

**2014-15 Budget Testimony of
Representative Joseph Hackett
161st Legislative District**

February 27, 2014

Good afternoon Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek and members of the committee and thank you for the opportunity to address you today to share my two cents on the 2014-15 budget.

My first area of concern with the Governor's proposed budget is the Corrections Department. The Governor has proposed to increase the line item for the State Correctional Institutions by over \$78 million - bringing the total line item to over \$1.7 billion. While this includes over \$7 million for enhanced mental health treatment to inmates, which I support, this means that over \$70 million more of taxpayer money is going towards housing our inmates. In a time when we have residents who are barely able to make ends meet, I want to be sure that this additional money is absolutely necessary, because quite frankly, I'd rather see that money coming back to our schools or helping to address other obligations.

This additional funding is especially of concern to me given the Department's testimony in front of the Senate Appropriations Committee last week where they stated they are putting final touches on a pilot program to give inmates access to electronic tablets. Prisoners are incarcerated because they have done something wrong - what kind of punishment is it to allow them to purchase a tablet to listen to music or check email? I find this kind of "fringe benefit" both insulting and infuriating and cannot stand by and allow prisoners to basically be rewarded while my law-abiding constituents live paycheck to paycheck.

One area that is of personal significance to me is the growing epidemic of opioid and heroin abuse in the Commonwealth. I have several friends who have battled addiction with these substances and, sadly, some of them are no longer with us today. While we in the legislature are exploring ways of keeping these prescription and illegal drugs off

our streets, the most effective tool in fighting this battle is a well-funded and trained police force. It is obvious that the Governor is committed to this issue, given his proposed increases in the Department of Drug & Alcohol Programs, and I would like to thank him for this. However, I think that it is going to take a lot more than what he has proposed to produce any kind of result with this problem. I'd like to see some of that proposed increased funding for the prisons redirected to programs like this to help keep people out of our prison system in the first place. I think it would be a far better use of taxpayer money.

Next, I have some concerns about the New Choices/New Options program within the Department of Labor & Industry, which the Governor has proposed to zero out from last year's \$500,000 appropriation. This program has been incredibly successful over the years at helping single parents and out-of-work individuals to obtain gainful employment. The program at the Delaware County Community College has a proven track record of success and I believe it is critical to the job market of the Commonwealth to at least restore that funding level if not increase it.

I would also like to commend the Governor on his increased funding for Department of Environmental Protection programs – specifically, \$2 million more for the Clean Air Fund and a \$7 million increase for Environmental Protection Operations. Air quality is a problem in Delaware County, which has led to increased levels of asthma in our children. By increasing the funding for these programs, I believe that we can address this issue of poor air quality in the southeast and reverse this trend of health issues in our children.

Another issue of interest to me is that of the safety and security of our rail infrastructure in Pennsylvania and the adequate funding of our response entities in these affected communities. There have been several incidents within the state recently involving crude oil-carrying trains, including one in Philadelphia and one in the Pittsburgh-region that actually resulted in an oil spill. We need to make sure that our local emergency management agencies and first responders are ready for this type of incident and are properly equipped to deal with them. Because of this, the Veterans' Affairs & Emergency Prep Committee will be holding a hearing on this issue next week in Delaware County, but I wanted to put this issue on the Appropriations Committee's radar. I realize that funding for this type of concern would likely be from federal sources or a hybrid of federal and state money, but I think it would be a good idea to keep this in the back of everyone's mind just in case it comes up in the near future.

In closing, I appreciate the time and forum, Mr. Chairman. I believe that my requests within the context of a \$29 billion budget amounts to a drop in the bucket and would appreciate your attention to them as you move forward with crafting the 2014-15 General Fund budget. I look forward to working with you to hopefully make them a reality.