



PENNSYLVANIA STATE CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

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Patrolling the Toughest Blocks in the State

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House Judiciary Committee
Prison Closings
Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2013

Chairman Marsico, Chairman Caltagirone and members of the committee:

My name is Robert Storm, and I have the honor and privilege to serve as vice president of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA), consisting of more than 10,000 brave men and women who everyday walk, unarmed, through the toughest blocks in the state. Their job is to protect the communities surrounding our facilities by maintaining security, order and discipline inside the walls of our state prison system. I wish to thank you for the opportunity to share with you the perspective of my members, as well as the harm done to them with the announced closings of the state correctional facilities in Greensburg and Cresson.

We have many concerns with these closings. One of our biggest is how we, and our members and their families, were notified.

On Monday, Jan. 7, PSCOA President Roy Pinto was notified by the Governor's Office of Administration that a major announcement affecting the Department of Corrections would be made at 10 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 9. No further details were provided.

At that point, the individual from OA requested a 2 p.m. meeting on the afternoon of the 9th. Roy requested, on behalf of our members, any information regarding this major announcement, but again his request was refused.

On Tuesday evening of Jan. 8, several media outlets reported that the SCIs in Greensburg and Cresson were to be closed. Like many of my fellow officers, I was shocked and angry that our members and our leadership team had to receive this information from a news leak

rather than appropriate notification through the Governor's Office and the Department of Corrections.

On the morning of Jan. 9, President Pinto received a phone call from the Governor's Office of Administration officially informing him that Greensburg and Cresson were to be closed.

This is not the way our association and our members should have been treated.

By their actions, it is clear the Administration wanted to make it as difficult as possible for us to provide any measure of notification or answers to the over 600 affected employees at Greensburg and Cresson of the closings.

Why would they do that? Is this what we have come to in our society?

Do you know how some of our members actually learned of this news? Unbelievably, from inmates. That's right: corrections officers learned the news of the closings after being told by inmates, who saw the media reports on television.

As you can imagine, we were inundated with phone calls from members and their families affected by the closings. Many questions arose over why these facilities would close.

Had the Department of Corrections chosen to work with us and our members, we could have helped to ease the impact on our members. Doesn't common sense tell us that that would be the right thing to do? Don't we owe the people who handle our state's most violent criminals at least that much?

Our members are in danger everyday. Some have been brutally beaten; others are forced to undergo constant testing for disease after inmates have gassed them. Do you know what gassing is? It's when an inmate throws a bag of urine or feces at an officer or is spat upon. Some inmates suffer from various diseases, including HIV.

The health risks of the job are incredible. Yet, their welfare meant nothing during this process. These hard-working public servants are left scrambling, and some simply won't be able to keep the job they were trained to do – trained at considerable taxpayer expense, I might add.

I'm sorry, but this is just wrong. In fact, it's horrible and shows no compassion.

As upset and angry as we were the day we received an hour's notice before the announcement, it doesn't compare to how we felt Jan. 15 and 16, when we met with the affected employees and families, and heard their horror stories.

Everything these families will face is because of the quick, uncooperative action of the department. These actions appear to have been made without any consideration for the impact on the employees and families at these institutions, along with an apparent disregard for the impact on the local communities.

I realize we all occasionally get blindsided by unexpected events over which we had no control, and we must make the necessary adjustments and move on. But this did not need to be such a blindsided event. In fact, they actually allowed one of our members to transfer into the Cesson facility in December. How unfair was that!

As bad as the harm is to those in Greensburg and Cresson, there is an additional fear and concern throughout the entire commonwealth expressed to us by other COs and their families – WHO IS NEXT?

Once again, it gets worse: I would like to share with you a letter sent by the department to the inmates following the announcement. No such consideration was shown to the men and women sworn to protect the citizens of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

During testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Corrections Secretary Wetzel acknowledged that the department started internal discussions on closing facilities as early as last July. Yet, they kept it to themselves.

Why they chose this path I don't know because an excellent model for inclusion in the closure process was readily available. A process that would have provided opportunities for all stakeholders to have had input.

In 2005, the federal government implemented the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission to provide an open process to carefully and thoughtfully evaluate the closing of military bases. They recognized that while the military value of the base was of compelling importance, so too was the impact upon their host communities and the personnel assigned to those bases. In fact, if you look at the mission statement for the commission it includes the following:

“While giving priority to the criteria of military value, the commission will also take into account the human impact of the base closures and will consider the possible economic, environmental, and other effects on the surrounding communities.”

The commission held community meetings in the various locations that had been identified for possible base closure. They solicited comments and suggestions from community leaders, area businesses and employees. When the base closures were announced, the communities and employees that were impacted at least had fair warning and were given an opportunity to present their case for keeping their base open. As important, community leaders were able to plan for the worst-case scenario.

Ladies and gentlemen of this committee, I ask you: Was it too much to ask that our state government demonstrate the same compassion and concern for its employees and the impacted communities? Seldom is the best decision made in a vacuum and I believe this is such an example.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I'll be happy to answer your questions.