

Testimony before the Senate General Government Committee
FY 2024-2025 Biennial Operating Budget
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May 9th, 2023

Good afternoon Chair Rulli, Vice Chair Schuring, Ranking Member DeMora, and members of the Senate General Government Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today regarding the Department's FY24-25 executive budget request.

We heard in the State of the State Address what Governor DeWine is focused on for Ohio and its citizens, and his budget supports the goals he shared. Someone told me after it had concluded that the State of the State had nothing to do with DRC. I hope you do not share this opinion, but if anyone listening does, I hope to demonstrate how our agency's strategic roadmap goals align with the Governor's executive budget request.

He spoke of serving the needs of the people, helping everyone achieve their God-given potential. DRC is a people business. It's people that rehabilitate people and who transform the lives of those under our supervision. Rehabilitation comes from people, not fences, cells, and handcuffs. It is no surprise that 60% of our budget supports the DRC team of over 11,000 professionals. These men and women do a difficult job assisting the most challenging population, and they do it with excellence. We are part of the criminal justice system, but not the part young people dream of joining. We are not viewed with the same prestige or respect as others. Yet, when we do our job well... we mend lives, strengthen families, and make Ohio communities safer.

While there is always well-deserved discussion of how stressful jobs such as policing are, it surprises many that research has proven that correction officers have a shortened life expectancy. Even shorter than police officers. The men and women who serve the citizens of the state of Ohio as correction officers are literally sacrificing parts of their lives to help transform the offenders under our supervision. To make them productive citizens when they return to their communities so we can reduce crime. This means correctional professionals are part of the solution to many challenges facing our great state, which the Governor mentioned in his address.

To support our workforce, we have engaged in a multitude of recruitment and retention (R&R) efforts. This included a pay increase for correction officers and R&R supplements for targeted healthcare positions. But more than money alone will be needed to address workforce issues fully, and our strategic plan in this area involves things that are not monetary. For example, we now permit people working in prisons to bring their personal cell phones in with them. It is reasonable for someone working a double shift to want to talk to their children before bedtime and stay connected to their spouse. We have also created an Employee Support Team. The team's work was bolstered with recent legislation, which allowed their work to be confidential, allowing our staff to feel protected when using this service.

Our team of professionals is our backbone, the foundation upon which we will transform the lives of those in our care. Our new budget requests build upon this foundation in new and innovative ways.

DRC has always been a trailblazer in corrections. With your support in this current biennium, we became the first state correctional agency to fully implement body-worn cameras in prisons and parole. This has resulted in a 25% decrease in the need to use force inside our prisons. This makes our prisons safer, our agency more transparent, and ensures accountability for our staff and incarcerated people.

We want to continue to be a leader in corrections so we may do our part in meeting the needs of our state as outlined by the Governor. In particular, he mentioned the need for a modernized and trained workforce. All around the state, employers talk of their need for workers. We release approximately 18,000 men and women every year, people who need jobs. We have the workforce Ohio needs. We can be a big part of the solution by making the right investments in this population. Our proposed budget supports expanding training and education for these returning citizens.

We have used funds provided to us strategically and judiciously. For example, we have already expanded college to all our prisons, even those of the highest security. A tower technician program was created as part of the 5G broadband expansion initiative. As I speak to you today, men are being trained to work on communications towers, and when they are released, they will be ready to go to work on day one. In the next biennium, we will expand our educational opportunities, including more training in information technology and other in-demand jobs.

Forging ahead of most other correctional agencies, we have created a reentry savings policy that requires individuals to save any money they earn over 200 dollars each month after they have met any court obligations. We combined this policy with efforts to expand jobs that pay a minimum wage or higher to incarcerated people. Jobs that are needed in the community now.

By the end of 2022, 688 people in our prisons were saving money for their release, and 153 of these individuals were working in a job that made minimum wage or higher. This is very meaningful to those who are leaving our facilities. Among many challenges facing restored citizens is housing. Many of those under our care want to avoid returning to the same environment which contributed to their criminal behaviors. This is not always possible for them. But one of the men who has participated in this reentry savings program saved \$6,000 and is making plans when he is released to live in an environment more supportive of his rehabilitative efforts.

Successful reentry is essential to our efforts to reduce recidivism. Yet only a small fraction of our budget is dedicated to this critical period. Our new budget proposal requests an additional 20 million to have an increased focus on successful reentry outcomes by expanding on two key areas: Workforce development and Housing. These funds would be used to expand reentry workforce guides who will be whole life coaches and provide the skills, training, and support

needed to be successful. They will also expand short-term and long-term housing options and help expand reentry coalitions to reach all of Ohio's counties.

The addiction crisis touches all Ohioans, and those entering and exiting Ohio's prisons are some of the most challenging cases. Giving them treatment and ending the cycle of addiction is critical for their successful reentry and ability to lead productive lives. Once again, DRC emerged as a US leader when we collaborated with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to create four medication-assisted treatment centers inside our prisons. With this new budget, we have requested funds to expand to 4 more prisons. We can now support the continuation of MAT from county jails, begin MAT within our department, and transition people being released.

As the Governor stated in his address, treatment for mental illness must be a focal point for our state. It is closely related to substance abuse and can be a major contributor to recidivism. 23% of the DRC's incarcerated population is on the mental health caseload. In this budget, we have requested funds to repurpose already existing facilities to meet these needs. Using a Treatment Mall approach, the new mental health housing areas will allow an individual to get multiple levels of mental health services to address chronic and acute needs without going to another facility. It will be staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of security and medical professionals who can provide holistic services to individuals at almost all acuity levels. Effectively addressing mental health needs and providing continuity of care for those returning to the community is all part of a robust strategy to reduce recidivism among the individuals with the greatest need for support.

Over the years, the population in DRC's prisons and on community supervision has become higher risk and more violent. This was expected when people with lower-level offenses were diverted from prisons, and I think we can all agree prison is the right place for violent people. 72% of our population is committed on an offense of violence as defined by the Ohio Revised Code. While we make every effort to provide rehabilitative services to these people, we must remain vigilant to keep Ohio safe.

Our parole officers play a crucial role in keeping Ohio's communities safer. In the past two years, we have created the Violence Predictor Risk Assessment (VPRA) to help focus resources on individuals most likely to commit violence after release. Individuals identified by this assessment are placed on greater levels of supervision with a lower tolerance for violation behaviors. As a result, we have a better chance of detecting violations and returning them to prison before they can commit new serious crimes.

We have also demonstrably increased our participation in law enforcement task forces to target violence and apprehend fugitives. Currently, 37 full-time and 52 part-time officers are assigned to various collaborative task force initiatives statewide. These include but are not limited to, task forces targeting Crimes against Children, Human Trafficking, and gun violence.

In sum, the Governor outlined our need to address addiction and mental health. He urged us to train and prepare a workforce to meet 21st-century needs. He seeks to keep Ohioans safe and

help all Ohioans reach their God-given potential. The funding we have requested in the executive budget directly supports these goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about our vision. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.