

Testimony of
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**Submitted to the Joint Public Hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Crime Victims,
Crime & Correction, and the Assembly Standing Committee on Correction**

Wednesday
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10:00 AM
Hearing Room B
Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York 12248

Chairpersons Salazar and Dilan and Honorable Members of the Committees,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the ongoing issues in our state prisons. My name is Chris Summers, and I have been a correction officer with the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) for the past 20 years. I also serve as President of NYSCOPBA, representing the fine men and women who have walked the most brutal beat in law enforcement.

First, I want to acknowledge the recent tragedies, including the deaths of Robert Brooks and Messiah Nantwi. No loss of life inside a prison should ever be taken lightly. NYSCOPBA immediately condemned the actions of those involved. These incidents must be thoroughly investigated, and those found to be responsible should face justice.

I want to be clear though that those actions do not depict the thousands of NYSCOPBA members who conduct themselves professionally and provide meaningful services to the incarcerated population (I.I.'s) daily. I urge this Committee to not forget about those dedicated employees who have continued to report for duty throughout the State's and the Department's challenges. Please consider the broader environment in which correction officers operate — an environment that is becoming increasingly dangerous, understaffed, and demoralized.

NYSCOPBA is always “sounding the alarm” on the increasing violence and safety concerns that exist in New York State's prisons and mental health institutions. Year after year, we have shown you record increases in violence and the dangerous living and working conditions caused by the policies and laws that this State has enacted (HALT, Raise the Age, Bail Reform, “Less is More”). The system wide violence exploded following the March 2022 enactment of the HALT Law. The numbers speak for themselves. Yet our safety, health, and family concerns have been routinely ignored. In 2024, for the fourth consecutive year, DOCCS set another annual record of II's-on-staff and II's-on-II's assaults and injuries.

For years, and especially leading up to the unsanctioned strike, our officers have been required to work excessive amounts of overtime (18–24-hour shifts) due to chronic understaffing and unrelenting mandates. The impact of mandatory double and triple shifts on employees cannot be overstated — physical fatigue, emotional burnout, and decreased alertness create unsafe conditions for both officers and incarcerated individuals. We've all personally witnessed colleagues suffering from a mental health crisis when they decide to leave the job entirely due to the relentless demands and lack of institutional support. We have told you about these concerns for years, but the State has refused to provide the resources our corrections staff needs.

Now, there is growing public concern — and rightly so — about violence within facilities. But what is often overlooked is that violence is not one-sided. Officers are attacked, sexually assaulted, and threatened in record numbers, and there are not enough resources or staff to properly address these threats. We need comprehensive staffing reforms, updated equipment and training, enhanced recruitment and retention initiatives, a healthier work/life balance, meaningful disciplinary sanctions, and improved access to programs that work, not just for those incarcerated but for the people trying to maintain safety in these environments.

Transparency and accountability must go both ways. Officers welcome fair oversight, but we often feel scapegoated while our systemic challenges are ignored. Policies are changing rapidly, yet the frontline staff is rarely consulted or trained prior to new procedures being enforced. This breakdown in communication fuels confusion and mistrust with management.

Furthermore, there is a serious need to improve infrastructure — many of our facilities are outdated and ill-equipped to support the kinds of programming and services that both incarcerated individuals and staff desperately need. Access to mental health care, substance use treatment, and vocational training are not only critical for rehabilitation but also for reducing tensions inside prisons.

In conclusion, I ask this Committee to approach these issues with balance. Yes, we must do better to protect the dignity and well-being of those in custody. But we must also protect and support the people who risk their safety daily to uphold order. Meaningful reform must include investment in staff, clearer accountability structures that apply to all, and solutions informed by those who actually work in corrections.

Thank you for your time and consideration.