the communities where our institutions are located.

Make no mistake; we are not simply recommending additional staff for its own sake. The job of DOC supervisors is to monitor the whole climate of each institution. We are expected to be the "eyes and ears" of each unit we are charged with supervising. A growing inmate population is straining the eyesight and impairing the hearing of our overstretched workforce.

Second, I would like to address the need for more effective mental health services training for DOC professionals. Thanks to your Committee, legislation creating a mental-health training program for our workforce and establishing a process for tracking inmates suffering from mental health disorders was passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by the Governor in July. Specifically, we believe the training must be expanded to include all correctional staff, regardless of the facility where they work or whether they are working with inmates with mental health issues.

Today, we are responsible for over 4,500 inmates who have been diagnosed with some form of mental illness. Though we have a dedicated facility for inmates diagnosed with mental health disorders, it only houses approximately 650. Where are the other 3,850 inmates afflicted with mental illness? You'll find them in the general population in our facilities all over the state. A careful look at our state's current incarcerated mentally ill population is needed to assess whether many could be served in a more cost-effective setting, such as supportive housing.

Many correctional facilities do not have 24-hour medical care, and little, if any, mental health supports. This leaves correctional custody staff the responsibility to handle medical and mental health care issues for which they have received little to no training, and for which there are few additional resources.

The legislation passed earlier this year is an important first step. As the inmate population has risen in the past few months, a greater investment of resources into effective mental health services training for DOC professionals and more pre- and post-incarceration supportive housing for inmates with a mental health disorder, is necessary to meet this expanding need.

Finally, I want to propose a concrete recommendation regarding the communication gaps that exist between public safety agencies, criminal justice units, and the judicial branch. The Governor has just signed landmark contract reform legislation that should prevent scandals like the one involving MAXIMUS, the private, out-of-state IT services consultant that has failed to upgrade the COLLECT criminal database. Specifically, we believe services such as this that directly impact public safety – and the public safety workforce – should not be contracted-out in the first place.

Fellow members in my union exposed this particular scandal to the news media last spring, and they testified to the Public Safety Committee at an informational hearing into the crisis in August. They raised an important question that I hope your Committee will also address;

Why are we not investing in our own public service IT professionals who are accountable to the taxpayers of Connecticut, not shareholders of a private corporation, for such critical functions?

Please don't misinterpret my testimony to mean that the horrific crimes committed by ex-offenders, such as the frightening incidents in Cheshire, are always preventable. As valuable as they are to improving the quality of our state's criminal justice services, more supervisory staffing, mental health training, and better communications are no guarantee against such tragedies in the future.

Please do understand that I believe the DOC is ill-equipped to handle the needs of our growing prison population. That is why your Committee's proactive measures in providing the resources needed for appropriate staffing levels for safe and secure facilities, effective mental health services for the incarcerated, and reliable, seamless communications among our agencies are needed today.

Thank you for your time and for hearing my voice on this critical matter.

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