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**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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FOR THE

**SENATE JUDICIARY: SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND
COUNTERTERRORISM**

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

**PRESENTED:
February 28, 2024**

I would like to sincerely thank the Sub-committee for this opportunity to present the perspective of our federal prison system from the professional, hard-working, men and women, of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. For far too long this conversation has been missing a key element; the professional law enforcement officers that have dedicated their lives in service to ensuring safety, rehabilitation, and the fair treatment of inmates in our care, as well as, protecting their coworkers and communities.

The Council of Prison Locals represents nearly 30,000 correctional professionals, across the country, in 121 federal prisons. These professional law enforcement officers, who work tirelessly in some of the most violent self-contained 'cities' in the country, keep us all safe from some of the world's most dangerous human beings.

Today I would like to discuss our primary concerns, which are the current critical staffing level and pay structure within the Bureau of Prisons, that pose significant challenges and must be addressed urgently. Staffing levels in the Bureau of Prisons have reached alarming levels. Over the past seven years, the authorized positions within the Bureau have decreased from 43,369 to the current count of 34,470 staff members. This reduction of nearly 8,900 staff members not only compromises the safety and security of both staff and inmates, but it also raises major concerns and hinders our ability to effectively carry out the Bureau's mission of rehabilitation and reintegration.

The impact of these staffing cuts is particularly evident among our Correctional Officers. Despite the President's request and subsequent legislation, the number of correctional officer positions falls short of

what has been allocated by Congress. As of the end of 2023, we have approximately 12,300 correctional officers, which is over 8,000 or 40% below the appropriated number of 20,446. This number follows a year of “hiring initiatives” enacted by the agency.

With the current staffing levels in the Bureau of Prisons, the First Step Act cannot be successfully enacted. Staff used for programming are often pulled from their positions and used to backfill shortages of Correctional Officers, a process known as augmentation. Augmentation reduces inmate access to recidivism by reducing activities like programming, recreation, and education initiatives. Additionally, because of the lack of staffing, correctional officers are forced to do mandatory overtime. Officers are frequently mandated at the last minute to stay an additional 8 plus hours, often several times a week. This diminishes skills and awareness, reduces acuity, and causes general fatigue which greatly hinders supervision.

Augmentation and mandatory overtime have become the “norm”. This detracts from programming, compromises the safety and security of the institutions, but it also greatly affects the mental health and well-being of our employees. Even without staffing shortages, corrections staff are among the highest rated profession to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), suicide, and divorce rates. We do not yet know the full toll of working in excess of 60-hour work weeks in this environment will take on employees mental health.

The Council believes that the staffing crisis can only be resolved by addressing the insufficient pay band issue. The current pay structure within the Bureau is significantly lower than that of other Federal Law Enforcement Agencies, including the US Marshals, Immigration and

Customs (ICE), and Border Patrol. Additionally, the Bureau's pay scale is non-competitive with state and local law enforcement positions and even the private sector market.

Without addressing this pay disparity, the Bureau will continue to struggle to attract and retain employees. The Bureau must be required to increase pay bands to correct the staffing crisis. Because the Bureau is unable to solve its biggest problem it now requires the direct intervention of the Administration, OPM, and the legislative authority of Congress to immediately correct the pay deficiencies within the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In the past the salary and benefits were what drew individuals to come to work for the Bureau. The Bureau attracted highly qualified and motivated staff. Today, there is nothing attractive about working for the Bureau. It is a high stress job, the pay and benefits are not competitive, we are augmented, forced to work mandator over time, it is shift work including weekends and holidays, subject to government shutdown going weeks without pay, and work day in and day out with individual who have been convicted of crimes that society has deemed unfit to be in the community who do not want to be in prison.

The current starting salary for a correctional officer is \$46,495. At the end of their career, they make \$70,679. This is far below what ICE and Boarder Patrol make. Their starting salary is \$46,696 and their ending salary is \$107,680. That is a \$37,000 difference. Additionally, there are currently county and state police departments offering up to a \$75,000 sign on bonus.

Another pressing issue that will directly affect our ability to retain staff is proposed legislation that would eliminate the use of solitary confinement. Eliminating the Special Housing Unit would make prisons less safe for inmates and the staff inside these institutions, thereby causing more staff to leave the agency. Special Housing is a tool to utilize when inmates cannot follow the rules or when inmates request to be placed there for their own safety. While there have been many disparaging reports in regard to the use of Special Housing over the years, the outright elimination of it will not have a positive effect. The Council remains dedicated to finding reforms and ways to make its utilization more appropriate. We would welcome working with Congress on potential reforms and we have already offered a major reform to the Director of the Bureau of Prisons and her staff.

Additionally, our infrastructure is in disarray. For years the Bureau has either not requested or been funded to a level to even maintain our infrastructure, let alone improve it. Therefore, a lot of prisons need a significant amount of work to be up to standards for our staff and inmates housed in these facilities.

Furthermore, the low morale from all the things mentioned above; high-stress dangerous career, staffing shortages, mandated overtime, augmentation, crumbling infrastructure, and pay disparity within the Bureau has led to difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified personnel. Another government shutdown will only complicate matters even further.

It is imperative that immediate action be taken to address this issue and ensure the Bureau has the necessary resources and support to fulfill its

mandate effectively. This includes increasing staffing levels to safe and manageable ratios, implementing competitive pay structures, and providing adequate training and wellness support for all personnel. By investing in the workforce of the Bureau, we can improve the overall functioning of the federal prison system and enhance the public safety outcomes.

I urge the subcommittee to prioritize these matters and work towards implementing comprehensive solutions that will strengthen the Bureau and promote a more just and effective criminal justice system.

The Council of Prison Locals has worked diligently with members of Congress to properly fund the Federal Bureau of Prisons. However, even with additional funding there continues to be a decline in correctional officers. Congress must now demand oversight and accountability.

The Bureau of Prisons staffing has graduated from a crisis to a catastrophe with real human consequences. The Bureau must use the funding that has been appropriated to fully hire the correctional officers needed to safely house incarcerated inmates. In order to achieve this, efforts must be made to raise the pay bands to make our Federal Law Enforcement Officers competitive with other law enforcement agencies.

Chairman Booker, Ranking Member Cotton, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my formal statement. I look forward to answering your questions and providing additional insight. Thank you for your attention to these important issues, and I look forward to your

continued support and leadership in addressing these critical issues within the Federal Bureau of Prisons.