

Testimony by Tim Roberts  
State Board of Directors  
The Ohio Civil Service Employees Association  
Thursday, March 12, 2009  
DRC Budget Testimony

Good Afternoon Chairman Ujvagi and Members of the Finance  
Transportation and Justice Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today and represent the approximately 7,000 Correction Officers and 2,000 support professionals who work in our state prison system as well as 195 members who work for the Adult Parole Authority. My name is Tim Roberts and I have been a Correction Officer at the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville for 19 years. I also serve on the State Board of Directors for the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association and am Vice President of the union's Corrections Assembly.

I'd like to address several issues that have been raised with the release of the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction budget, including sentencing reform, trends in inmate population, staff to inmate ratios, prison closures and prison privatization.

While we understand and appreciate the condition of Ohio's state budget and acknowledge the challenge of containing costs in the budget for DR&C, we want to caution against making budgetary and policy decisions that would further erode the safety and security of Ohio's communities and prisons in the name of increased efficiencies. We also want to caution that there is no one "magic bullet" that will make Corrections fiscally sound.

Be assured, this union has done much to partner with state government to reduce spending and to make government more effective, especially in DR&C. In fact, DR&C leads the state in the highest number of cost saving suggestions by the union and the highest number of ideas implemented of any state agency. In fact, in cost saving initiatives, DR&C has saved \$6 million in just one year, including hundreds of thousands in savings from eliminating private contracts and bringing the work back to bargaining unit OCSEA employees. We applaud the department for these savings and we are proud of the union's work in bringing many of these ideas forward. And more work can be done along these lines.

This union has also brought a number of money saving proposals to the attention of DR&C administrators through the years. One of the largest and most important of them was a proposal to eliminate the private contract for

the North Coast Treatment Center Facility at a savings to the state of \$6 million. It is our hope that proposals such as this one will be reconsidered, particularly given the changes in budget language that will allow the state the flexibility of making the two private prisons, state-operated, a change that we support

However, other DR&C budget proposals to cut costs will not be so benign. Already, historic cuts in this agency have had a withering affect not just on staff morale, but also on our ability to do our jobs and ensure the safety and security of our facilities, our staff and the inmates. We have lost approximately 1,000 Correction Officers in the last 10 years and for the first time since the aftermath of Lucasville, we have fewer than 7,000 Correction Officers. We have closed two major prisons and consolidated administrative functions of others. Meanwhile, the prison population has exploded (see graph attached). As you have undoubtedly heard and read, Ohio has the largest prison population in its history and the fifth largest of any state, with over 50,000 inmates.

Today, our statewide inmate to CO ratio is at an all time high of 7 to 1 (see bar chart attached). However, that number is deceiving and does not accurately reflect the true staffing levels at one particular time. There is,

however, a proper way to view them. To use the example of my own institution, ORW: Currently ORW has 2,424 inmates and 246 Correction Officers. If, by some strange occurrence, all COs were at the institution at the same time, the inmate to CO ratio would be 9.8 inmates to 1 CO. However, all 246 COs are never there at the same time. A prison is a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week operation. To give you a true and accurate picture, I recalculate the ratio for each shift and you will see that these ratios are far different than 9.8 to 1.

On first shift we have 114 COs. That's a ratio of 21.3 to 1. On second shift, we have 74 COs. That's a ratio of 32 to 1. On third shift we have 58 COs. That's a ratio of 41.8 to 1.

But even these numbers are deceiving. ORW is broken up into several living units. The living units at ORW range in size from 341 inmates to 90 inmates. And that's what determines the important ratios. For example in JG there are 133 inmates to 1 officer. In Shirley, there are 252 inmates to 2 officers. In Meridian there are 341 inmates to 2 officers.

As you learned from DR&C Director Terry Collins, we are at 136 percent capacity on average. But many prisons are at 200 percent capacity and over. Lorain Correctional is at 256 percent of capacity. Inmates are double

bunking; one or two COs watch over 250 to 500 prisoners at a time. Staffing levels are so low, mandatory overtime is routinely utilized, making DR&C the agency with the highest rate of overtime.

While we applaud the administration's attempts to offset a historic Correction Officer-to-inmate ratio, we do not believe that the sentencing reform initiative being considered offers a panacea to reduce that figure. In fact, if that initiative is coupled with further staffing reductions and/or a prison closure, it will be as if the reforms never took place.

Further, sentencing reform by itself may or may not eliminate *any* overcrowding. Consider that sentencing reform typically takes years to implement fully, and cost savings associated with it are based on the prison system remaining at status quo. But prison systems are not static, and a variety of factors will continue to raise their costs. We know, for example, that the length of stay for inmates is trending upwards; that the prison population is graying and will require more health care resources; that the inmate numbers are going up; and that new sentencing reform measures are always being passed and will continue to change the inmate population and DR&C's response.

Nor do we believe in simply passing the buck by diverting criminals in our state system to community-based correctional facilities. Do we believe some low level offenders may be properly placed in community facilities? We believe so. But the typical offender in Ohio's state prison system has run out of other punishment options. He or she is a repeat offender for whom other forms of punishment have not worked or for whom other options are not available or are overcrowded. Additionally, there is simply not enough money in the system to move inmates to community correctional facilities on a large scale. The addition of 200-odd beds for CBCFs that is being proposed is a fraction of the state prison population.

More troubling, still, is the notion that a prison may close if enough inmates are not diverted to community programming or the economy continues to slide. This is an extremely dangerous proposition and we strongly object to it. The state's prison figures are already at pre-Lucasville levels. We have too many inmates and not enough Correction Officers. When any prison closes, the entire correctional system is thrown into turmoil. When there's a closure, typically, the inmate population is down, facilities are being underutilized and beds are empty. Today, we have inmates double bunking, COs stressed by mandatory overtime, posts not adequately filled and increased violence. We have reduced programming & education, which

creates idleness and unrest. We have a new tobacco-free policy that is causing discord. We have an increase in potential outbreaks of contagious disease and infection due to overcrowding. All these factors increase the risk on the community, staff, and offenders.

This is a watershed moment for Corrections in this state. The decisions that get made with this budget here today, will change what happens in our prison system for years to come. The question is: Will the decisions we make be positive and ensure the safety of Ohio's communities, prisons and public or will these "realignments" have negative consequences? We believe that there is not just one answer—for instance, sentencing reform—to the problem of controlling costs and reducing the overcrowding in Ohio's prison system. But we do believe that laying off front line employees, closing prisons and eliminating programming are the *wrong* answers at this time.

We look forward to working with the General Assembly and the administration on coming up with some pragmatic solutions that are data-driven and that take full advantage of the expertise and training of our Corrections Officers and other DR&C support professionals.

Thank you for your time today and I will answer any questions.