

## **PA House Testimony – Closure of Polk and White Haven – October 21, 2019**

### **Darrin Spann:**

Members of the Committee, my name is Darrin Spann. I serve as Assistant to the Executive Director of AFSCME Council 13. I am here today to urge you to do everything in your power to stop the closures of the Polk Center in Venango County and the White Haven Center in Luzerne County.

I will be speaking about the detrimental impact this will have on the hundreds of employees represented by AFSCME and other unions at these centers. However, I must admit, the impact on the employees is second to the pain it will cause the residents of these centers, but I will let Mr. Hill and Ms. Luce speak to that.

What I want to focus on is the uprooting of the employees' lives that these closures would cause and how they were not consulted or warned before being blindsided by the announcement. Council 13 represents 626 employees at Polk and 337 employees at White Haven. The work they do maintains a high level quality of life for the residents every single day. They have developed close, personal relationships with the people they care for. They know better than anyone what the residents need to be safe and happy. They are the source of comfort and normalcy for an extremely vulnerable population. For the Wolf Administration and Department of Human Services to unilaterally decide to eliminate the jobs of these workers, and the homes of the residents, is misguided at best and cruel at worst.

In addition to the 963 employees represented by AFSCME at the two centers, hundreds more are represented by Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), Pharmacists' Defence Association (PDA), Service Employees International

Union (SEIU) and SEIU Healthcare, along with management positions. While DHS has described the prospect of furloughs as “a last resort and the least desirable outcome,” it is hard to imagine an outcome that doesn’t leave some of these hard working people behind.

And sadly, we have yet to see any real plan from the Commonwealth on how these employees will be relocated. It seems like the decision makers made the call to close the centers and would just figure everything else out later. That’s not how this is supposed to work. On top of that, the Polk Center just hired new employees recently; only for them to be relocated in a couple of years? It just speaks to the lack of planning or forethought that makes this bad decision even worse when you really look at it.

DHS often cites the dwindling number of residents at Polk and White Haven, but they don’t mention that people need court orders to get into the facilities. If open enrollment were allowed, we might not be in this position. It seems very little effort has come from the Commonwealth to make these facilities more economically viable, and now the workers and residents are bearing the brunt.

We must also consider the economic impact that closing Polk and White Haven will have on the surrounding communities, because yes, they are part of the community – a community-based setting you might say. Taking away these good jobs means businesses in the surrounding area could suffer as well. This is yet another piece that seemingly no one considered before making this decision.

If nothing else, the closures will force the employees to leave good jobs that many of them love, jobs that allow them to earn a decent living, and jobs that give them the fulfillment of helping those who so need it.

Thankfully, most of these employees have a union that will have their back, but unfortunately, the same can't be said for the residents of the centers. I will let Mr. Hill and Ms. Luce speak to that. I will attempt to answer any questions the Committee members have at this time. Thank you.