



Testimony on the Safety of Persons in Custody, Transparency, and Accountability within State Correctional Facilities

May 14, 2025

The Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) represents civilian employees in the State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). These employees serve a vital role, providing incarcerated individuals with medical care as well as education and training programs. Other CSEA members also work in maintenance roles that keep these facilities operating. While not the focus of this hearing, it is important to note that CSEA represents uniformed and civilian employees in local correctional facilities in 28 counties. As such, we are committed to ensuring the safety of everyone in these facilities.

When correctional facilities are unsafe, staff, visitors, and incarcerated individuals face the consequences.

- Assaults on staff have **increased by 97%** from 2020 to 2024.
- Violence between incarcerated individuals has surged even more, **by 147%**, in the same timeframe.

These troubling statistics, as well as the murders of Robert Brooks, Messiah Nantwi, and others, underscore the urgent need for meaningful action to improve safety within our correctional facilities. Investments in staffing and equipment, as well as improvements to safety protocols are necessary to address this crisis and protect everyone who visits, lives, and works in these facilities.

Staffing

Correctional facilities cannot function safely or effectively without adequate staffing, yet the workforce has steadily eroded. Between 2000 and 2023, correction officer and correction sergeant positions declined by **24.4 percent**, and staffing levels have continued to fall since then. However, this issue is not limited to security staff. In state facilities, *health services*, *support services*, and *program services* have vacancy rates of **25.1%**, **18.6%**, and **16.2%**, respectively.

In addition to long-term staffing reductions, facilities must regularly account for short-term absences due to workplace injuries. Some facilities have seen as many as **17 percent** of their staff out on workers' compensation leave at one time, meaning nearly **one in six** employees were unavailable for duty.

This shortage puts tremendous strain on the staff who remain. In 2024, DOCCS employees worked on average over **40 hours of overtime per month**, or nearly 500 hours annually. In

total, this overtime costs the state **\$353 million**.

Beyond the fiscal burden, this shortage presents a significant safety concern. When staff are overworked and facilities are understaffed, lapses in oversight occur, response times to incidents are delayed, and tensions between staff and incarcerated individuals rise. As such, CSEA strongly supports efforts to increase the number of staff and ensure that work shifts do not create an environment that results in unsafe conditions for staff and incarcerated individuals.

Tier 6

In the past, people would enter the public sector knowing that they would make less money compared to their private sector counterparts but would receive high quality, affordable health insurance and a defined benefit pension that would ensure financial resources in retirement. Under tier 6, pensions are no longer a selling point for entering the public sector workforce, as new employees must work longer and pay more for a smaller benefit at retirement. Reforming issues, such as the sliding scale for contributions, the overtime cap, final average salary, and the pension value at 20 years can impact hiring in the public sector immediately. These changes will make public sector work appealing again and give new workers secure retirement 30 years from now.

Mandatory Overtime

CSEA strongly supports Governor Hochul's commitment to eliminating **24-hour mandatory overtime**. Requiring staff to work such grueling shifts leads to exhaustion, increases the risk of errors, and contributes to burnout and turnover. By creating safer, more stable working conditions and ensuring that staff have reasonable schedules, we can better protect both employees and incarcerated individuals while making these critical jobs more sustainable for the long term.

Facilities & Equipment

Creating safer correctional facilities requires smart, sustained investments in infrastructure and equipment. As such, CSEA supports expanding the use of certain technologies that will create safer environments for all individuals in a correctional facility.

Body/Fixed Cameras

CSEA supports the state's **\$400M** investment to accelerate the installation of fixed cameras throughout correctional facilities and the **\$18.4M** investment to expand the use of body-worn cameras. CSEA members in correctional facilities are already in compliance with the DOCCS directive mandating the use of body-worn cameras. Continuing to expand the use of cameras is critical to increasing transparency, accountability, and safety for everyone inside these institutions.

Body Scanners

In March, DOCCS issued a directive mandating that all visitors pass through a body imaging

scanner before entering a state correctional facility. While this policy applies to state-run facilities, it does not extend to local facilities. As such, **CSEA supports S.7728**, which would allow local facilities to implement similar scanning procedures for visitors. Making it mandatory for visitors to be screened with a body scanner is a commonsense way to stop the flow of dangerous contraband into correctional facilities, which can jeopardize the safety of both staff and incarcerated individuals.

Safety Protocols

Ensuring safety in everyone in a correctional facility requires clear, consistent, and humane safety protocols. As such, CSEA supports the following measures to improve safety and reduce the risks associated with everyday operations:

- **CSEA supports S.1856-A**, which would ensure that medications in correctional facilities are dispensed only by qualified medical professionals, not corrections officers. Corrections officers are not properly trained to administer medications and restricting them from doing so protects both officers and incarcerated people from dangerous mistakes.
- **CSEA supports S.575**, which would ensure that when strip searches are required in a correctional facility, at least two corrections officers must be present. This is a commonsense step to protect both incarcerated individuals and staff during these procedures.

Conclusion

CSEA is committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone in our state's correctional system. We urge the State Legislature to take a comprehensive approach focused on ensuring that the staffing, equipment, and policies in these facilities foster a safer, more humane environment for both staff and incarcerated individuals. CSEA stands ready to work with lawmakers, DOCCS, and other stakeholders to achieve these goals.

For more information, contact:

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