



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Resolving the Correction Officer Strike Takes More than Rhetoric, it takes Legislative Action

DANIEL G. STEC March 4, 2025

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### A Legislative Column by Senator Dan Stec

We're now more than two weeks into the correction officer strikes happening across New York State. Thousands of dedicated men and women have risked, and continue to risk, their livelihoods and their health care for one reason: there has never been a less safe time to be a correction officer than right now.

A spate of policies from Albany politicians have made it more difficult for officers to protect themselves and civilian staff from violent and disruptive incarcerated individuals. These policies have also put incarcerated individuals at greater risk of harm from other inmates.

Laws like the HALT Act have led to a consistent, measurable increase in assaults inside prisons. Loopholes in visitation and mail policies have facilitated the importation of contraband, leading to drug overdoses and events like the recent chemical exposure at Upstate Correctional Facility. But rather than focus on these practical concerns and the actions that can be taken to address them, Governor Hochul has chosen a route that's a mixture of delegating executive authority, threats and denial.

It was just a week ago that the governor stated, “We want to find out what the issue is because the individuals who have walked out...have yet to tell us the issues.” At that time mediation was ongoing, a process she chose to delegate to DOCCS Commissioner Martuscello. This is the same commissioner who last month received a vote of no-confidence from the correction officers he’s tasked with overseeing and advocating for.

We’ve seen the consequences of the commissioner’s failed leadership and the governor’s hands-off approach to the correction officer crisis. Thousands of officers are still on strike, their concerns still needing to be addressed. Instead of actually meeting with the officers for a full, frank discussion the governor has opted for a course that’s only exacerbating an already fraught situation.

Officers are now losing their health insurance, losing access to COBRA benefits and losing their jobs. If this path continues our correctional facilities will lose nearly 14,000 dedicated and experienced officers, with no real plan to address a long-term staffing shortage of that magnitude. Instead of pursuing a path of punishment and retribution towards thousands of employees, there are more sound avenues available.

Through her state of emergency declaration, Governor Hochul has taken a few tentative steps towards addressing prison security through a change in body scanner usage and cosmetic changes to HALT. But these are impermanent and don’t go nearly far enough in addressing prison safety.

HALT, body scanners and a secure vendor process are not issues that can be resolved through collective bargaining or executive decree. Legislation created many of these problems and it will take legislative action to correct them.

I sponsor three bills – S.2656 which repeals HALT, S.4422 to make body scanner use mandatory for incarcerated individuals and visitors and S.4560 to create a true secure vendor process – that address concerns I've heard directly from COs at the seven correctional facilities inside the 45th Senate District and which officers have also publicly made clear during this strike.

New York State's budget deadline is rapidly approaching. As most people who follow the process and the happenings of state government can tell you, the budget is the most likely place for meaningful policy changes to occur. I've written to both the governor and Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, urging that my proposals, or analogous measures, be included in this year's budget negotiations.

Whether it's standalone legislation such as the bills I sponsor or as part of budgetary measures, prison safety must be addressed through legislative action. To bring legislation to fruition, the governor must step up and actually advocate for meaningful change. No more delegating responsibility to a clearly overwhelmed DOCCS commissioner. No more threats, retaliation and retaliatory measures toward officers. These heavy-handed tactics haven't worked, and in fact have only worsened the situation.

Now is the time for solutions and legislation. It's the time for the governor to listen to our COs, then lead the effort to pass common sense prison safety reforms. And given the severity of the stakes, the untenable situation around correction officers and facilities and the livelihoods of thousands of public employees, it simply cannot wait.