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Senate Democratic Policy Committee

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Written Testimony for the Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on Deaths in Pennsylvania Jails and Prisons

I want to begin by acknowledging my lack of formal expertise in the corrections field. However, my life's work as a Pastor, enriched with a master's degree in religion, has granted me a unique perspective on the human toll of incarceration, observed through the struggles and stories of the families I have served. My experience with families who carry the heavy weight of incarceration underscores for me the profound discrepancies within a corrections system more inclined towards confinement than the rehabilitation and dignity of individuals.

In 2023, I embarked on a campaign for County Commissioner of Dauphin County, with a deliberate focus on the alarming mortality rates within our local prison. Despite warnings that this concern would not resonate with the electorate, I remained committed to highlighting this crisis, including through a billboard campaign that brought attention to the deaths of 18 inmates since 2019. Today, I regret to report that this number has tragically risen to 21. Since my election, three more lives have been lost: two while I have been in office and one in the interlude between my election and inauguration. Dauphin County Prison's death rate consistently surpasses both national and state averages. According to data released by Reuters in 2020, the facility ranked third in Pennsylvania for its mortality rate and was higher than approximately two-thirds of the jails examined across the country by the news agency.¹

It is imperative that we scrutinize each death within our custody with the presumption that it could have been prevented. While some fatalities are attributable to the challenges of an aging inmate population or existing health conditions, these factors do not fully account for the distressing death toll in Dauphin County Prison since 2019. This trend signals a pressing need for systemic reform, emphasizing the importance of not only managing the immediate concerns of health and safety but also fostering a corrections environment that prioritizes the humanity of all individuals in its care.

As this is only my 13th week on the job, I want to couch everything I share in the reality that I am still learning; yet I have been very active in the prison during this time, visiting regularly. I have also been appointed to the National Association of Counties (NACO) Justice and Public Safety Steering Committee and County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) Courts and Corrections.

My initial impression is that jails and prisons are very much ecosystems, containing a variety of factors that contribute to their organizational wellbeing or disarray. What this means is there exists no silver bullet that will fix prisoner deaths. Instead, it will require a variety of reforms and considerations. Here are five areas of the ecosystem that I think contribute to prisoner safety and wellbeing.

¹ Smith, G. (2020). Dying Inside: The data behind Reuters investigation of US jail deaths. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-jails-graphic/>

Healthcare:

The wellbeing of inmates significantly depends on the actions of prison healthcare providers. The way they address medical requests, their staffing levels, the qualifications and training of their personnel, among various other factors, frequently dictates their effectiveness. Andrea Armstrong, a law professor at Loyola University New Orleans who has studied prison medical care said, “They (inmates) have a general sense that they are getting the people who can’t get jobs anywhere else.”² One possible approach might involve instituting compulsory evaluations of healthcare providers on a regular basis, such as every few years, or after a specified number of medical emergencies or inmate deaths.

Mental Health:

Reviewing the most recent report from the Dauphin County Prison (DCP) board meeting, it's evident that with a population of 844 inmates, over 16% are under suicide watch or mental health observation, and 44% are on psychiatric medications. DCP is not equipped to function as a mental health hospital. Our current approach in the Commonwealth tends to criminalize mental illness, placing affected individuals in an environment where effective treatment is improbable. The remedy lies in a substantial commitment to developing inpatient mental health care facilities. This investment would ensure individuals experiencing mental health crises receive appropriate care before any criminalization occurs and provide a secure treatment option for those already within the criminal justice system but in dire need of genuine mental health interventions.

Prison Facility:

The conditions of a prison significantly impact the health of its inhabitants. Access to natural light, fresh air, and opportunities for physical exercise are critical for the well-being of inmates. Facilities that are dark, damp, and frequently in lockdown can lead to an increase in sick and mentally unwell individuals. Overcrowding poses another significant challenge, questioning the prison's capacity to manage its population effectively and adhere to policies designed for a smaller number of inmates. Moreover, many facilities face issues due to their being outdated and old. This necessitates a critical evaluation and allocation of resources toward the modernization and improvement of prison infrastructure to address and alleviate the adverse effects on inmate health and welfare.

Staffing:

The issue of staffing shortages is widespread across various sectors, yet the corrections field faces its own set of unique challenges. At Dauphin County Prison (DCP), we are operating with a deficit of over 50 corrections officers from what is considered fully staffed. This shortage often results in frequent lockdowns, negatively affecting both inmates and correctional officers. The impact on correctional officers is profound, with one study revealing that their average life expectancy of a corrections officer is just 59 years—16 years less than the national average.³ Addressing the issue of prisoner deaths requires, in part, a commitment to improving the quality

² The Marshall Project. (2021, July 1). Prisons have a health care issue — And it starts at the top, critics say. The Marshall Project. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2021/07/01/prisons-have-a-health-care-issue-and-it-starts-at-the-top-critics-say>

³ Brower, J. (2013). Correction Officer Wellness and Safety Literature Review. Retrieved from https://info.nicic.gov/virt/sites/info.nicic.gov/virt/files/09Correctional_Officer_Literature_Review.pdf

of life for corrections officers. Enhancing their working conditions is key to workforce development and ensuring that the prison population is managed effectively. Improvement in corrections officers' quality of life alongside implementing diversion programs and other strategies aimed at reducing incarceration rates can significantly improve prison conditions.

Accountability and Transparency:

The necessity of owning up to mistakes is crucial, but the apprehension about legal liabilities often stands in the way of acknowledging shortcomings and enacting essential enhancements. This fear of facing legal repercussions tends to obstruct our path toward taking accountability and pursuing the improvements that are needed. Transparent communication with the public about the operations of our prisons is vital. While it's understood that there are sensitive issues and ongoing investigations that cannot be fully disclosed, the tendency to view the media and public as adversaries and withhold information only exacerbates the problem. Enhancing accountability and transparency typically compels everyone involved to adhere more closely to policies and procedures. A potential approach to address this issue could involve establishing a protocol for releasing information to the public and media after the death of an inmate, ensuring that critical details are shared after thorough investigation.

These are just five elements of the ecosystem that are critical for enhancing the wellness of inmates. Other elements include drug and alcohol rehabilitation, bail reform, training, and a variety of policies and procedures that could be implemented.

The essence of our incarceration system is shaped by its underlying intent, which directly impacts its results. Focusing on punishment for legal transgressions without considering the consequences—merely disciplining individuals for their misdeeds—reflects the deep-seated issues within our criminal justice system, resulting in inevitable punitive outcomes and elevated rates of recidivism. Conversely, the term "corrections" highlights the importance of altering behavior through diverse strategies, such as providing support and rehabilitation to individuals. This seemingly minor terminological shift lays the groundwork for a justice system based on restoration, marking a significant move towards addressing the root causes of criminal behavior. Such an approach values the intrinsic dignity of incarcerated individuals, recognizing their potential despite the challenges they face. Rather than belittling them, it imagines the possibilities that could arise from providing adequate support and genuine opportunities for progress. Our approach to these individuals and the policies we implement reflect our respect for their human rights and belief in their worthiness of a second chance. Angela Davis poignantly noted, "prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings."⁴ This highlights a critical question: are we aiming to address the complex social issues at hand, or merely removing those affected by them from sight?

It is important to understand that over 90% of incarcerated individuals will reenter our communities.⁵ At the very least, it is our duty to honor our constitutional obligations by faithfully adhering to amendments designed to protect inmates from unfair treatment, undue

⁴ Davis, A. (1998). Masked racism: Reflections on the prison industrial complex. History Is A Weapon. Retrieved from <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html>

⁵ James, N. (2015). Offender reentry: Correctional statistics, reintegration into the community, and recidivism. Retrieved from <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL34287.pdf>

discrimination, and harsh confinement conditions. These provisions safeguard the basic rights of inmates throughout their time in custody. The compilation of the points above clearly shows that addressing the systemic issues in Pennsylvania's jails and prisons involves a complex and challenging journey. By embracing a holistic approach that addresses healthcare, mental health, facility conditions, staffing shortages, and the necessity for greater accountability and transparency, we can begin to forge a corrections system that genuinely prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment and dignity over degradation.

I would like to express my gratitude to the committee for recognizing the gravity of prisoner deaths and dedicating time to holding a hearing on this critical issue. Your efforts to gather resources, testimonies, and feedback to make well-informed policy decisions are commendable. Please know that I am at your disposal to support your work in any way I can in the future.