



PENNSYLVANIA STATE CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

2421 North Front Street
Harrisburg, PA 17110-1110

(717) 364-1700 Phone

(717) 364-1705 Fax

Patrolling the Toughest Blocks in the State

WWW.PSCOA.ORG

John Eckenrode, President
jeckenrode@pscoa.org

Hank McNair, Executive Vice President
hmcnair@pscoa.org

Aaron King, Vice President
aking@pscoa.org

Mark Truszkowski, Vice President
mtruszkowski@pscoa.org

Justin Krommes, Secretary/Treasurer
jkrommes@pscoa.org

**Testimony for House Judiciary Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
By John Eckenrode, President
Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association
March 5, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Briggs, Chairman Kauffman and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee on a critical safety issue – and the essential need for – restricted housing units (RHUs) in our state prisons.

My name is John Eckenrode, and I'm here today as the president of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA), representing our approximately 11,000 members who serve this commonwealth every day in some of the most dangerous work situations you'll find anywhere. As we often say, our members patrol the toughest blocks in the state.

After serving our nation in the United States Marines, I returned to Pennsylvania and became a corrections officer. For a quarter century, I've worked at state prisons in Cresson and Benner townships, reaching the rank of sergeant and serving as member of the Corrections Emergency Response Team.

It's safe to say, I've pretty much seen it all.

And that's why I'm here today to speak to you about the dangers of eliminating, or scaling back, how our department uses RHUs. It's deeply concerning to me – and the thousands of officers and prison staff we represent - that this is even a consideration. Simply put, it's our lives on the line, as well as the lives of inmates who are preyed upon by others.

Let me provide you with some examples. Currently, in SCI-Benner, inmates are being housed in the RHUs for a number of dangerous incidents, including:

- An inmate convicted of first-degree murder who committed an assault.
- An inmate convicted of rape who engaged in sex acts or sodomy on another inmate.
- An inmate convicted of robbery who committed an assault and threatened an employee.

- An inmate convicted of kidnapping to inflict injury or terror who was placed in the RHU for fighting.
- An inmate with a drug-related conviction who committed sexual harassment and indecent exposure.

In one case, an inmate was charged with assault while he was in RHU. When returning from an outdoor RHU exercise area – let me say that again – when returning from an outdoor RHU exercise area – the inmate headbutted an officer who was escorting him back to his cell. Several officers were needed to end the situation, but multiple times the inmate yelled, “Every time I come out, I’m gonna kill all of you motherfuckers.”

Once again, this is a small sample of cases in only one of our system’s 24 state prisons.

I should also note that our officers are “gassed” by inmates, which is an assault offense for RHU punishment. Gassing occurs when an inmate throws his or her bodily fluids or feces at an officer. Please understand, horrific offenses like this can be worse than violent assaults. Officers victimized by gassing must undergo constant testing for communicable diseases. I don’t think I have to tell anyone here the kind of stress that can place on a human being – and his or her family.

I can speak about this with authority because I was an officer and later sergeant assigned to an RHU for eight years. And I was gassed. When that happened, I couldn’t work for a period and had to take medication due to exposure to blood born pathogens. Over the next month, I was tested for HIV and hepatitis. And then I was tested again.

It’s impossible to describe the feeling of not knowing if you’ve contracted HIV or hepatitis – because someone in an RHU gassed you. Years later, I can still see the fear in the eyes of my family because we just didn’t know.

For all of these reasons, we believe the system should remain as is. If it’s limited in any way, Pennsylvania will be sending a clear signal to inmates that it’s open season on our officers, prison employees and other inmates.

That isn’t my opinion. We’re seeing this happen right now in New York state.

On April 1, 2022, New York passed a law that severely limits, or in some cases eliminates, the ability to place inmates in RHUs.

In the first two weeks, six officers and a sergeant were assaulted at a state prison in Elmira.

One year later, statistics showed prison violence skyrocketed by 33%. According to numbers maintained by the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), there were 3,113 total assaults recorded in New York’s correctional facilities, up from 2,375 assaults the previous year when RHUs were in use.

Finally, we recently observed the six-year mark of the murder of our fellow Corrections Officer, Sgt. Mark Baserman. His murder happened at SCI-Somerset, and it could've been avoided. Mark and a fellow officer knew the inmate was dangerous and had made repeated requests to have him placed in the RHU. That never happened, and tragically, we lost a hero in Sgt. Baserman.

Once again, on behalf of the PSCOA, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on this critical safety issue. Please stand up for the safety of our dedicated public servants. Please show your support for the dangerous work they do every day by keeping our RHU system intact. It's proven to be an effective deterrent. We do not want to see what's happening in New York repeated here in Pennsylvania.

Thank you.