

Testimony of Mark Lucey
before the Judiciary Committee

March 12, 2008

My name is I am Mark Lucey and I am testifying today in support of SB 668 AN ACT CONCERNING PRISON OVERCROWDING. It is a good first step in addressing the need for reform within the Department of Correction.

I have been a Correctional Lieutenant for the last thirteen and a half years and I have over eighteen years of service in the Department of Correction. I currently work at the Robinson Correctional Institution.

I am also the elected Executive Vice President of the Corrections Supervisors' Council in CSEA/SEIU Local 2001. Our Council includes six hundred professionals in the DOC, representing lieutenants, training officers, captains, and counselor supervisors. CSEA also represents educational staff in the DOC, as well as IT professionals.

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

1. Appropriate inmate and staffing levels for safe and secure facilities.

It is important to establish upper limits on the number of inmates housed in each facility. Absent those limits, we can see how the Department handles an increase in this population- by "housing them in non-traditional spaces", or what you and I would call putting beds in closets, class rooms and gyms. And if we have more inmates, we do need more staff. However the measures before you only call for more correctional officers. While we support the call for more CO's, we feel that doesn't solve the problem of staffing- you also need more supervisors, counselors, instructors and other support staff to handle the needs of rising prison populations. Limits in this bill can mean more hiring, another costly round of prison construction, wholesale release programs, or a thorough re-evaluation of our policies of what offenses deserve incarceration and for how long. We've already tried shipping excess inmates out of state, and that didn't work very well. I realize each one of these answers result in tough and unpopular political choices, but those choices are going to be required of you as elected leaders. Not making a choice is the wrong choice.

2. Effective support for our staff. This includes training for DOC professionals, access to pre- and post-incarceration supportive housing for inmates with mental health disorders.

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 2007. 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. Out of those 650, 200 are inmate workers assigned to Food Service, Janitorial, and other Work Details who are not Mentally Ill. Where are the other 4,050 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.

The legislation passed last 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.

3. Effective educational services for inmates to reduce recidivism.

I've talked with fellow union members who work as educators within the Department of Correction, and I know that to reform how we handle — and eventually release — the incarcerated, we cannot ignore the need to invest in the educational and vocational workforce in our institutions.

Today, up to three-quarters of Connecticut's inmates receive no occupational training or educational developments while incarcerated. Many programs are available however, there are long waiting lists of inmates seeking to take advantage of programs and seek jobs within the facilities. For example in the early 1990's Robinson Correctional once had as many as 18 Inmate Work Details with a total of 1350 inmates confined to the facility. Today, the facility count totals approximately 1485 inmates but only has 6 Inmate Work Details not including Janitorial and Food Service Jobs within the facility. It is in all our interests to prepare the incarcerated to be productive members of society when they eventually return to our neighborhoods.

If we are to accomplish this, we need to improve the education system within the Department of Correction. Such an investment will enable the attainment of a real education, the development of social skills and the realization of vocational skills training to be assessed, along with other criteria, before making the critical decision to release an inmate to the community. Section 3 of the bill before you is a good first step in encouraging inmates to learn real world skills and gain some education in order to gain release from prison.

That is why my fellow members in CSEA/SEIU Local 2001 and I are recommending that the Department of Correction improve educational opportunities to inmates. Assessing the achievement of educational and vocational benchmarks before making the critical decision to return an inmate to the community is just one of many benefits of such a shift.

This reform will require a comprehensive approach that brings criminal justice agencies and community transitional-service providers together to achieve common goals.

4. Improved communications among the state's criminal justice and public safety agencies.

Finally, I want to reiterate our union's recommendation regarding the communication gaps that exist between public safety agencies, criminal justice units, and the judicial branch. The Governor has 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?

In conclusion, we believe the DOC is currently doing what it can to handle our growing prison population however, it's resources and ability to handle this issue is being pushed to it's maximum capacities. That is why it is imperative for your committee to take proactive measures in providing the resources needed for secure facilities, effective educational and mental health services for the incarcerated, and reliable, seamless communications among our agencies.

Thank you for hearing my voice on this critical matter.