

**Pennsylvania House Republican Policy Committee**

**Testimony by John Eckenrode, President  
Pennsylvania Corrections Officers Association  
April 14, 2025**

Good morning! My name is John Eckenrode, and I'm proud to serve as the president for the men and women of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association. I would like to thank Chairman Rowe, Vice Chairwoman Marcell and all members of the committee for having this important hearing.

Last month, hundreds of PSCOA members descended on Harrisburg to stand up for the right thing. Together, we are fighting for the future of SCI Rockview, SCI-Quehanna and the community corrections centers of Progress and Wernersville. Rep. Kephart also joined us that day to stand up for our members against these closures. Thank you, Rep. Kephart.

It's important for the public and all members of the General Assembly to understand the ramifications if these facilities close.

First, our department says every employee will receive a job at another facility, which sounds easy on the surface. Until you look deeper.

Three of the four facilities they've targeted for closure are at least an hour-long one-way drive to the closest facilities where they could work. The lone exception is Rockview, which is located very close to Benner. There's just one problem: Rockview will have 466 employees looking for work but Benner only has 39 vacancies. That means Rockview staff who don't get a job at Benner will also be forced to travel an hour a day one-way.

Gas isn't exactly inexpensive these days, so do the math. Our members, dedicated public servants who risk their lives on a daily basis, will now have to spend two hours in their cars each day away from their families. Their financial reward? An extra \$500 each month out of their pockets to pay for gas because our department doesn't help with any expenses.

Now, our members are forced to make an awful decision: Should I stay where I've raised my children and deal with the extra cost of gas and long hours away from home, or should I uproot my family and move to another town?

The administration at the Department of Corrections in Camp Hill doesn't have to answer a question like this – unless it comes with a promotion and more money. The next time they say everyone is guaranteed a job, be sure to read the fine print.

As some of you know, closing a jail is a death sentence for their communities. In today's America, it's virtually impossible for small towns to replace a facility that employs close to

500 people. Simply put, these decisions are devastating for the communities the Shapiro administration is choosing to abandon.

I have to tell you, I'm worried about the safety of my members if these facilities are closed. In 2019, violence in our state prisons was some of the worst I've seen in a quarter century of service to this commonwealth. Much of this was due to 21 of 25 prisons being over 90% capacity, including 11 over 100%. Today, violence has dropped in part because the prison population is spread more evenly. Last year, only half of all prisons were over 90% capacity and only four over 100%.

In Secretary Harry's recent Appropriations Committee hearings, she indicated that most of the violence in our state prisons was committed in only seven prisons. She was correct. But what she didn't say was the most violent seven prisons were the ones with the highest capacity. The violent lessons learned from 2019 now are being forgotten. Closing these facilities will create potential powder kegs of trouble that many of us thought were a relic of the past.

Saving money at the expense of the safety of our members is too high a price to pay. In fact, I question if there are even any savings at all. As we all know, budget math can be quite creative.

The commonwealth talks about saving money by closing these facilities, but we know that's not true. It's just a budget gimmick.

For example, according to a recent Senate committee hearing, three state-run facilities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been closed since 2018 but their continued maintenance and upkeep has run up a \$47 million tab for taxpayers – and counting.

The committee also examined three properties that sat vacant for years before being torn down. The state spent more than \$115 million maintaining the Harrisburg State Hospital, Allentown State Hospital and SCI-Pittsburgh. Maintaining SCI-Retreat, which was closed five years ago, also continues to cost the commonwealth millions.

These closings were pitched as a way to save the commonwealth money. But as you can see here, taxpayers are spending well north of \$150 million on closed properties.

This isn't putting money above public safety.

This is putting budget gimmickry above the safety and quality of life of our brave Corrections Officers and staff.

Thank you for your leadership and time today. I'll be happy to answer your questions.

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