

Testimony of

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As part of the

Joint Legislative Public Hearings

on the

2025-2026 Executive Budget Proposal: Public Protection

February 13, 2025

Legislative Office Building

Albany, NY

Chairwoman Krueger, Chairman Pretlow, and other distinguished Chairs and members of the Legislature, I am Chris Summers, President of the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, Inc. (NYSCOPBA). On behalf of the more than 30,000 active and retired members of NYSCOPBA, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

I am here today to represent the dedicated and hard-working men and women of NYSCOPBA whose needs continue to be ignored by this State. For the better part of 3 decades, NYSCOPBA has testified before this Panel and has presented testimony reciting many of the same issues and problems that continue to plague the DOCCS today. These issues need serious consideration and financial investment and have been continuously ignored (Issues like increased violence and unsafe working conditions, the shortage of proper staffing to complete our workday safely and the erosion of benefits and lack of any proposed enhancements to offset rising attrition).

We have continually requested financial investments to address these areas of concern in the hope that somehow my members and their families can return to a reasonable work/life balance that has evaded this Department for far too long.

Before I get into the specifics of what is included in the Governor's proposed budget, and more importantly, what is not included in the budget proposal, NYSCOPBA recognizes that the investments needed to address increased fixed and body worn cameras, increased programs for vulnerable and incarcerated individuals, as well as increased staff recruitment, must be considered. However, we must also consider that this budget fails to address the needs of the more than 16,500 active NYSCOPBA employees who remain in our facilities to complete the job every day with dignity and professionalism.

With all the available numbers and statistics, it is easy to measure the existence of staffing shortages, the annual record-setting increases in violence, or the increase of illicit drugs/substances/exposures in our facilities. However, what can't be measured with numbers, and is too often ignored by proposed budgets (including this budget), is the cost transferred to our workforce created by these issues. Couple that with socio-political movements, and the lack of support for law enforcement in general, our employees, who continue to "do the job right," suffer both financial and mental health losses, while nothing is done to offset these losses.

Being able to report to a safe workplace and return home safely to their families after their expected shift is something that should be required and expected - not something my members should hope for. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Instead of addressing any of the issues we have brought before this State over the last three decades, this State continues to balance the budget on the backs of our members in the form of:

- Dozens of prison closures and thousands of employee relocations
- Failure to provide employees and families a basic peace of mind to continue their work beyond retirement age through repeated vetoes of the Death Gamble benefit.
- Retracted GEO Pay promises
- Reduction of more than 5,000 security staff over the past 5 years in DOCCS alone.
- Exponential increase of mandatory overtime – including triple shift requirements, as well as being required to work regular days off. Employees are put in an untenable situation to

choose between following orders to work mandatory overtime or receive disciplinary sanctions and fines for leaving and going home to care for children who would otherwise have no one at home to watch them.

- Failure to implement “real” safety measures to stop illicit drugs, harmful substances and contraband from entering our facilities.
- Failure to provide enhanced training to meet the constant growing complexity of Corrections, Mental Health and Disability facility environments. Training hour requirements have not changed for over 30 years.
- Failure to provide adequate budgetary relief factors for proper staffing of facilities.
- Failure to provide proper staff levels to safely run mandated programs for the incarcerated and vulnerable individuals as required by law or social reform.
- Failed investment in our failing and broken labor relations grievance system, including failure of the State to enact our agreed to Tripartite panel for the most serious disciplinary infractions. The Union recognized and collectively bargained the need for change in that system 2 contracts ago, yet the State failed to get the system up and running. Instead, we are vilified, and legislative movements swell to strip disciplinary protection rights away from our members, regardless of collective bargaining rights.
- Eroding health insurance coverage while costs skyrocket
- Eroding retirement benefits

The efforts that the State and the Department have attributed to the recruitment of correction officers are commendable; however, the number of people who ultimately choose a career in corrections is very limited and for many, the risks are no longer worth the reward. According to DOCCS statistics, at the end of 2024, the number of Correction Officers employed by New York State dropped below 13,000 for the first time in decades. 5 years ago, we had over 17,000 Correction Officers in our ranks. We simply cannot continue to operate this Department with the continued lack of staff. Those of us who remain have sacrificed repeatedly for this Department and it is well passed the time for the recognition that my members deserve. Our families, at least those that remain intact, are suffering under the burdens of being employed by DOCCS. Our wives and husbands are forced to run our households as single parents because when we show up for our shifts, we don't know when we can go home. So, what is the answer?

The current budget proposal calls for a meager 380 FTE's being added to the Supervision of Incarcerated Individuals program. How many of these FTE's will be trained correction officers providing relief to our overworked staff? How many will be assigned to the bloated DOCCS central staff?

We've already established that we are operating with several thousand fewer CO's than we had five years ago. Last year alone, over 600 of my members retired from DOCCS and even more are expected in the next few years. At the same time, the DOCCS Training Academy graduated approximately 450 new recruits in 2024. We are going in the wrong direction. These numbers do not give my members hope that meaningful help is on the way.

The Governor is proposing to authorize the hiring of correction officers who reside outside the State of New York by eliminating the residency requirement within the Public Officers Law. While NYSCOPBA is not opposed to this initiative, we are left wondering if this is all the State has to offer. Have we exhausted all the opportunities to recruit our own citizens with meaningful employment

that we need to look outside our state lines for public employees? What investments have we made in the current workforce? Have we forgotten just a few years ago when the Department was threatening to fire employees who failed to establish residency within the state boundaries?

What about the retention tool of offering my members a Death Gamble benefit to incentivize those who are retirement eligible to remain employed. NYSCOPBA thanks this legislature for their past support by passing this important legislation. However, the lack of funding to accompany the legislation has resulted in what has become a ceremonial veto message. And here we are again, following another veto message that says Death Gamble needs to be included in the budget, with a budget proposal that once again fails to include the measure. This is another example of the ways in which my members are slighted. The political jockeying at the expense of my members needs to stop. If the Governor or DOCCS won't fund it, we are calling on the Legislature to take the lead and fund NYSCOPBA's Death Gamble legislation once and for all.

When my members ratified our previous collective bargaining agreement, we did so because we were led to believe that the State would seriously consider several financial incentives for members of the bargaining unit. To date, nothing of substance has been agreed to and my members keep on showing up to work for a State that continually does not hold up their end of the bargain. Geographic pay incentives, Civil Service upgrades and higher starting salaries are just a few of the ways that State can invest in the current workforce and show them a little bit of appreciation for the work they do.

Given the difficult and dangerous nature of their work, it is crucial that corrections officers receive fair and competitive compensation. Many officers feel underappreciated and undervalued for the sacrifices they make every day. Proper compensation is not just a matter of fairness; it is a matter of public safety. When officers are underpaid or overworked, the likelihood of burnout increases, which only exacerbates staffing shortages and puts additional strain on the officers who remain.

As you can see, we come in front of this Body every year and ask for the same investment and raise the same issues. Year after year we are told, "Don't ruffle feathers, it will all work out." Our members have been hearing this for far too long and if we cannot reasonably expect serious consideration, I don't know why we continue to participate in this insanity in its truest form.

Meanwhile, here comes more prison closures, less staff, more violence, another Death Gamble veto or another GEO Pay offer retraction. I can tell you that over the years, NYSCOPBA's confidence in this process has faded to hope, the hope has faded to skepticism, and our skepticism has faded to doubt and distrust. I ask you. How you would feel if your Employer treated you in this manner.

My members deserve better from their Employer.