

**Testimony of  
Jason Bloom, President  
Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA)  
Pennsylvania House  
State Government Committee**

**May 23, 2018**

Good morning Chairman Metcalfe and Chairman Bradford and all members of the House State Government Committee. Thank you for holding this public hearing on SB 748, which we believe will bring much needed transparency to the controversial issue of closing State Correctional Institutions (SCIs) and other public safety facilities.

My name is Jason Bloom and I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA) representing the approximately 10,000 members of PSCOA.

As I come before you today, I am struck by the irony that my predecessor and I have testified before various Committees over the years to talk about this same issue. Five years ago, the Corbett Administration had announced plans to close SCI Cresson and SCI Greensburg with absolutely no notice given to the local communities or the employees working in the SCIs. At that time, we chronicled the lack of consideration that the Administration showed to the host communities as well as the employees working in the facilities and the hardships such action would cause. We said that there had to be a better way to undertake such a monumental decision. Closing SCIs have such a profound economic impact on the affected communities and uproot the lives of so many employees. We have continued to ask that any future closings be transparent and properly vetted. Unfortunately, not much changed.

On the morning of January 6, 2017, Secretary Wetzel announced to PSCOA that the Wolf Administration would be closing two state prisons as a cost cutting measure. We were also assured that no employees would lose their jobs. Strangely, the two SCIs would be chosen from a list of five possible SCIs with the final closure announcement coming on January 26, 2017. In turn, this decision left five communities in a troublesome situation for several weeks wondering what their fate would be and, to some extent, pitted those communities against each other in an attempt to save their SCI from the chopping block. Further exasperation was caused by the lack of any formal process for the potentially impacted communities and employees to voice their concerns. The announcement left those working within the SCIs wondering how their lives would change both with regard to their new postings and the safety of the SCIs once our state inmate population is dispersed from the closed SCI's and packed into fewer facilities.

Questions such as, where will I be assigned? How far will I have to drive each day? Will I have to move? What happens to the value of my home? Will I even be able to sell my home for what I owe on it? If I do move, what are the schools like? Will my spouse be able to find a new job? Can my current vehicle handle the drive or will I need to purchase a newer model or one that gets better mileage?

Those are all very legitimate questions for hardworking men and women to answer under the very best of circumstances. Being forced to make these decisions in a compressed timeframe, as they were in January of 2017, made them all that much more difficult.

PSCOA members were, and continue to be, very concerned about the safety inside the current SCIs and question what future SCI closings will mean for the safety of both Corrections Officers and inmates. We believe the Wolf Administration currently has extremely optimistic projections about future decreases in the state prison population and worry that closing additional prisons will lead to a dangerous over-crowding situation if inmate populations increase again. Squeezing more of our existing inmate population into fewer prisons is a recipe for disaster. I think it is legitimate to remember that the Camp Hill riots of 1989 stemmed from overcrowding in that SCI.

We all know that prisons are, by their very nature, dangerous and volatile environments. A report released in 2016 by Auditor General DePasquale found that over a recent fifteen month period there were an average of 65 direct assaults on Department of Corrections (DOC) employees and 136 fights between inmates (which DOC employees must break up) *per month!* Furthermore, we were all shocked by the murder earlier this year of Sgt. Mark Basserman at the hands of a convicted murderer at SCI Somerset. PSCOA members are rightly concerned that the incidents of assault on Corrections Officers will increase if our SCIs become overcrowded. The provisions of SB 748 will ensure that all of these factors are taken into consideration when any Administration is considering closing another SCI.

We do understand that Pennsylvania has faced dire fiscal demands for many years and that the Legislature and the Administration will always be looking for savings wherever they can be found. We caution against achieving this at the cost of public safety or economic catastrophe for certain communities. We know that there are cost savings that can be derived from the DOC budget but we believe that any savings must come from a comprehensive look at the entire SCI system. We are willing to work with Secretary Wetzell and the administration to identify potential savings and would welcome such an opportunity.

Most importantly though, a decision with the magnitude of closing an SCI or a State Police Barracks must be done in the most transparent manner possible with input from local officials, employees, the Legislature and the general public, as outlined in SB748.

Further, such a decision has dramatic infrastructure and financial ramifications for the host communities, it damages property values upon which local revenues are based, it hurts local businesses that serve the prison facility and those who work there, as well as those coming to visit their loved ones and friends housed in these facilities. It is only fair that all be given sufficient time to make informed personal and business investment decisions that can mitigate the harmful impact of such closings.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions.