

Testimony of Secretary of Corrections John E. Wetzel  
House Judiciary Committee Hearing on Proposed Merger  
Department of Corrections and Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole  
December 7, 2015

Good morning Chairman Marsico, Chairman Petrarca, and members of the House Judiciary Committee,

We are here today to talk about merging the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole.

This is about two agencies, with the same goal, working together to get better results from the same group of individuals.

Currently, one in every 10 crimes in Pennsylvania is committed by a person who spent time inside one of our state prisons. One in 33 crimes is committed by someone who is actively on parole.

The Department of Corrections has always had a reputation of being independent and forward thinking. This administration, like all others before, simply expects us to do our job – and that is to enhance public safety by creating an environment where inmates can leave our facilities with the tools to live a crime-free life.

We do our job.

And we do it very well.

In recent years, we have reduced the prison population by 1,391 individuals, or 3 percent, and we've reduced recidivism by 19 percent.

We've improved our methods for treating offenders, two-thirds of whom are coping with alcohol or other drug problems and one-fourth who suffer with mental illness.

We've improved our educational and vocational training programs to support the successful transition of parolees back into society, ensuring that they have the resources they need to find work, housing and social services.

For the first time, we demanded results from our community corrections centers – or halfway houses – by holding them accountable through outcome-based contracts and, as a result, significantly reducing the recidivism rate.

But we believe we can do better.

By merging the two departments that manage this group of individuals, we can create a more efficient system to supervise and support them - from their first day in prison through their last day on parole - resulting in better outcomes and safer communities.

For too long, the duplicative and overlapping use of resources to impact the same individuals, has resulted in increased spending and diminished returns.

By working in tandem with the Board of Probation and Parole, we can coordinate the efforts of talented people in two agencies who share the same goal. We estimate that combining our agencies can save the commonwealth more than \$10 million.

This is not a new concept. Merging the two agencies has been discussed in the past as a more efficient way to use taxpayers' money and improve outcomes.

Let's look at the facts: 90 percent of the people in our control will someday return to their communities - to your communities.

After they're released, the challenge becomes how do we supervise these people to make sure they are staying on the right track to be successful citizens?

First, by making our administrative efforts more efficient, we can channel those financial resources into the community by providing more parole personnel working in the field.

We estimate saving \$6.2 million by eliminating long-vacant positions and redundancies in both agencies. These will be solid, structurally sustainable savings.

Let me be clear, we are not recommending the elimination of any officers inside our facilities or parole agents in the field.

We estimate that with this savings we could fund a significant increase in the number of parole field staff.

Nor would this merger detract or impact the independent decision-making of the Parole Board or the important work of the Office of Victim Advocate and

the Sex Offenders Assessment Board – other than to provide them with more efficient administrative and technological support services.

As we all know, convicted parole violators – those offenders that commit another crime – are returned to prison. This will not change under the merger.

What we propose to change is the management of technical parole violators – those persons who do not commit another crime, but still violate conditions of their release, such as a missed appointment, a failed urine test, failure to pay fines or not reporting a change in address.

We believe we can save an additional \$4.1 million by instituting a system known as “Swift, Certain & Fair,” that imposes specific sanctions on a larger number of violators for a shorter length of time.

In the past, without predictable sanctions, violating parole is a gamble that parolees may be willing to take, hoping they will get off with just a warning, or two or three, before they are returned to jail or receive a meaningful sanction.

Under the “Swift, Certain & Fair” method, there is an immediate repercussion - maybe a week in a parole violation center or contracted county jail – a calculated sanction designed to deliver the message and get them quickly back on track.

What we’re suggesting through the “Swift, Certain & Fair” program is to lay out the rules clearly and up front for everyone to follow. This will give parole officers the tools, strategies and resources to hold offenders accountable.

Pennsylvania’s lawmakers apparently saw the wisdom in this approach to supervision based on past legislative efforts. The Justice Reinvestment legislation, unanimously passed by the House and Senate in 2012, enabled and encouraged county probation departments around the state to implement the same “Swift, Certain & Fair” approach to supervision.

To be clear, this approach will enhance, not change, the provisions of the Justice Reinvestment legislation.

Remaining intact will be the five categories of violations that result in an offender returning to custody. Specifically, those include: any violation that is sexual in nature, any violation involving assaultive behavior, any violation involving possession or control of a weapon, if a parolee has absconded and cannot safely be diverted to a community corrections facility, and, finally, if there exists an identifiable threat to public safety.

This approach allows parole officers to be more proactive in providing consequences for unacceptable actions before an offender's behavior rises to the level of committing a new crime or one of the five categories of violations that demand a return to custody.

Several other states across the country that have already adopted this sanctioning process have already reported not only significant cost savings, but a reduction in recidivism as well. Washington State, for example, has already reported a 20 percent reduction in recidivism and saved \$40 million.

Any additional savings that Pennsylvania reaps from this effort can be reinvested in other areas to make our communities safer and help our citizens become more successful.

We have done everything we said we were going to do to make Pennsylvania's corrections system better.

Now, let us combine our resources and, together, let us do more.