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March 31, 2020

Governor Andrew Cuomo
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

As we continue to think proactively about how we can protect our state from COVID-19, I urge you to take additional precautions to protect DOCCS employees. I have heard from many Corrections and Parole Officers in my district who are concerned about their risk of exposure, and I hope to work with you to minimize any potential risk to them.

A recent article in the *New York Post* highlighted the lack of precautions taken for DOCCS workers, which is consistent with what I'm hearing from constituents. A NYSCOPBA official said in the article¹ that PPE is only being provided to officers working with sick inmates. Reports have arisen where officers providing their own protections were told that their actions violated uniform policy. Given what we know about how this virus spreads, the lack of protection for those in DOCCS facilities is staggering.

This concern is well-founded: NYSCOPBA told the *Post* that “[f]ifty-six officers and sergeants tested positive for the virus as of Monday — including the president of the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, Michael Powers. ... Hundreds more are in quarantine.” This has become a ticking time bomb, and our state needs to act now to disarm it.

The density of correctional facilities makes them a highly contagious environment, and keeping our law enforcement officers safe should be a top priority during an outbreak of an airborne communicable disease. The state's prison closures in recent years have compounded these concerns. However, corrections officers' inability to wear PPE puts both officers and inmates at risk.

Parole officers are also placed in harm's way when it comes to COVID-19. By making regular visits to the homes of numerous parolees, officers are exposed to many environments that could contain COVID-19. Additionally, if an officer were to be carrying the virus, he could expose numerous parolees and their families through community spread. Again, the risks of this are mitigated by keeping officers supplied with proper PPE.

¹ Bernadette Hogan, “NY state prison guards beg Cuomo to protect workers from coronavirus,” *New York Post*, 30 March 2020. <https://nypost.com/2020/03/30/ny-state-prison-guards-beg-cuomo-to-protect-workers-from-coronavirus/>

While I am aware of the unparalleled demand for PPE, I believe law enforcement officers should be a high-priority recipient of supplies.

However, the lack of PPE is not the only cause for concern in DOCCS facilities. I encourage your administration to minimize other opportunities for community spread in DOCCS facilities. Specifically, visitations and inmate transfers put officers and inmates at risk, and I urge you to temporarily restrict these practices until the threat of COVID-19 has subsided.

Thank you for your attention to this issue and for your efforts to keep DOCCS employees safe. Please contact me at 716-434-0680 if you wish to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert G. Ort". The signature is stylized, with the first name "Robert" written in a cursive script, followed by a hyphen and the last name "Ort" in a similar cursive style. The signature is positioned above the printed name.

Robert G. Ort

Senator, 62nd District

CC: DOCCS Acting Commissioner Anthony Annucci

NYSCOPBA President Michael Powers