

Thursday, April 16, 2015

Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Schuring, Ranking Member Driehaus, members of the House Finance Committee.

I am Michael Heldman, Sheriff of Hancock County. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the privatization of county jails. Although this language inserted in the budget bill has been said to clarify an existing statute that would give Sheriff's the opportunity for more flexibility in managing their budgets we believe the language of privatization of county jails will only further create jurisdictional and safety and security issues for our communities, and will not provide for cost savings as a privately operated jail shall be required to follow the Standards for Jails in Ohio as outlined in the Ohio Administrative Code.

County jails have been the duty of the Sheriff since the creation of the office. Ohio Revised Code currently requires that the Sheriff shall have charge of the county jail and all persons confined therein. Further, the Sheriff shall keep such persons safely, attend to the jail, and govern and regulate the jail according to the Standards for Jails in Ohio promulgated by the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Bureau of Adult Detention. By allowing for the private operation and management of a county jail removes the Sheriff from their elected responsibilities.

Sheriffs do not believe there will be any additional savings garnered for privatizing county jails in favor of for-profit entities. Costs to operate county jails on average have been reduced by more than 10% over the last 6 years due to overall reductions in the Sheriffs' budget. Privatization could in fact increase costs. In many county jails, the sheriffs utilize current jail staff that statutorily has the authority to investigate criminal conduct that occurs in their jails. Private run facilities would still require the Sheriff to allocate these resources.

Some county jail operations have actually created additional revenue to offset general fund expenditures. Examples would be those Sheriffs who have successfully negotiated contracts to house Federal prisoners. Per Diem rates for those contracts are significantly higher than those paid to for profit operations. Those contracts and revenue streams could discontinue under the proposed changes.

The majority of county jails have already implemented several cost saving measures used by for profit businesses in jail operations due to overall budget reductions to the Sheriffs' Office. Examples would include: Outsourcing food service operations, competitive bids for inmate medical care and medications and pay for stay policies.

The majority of county jail operations are staffed by employees whose average personnel costs are comparable to those found in for profit operations.

Examples would include: most Sheriffs' Offices employ civilian corrections officers. Civilian corrections officers assigned to the jail, on average earn an estimated 10-20% less than those officers assigned to patrol duties. Further, those same officers on average earn less than current Corrections Officers employed by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

Sheriffs must be able to ensure their communities are provided with the highest level of safety and security while maintaining human rights, protecting property and preserving life. Further, privatization of a county jail lessens a standard of professionalism and weakens the respect of the service provided.

We as Sheriff's however realize there may be times when a county finds itself facing a financial crisis and may need to contract services with a private company for jail operations. When that need arises the Sheriff and County Commissioners shall be in agreement and collaboratively work toward a solution that meets the needs of the citizens in providing for a safe and secure operation.

Sheriffs must be able to have arrest powers and maintain the ability to Investigate incidents and complaints which occur within the confines of the facility when the need arises, to ensure the safe, secure and humane treatment of those inmates confined within.

Sheriff's oppose the proposed language inserted in the budget bill regarding the privatization of county jails. We however realize that there is a need to further evaluate the ability to utilize private companies in operating our jails. Sheriffs are willing to further discuss options and solutions that benefit the citizens and communities as a whole.

Sheriffs have honorably served as Ohio's jailors for over 100 years. In this time, we have both protected the public safety while being careful stewards of the taxpayer dollar. For these reasons, the sheriffs respectfully request your support in eliminating the proposed language inserted in the budget bill regarding the privatization of county jails.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee I will try to answer any questions that you may have at this time. Thank you.