

## Statement of Santia Nance

Hearing on “The Nation’s Correctional Staffing Crisis: Assessing the Toll on Correctional Officers and Incarcerated Persons”

Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Criminal Justice and Counterterrorism

*Wednesday, February 28, 2024*

Chair Booker, Ranking Member Senator Cotton, and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Santia Nance. I’m the mother of a middle-schooler, Virginia voter, vice president of an advertising company, and fiancé to Quadaire Patterson, who I reconnected with 6 years ago and who has served 15 years of a 20-year sentence.

Quadaire and I met in high school when we were both in the Navy Junior ROTC program and spent time together when I was in college. This changed instantly the summer of 2007, when he and his family members were forced out of their home, and they had to split up. This wasn’t the first time this has happened, as Quadaire had a difficult childhood moving state-to-state, that led to some poor decisions when he was a young adult and was homeless. He takes full responsibility for those that led to his current incarceration.

But spending his entire 20’s in prison and beyond, Quadaire has made the most of his time and seized every opportunity to prepare for his successful reentry. He received his GED in 2012 and is taking print-based college courses at Ohio University and studying to be a paralegal. He has a trade in brick masonry, and even assists with re-entry efforts and mentorship through his project, Brilliance Behind Bars.

Quadaire is housed at Lawrenceville Correctional Center - the last private prison in the Virginia Department of Corrections that the state will assume control of by August 2024.<sup>1</sup> Lawrenceville has been facing staffing shortages since at least 2018, and the Virginia Department of Corrections estimated that when it assumes control of Lawrenceville, it will need to increase staffing by 93 correctional officers to provide enough relief to other officers and to ensure security.<sup>2</sup> While a partnership during incarceration is already hard enough, short staffing in Lawrenceville has impacted my family tremendously. Short staffing has affected his ability to access essential medical services and programming and has created difficulties for my family staying in touch and visiting with Quadaire.

As a glaucoma patient diagnosed in 2012, Quadaire needs his eye drop medication – Latanoprost – which relieves the pressure on his eyes and reduces discharge. He’s been instructed to take these nightly, before he sleeps, so that when he wakes up, his vision is clearer. Without this medication, it is not only difficult for him to do everyday tasks, but also to keep up with his coursework and studies. Quadaire has filed multiple grievances and requests to see the eye doctor that only comes to Lawrenceville once a month, but he has only been met with ‘you are on the waiting list.’ Knowing that he’s only 35 years old and suffering blurry vision, there are

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Vogelsson, *Virginia to close four prisons, reassume controls of sole private prison*, VIRGINIA MERCURY (Dec. 15, 2023), <https://virginiamercury.com/2023/12/15/virginia-to-close-four-prisons-reassume-control-of-sole-private-prison/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*; see Virginia Dep’t of Corrections, “Lawrenceville Correctional Center Management Study” (Sept. 18, 2020), <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2020/RD516/PDF>.

serious concerns of developing cataracts and blindness, which is a possible side effect of his condition.

Quadaire has his dream job working in the religious library in the gym as a Chaplin's Clerk. He has also been the organizer of the Zen Buddhist group, leading other men through meditation to help them stay grounded. Because of short staffing in Lawrenceville, he has seen first-hand how this has affected the way people have been able to get services restored to pre-Covid levels. For example, he has seen religious gatherings, like church on Sunday, getting canceled at the last minute. Various programming is offered in the gym, so this goes beyond just religious services. Now, with only one correctional officer running the gym instead of 4 - music programs, anger management programs, substance abuse programming and sports, have all been interrupted - causing difficulty to encourage rehabilitation for Quadaire and the people at Lawrenceville.

While prison does require physical separation, we stay in contact through visitation, phone and email. For people with loved ones in prison, close contact creates the best outcome for all parties. 95% of people in prison will come home; and strengthening family bonds has been scientifically proven to increase public safety and reduce recidivism. But short staffing has interfered with our ability to maintain our family bond.

On February 18, 2024, I went to visit Quadaire. I was surprised to see the longest line of visitors I've seen in months, and only one correctional officer working in the visitation office. When I stood there to hand in my I.D, I noticed that she was sitting behind the body scanner, operating it; before she took my ID, opened the door for someone else, and then patted down a different person. In the 5 years since I've visited, there have been at least 4 people in the office getting us through security. It took over 45 minutes for me to get into the room to see my fiancé, which cut deeply into my 2-hour visit. This was after my visits on January 28th and February 4th were canceled due to staffing concerns.

Whenever there are lockdowns in the prison or extended 'count' times due to lack of employees to cover the shifts, the phones may be down, and the population doesn't have access to the JPay kiosk. I suffer not knowing the reason why he is not calling, and often fear the worst, as I'm unable to reach anyone at Lawrenceville. When I call the facility, asking for an explanation, I get met with no answer, minimal information, or simply a disconnection. There's a trend of these events on holidays, weather events, and evenings, as people are calling out of work.

We understand that Quadaire needs to be held accountable for mistakes made, and he is the first to say so. But the issues caused by understaffing go beyond affecting those behind the prison's walls - it punishes me and my son as well.

After reconnecting with Quadaire 6 years ago, I've been educating myself on policy, laws, and advocacy to create meaningful change involving prison conditions and extreme sentencing. I co-founded an organization called Sistas in Prison Reform, where our mission and purpose are to bring humanization to those behind the walls and collaborate with Virginia's lawmakers. Through this work and through my personal experience with Quadaire, I believe that the answer to the nationwide staffing shortage and increasing public safety for prison staff, incarcerated people, and their families - is to identify those who received harsh sentences and have

rehabilitated themselves, and release those who have proven they are ready to come home and do not pose a public safety risk. Like many others in Virginia, Quadaire's sentence includes 13 years of mandatory minimum time. But this long and harsh mandatory sentence was not necessary to protect the public or to prepare Quadaire for reentry. Like so many others, Quadaire is rehabilitated and ready to rejoin our communities. There are many mechanisms to identify what rehabilitation looks like - good behavioral records while in prison, educational milestones, safe environments to go home to, secured jobs, extensive time spent in prison, and the list goes on. There are SO many people - like my fiancé - that our state and federal tax dollars are wasting money on when these incarcerated people could be home PAYING taxes and giving back to their communities. Reducing the population would lessen the burden of the officers and allow them to maintain a manageable environment that focuses on those who still need rehabilitation.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to share our story.