

Testimony  
House State Government Committee – Senate Bill 1  
Tuesday, June 2, 2016

Chairman Metcalfe and Chairman Cohen, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you why individuals serving our Commonwealth as Corrections Officers should be excluded from the pension changes proscribed in Senate Bill 1. My name is Roy Pinto and I have the privilege to serve as President of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association. We represent the men and women who walk into the toughest working environment every single working day of their lives.

The job of Corrections Officers is unique, with extremely stressful job realities. On a daily basis we deal with actions that hurt us physically and mentally. Every single day my members are subject to verbal and physical abuses. It is a job that requires physical and mental abilities that deteriorate with the constant assault upon your senses and body, and simply with age.

Many states that have implemented changes to their pension programs have recognized the unique challenges of serving as a corrections officer and have exempted corrections officers from their pension revisions. They have acknowledged that the nature of the job demands physical and mental abilities that decline with age, as has our Commonwealth. Presently our state recognizes the unique stresses of a Corrections Officer's duties and allows them to retire at age 55 years without penalty. This is reflective of the desire to maintain and encourage a younger and more physically adept workforce to maintain care, custody, and control of our inmate population.

It is in no one's interest to have corrections officers working into their late 60s and early 70s in an attempt to enhance their pensions. Yet that is exactly what SB 1 would do!

This would adversely impact the public's safety and the safety of Corrections Officers. Yet, many of the pension changes that have been incorporated into SB 1 would require many more years of service to achieve a sustainable retirement benefit.

If an abrupt downturn occurs in the stock market, as happened in 2001 and 2008, defined contribution plans can lose tremendous value, resulting in workers not being able to retire as planned. And I believe it safe to say that other market downturns will occur, it is just a matter of when and how hard. In that scenario, many of our members will be forced to continue working well past the time when their physical and mental ability to do so has faded.

Over time, one of the consequences of SB 1 will be an aging workforce within our prisons. That is a frightening prospect for my members. We are unarmed and outnumbered every single day of our working lives. We recently had five of our members injured and hospitalized as a result of being jumped while attempting to aide their co-workers. When you are getting beat by two or three inmates your only hope for survival at that point is the prompt and effective response of your co-workers coming to your aide.

If I am on the floor watching my would be rescuers coming to my aide and see older less physically capable workers trying to save me, my odds won't be looking so good. My guess is that after getting my butt kicked they will wind up getting their butts kicked. We need to encourage and incentivize younger Corrections Officers to fill our many vacancies. SB 1 will result in an aging work force within our prisons and that is not in your constituents' interests nor my members' wellbeing.

We also need to raise the unfortunate truth about serving as a Corrections Officer, your life expectancy is not good. In fact in one study it was noted as less than 60 years of age. The constant physical and emotional stress we encounter day in and day out takes its toll. That constant unrelenting stress wears you down on so many levels. Unfortunately the way many deal with that stress is to turn to life choices that only hasten physical challenges, whether that be alcohol, smoking, or in extreme cases drugs.

It has also been well documented that our profession has a high incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), more than twice the rate of our military. Again, this is directly related to the harsh daily work environment and witnessing violent actions against you, your fellow workers, or upon inmates within your care. It is a constant assault upon your mental and physical being.

For our members, another very troubling aspect of SB1 is the elimination of work related disability, as noted in the PERC report, page 17. As I have noted, my members face physical and psychology harm every day. To do away with the work related disability for new hires leaves those serving as Corrections Officers with little real financial security for themselves and their families.

We also are disheartened by the drastic course SB 1 took in regards to the disallowance of overtime as a portion of pensionable earnings. The Department of Corrections is heavily dependent on the use of overtime in order to cover the acute understaffing of SCI facilities. If my relief fails to show for whatever reason, I don't get to just go home. I am forced to stay and work a double shift. It doesn't matter if it's my anniversary or my child's school event, I have to work overtime. At the very least a significant portion of overtime compensation should continue to be included in pension calculations and ***all of mandatory overtime compensation should continue to be fully considered as pensionable.***

With a starting salary of just a little over \$33,000, attracting good candidates for Corrections Officers positions is becoming very challenging. If you further reduce the job incentive by eroding the pension portion of the overall employment package, eliminate the inclusion of overtime, and remove work related disability coverage it will only make it that much harder to attract suitable candidates for these very difficult and challenging jobs. How many of you will recommend to your family and friends that they should pursue a career in corrections given these stark realities?

For all of these reasons I implore you to exempt from SB 1 the hard working men and women who work the “toughest blocks” in our Commonwealth every single working day of their lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you and I look forward to responding to your questions.