

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND



Department of Corrections

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The Honorable William W. O'Brien
House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety
State House, Room 35
Providence, RI 02903

April 10, 2025

Re: Department of Corrections April 8 Hearing Follow Up

Dear Chairperson O'Brien,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Finance Committee on Tuesday, April 8. The Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) appreciates the opportunity to have come before members and highlight the important objectives we have prioritized in the coming fiscal year and the years to come. We are grateful to provide additional information as requested by members during the meeting.

This summer, the Department will switch its tablet provider for the incarcerated population to Securus Technologies. As you may recall, each member of the incarcerated population is afforded the privilege of receiving a tablet that is operated on a secure, closed network system. The Department made the decision to switch providers to ensure alignment with the goals of our five-year strategic plan to increase participation in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) programs and leverage previous investments made to install a closed, secured Wi-Fi network in the Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI). These new tablets will enhance access to education through the Edovo learning platform, which is utilized in more than 1,100 prisons and jails across the United States, and allow for expanded programing opportunities. We hope this will mitigate the need for incarcerated persons to choose between work, programing, and educational opportunities, and enable them to pursue their interests through the day rather than at exclusive, predesignated times.

For your reference, enclosed please find a copy of the remarks I provided to open our presentation during our hearing. Also enclosed is the requested data for countries and individuals relative to the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program (SCAAP).

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these answers and clarifications.

Sincerely,

Brenda Brodeur
Assistant Director

cc: Honorable Members of the House Finance Committee
Christopher O'Brien, Committee Clerk, State House, Room 35
Sharon Reynolds Ferland, House Fiscal Advisor, State House, Room 306

FY25 Revised and FY2026 Governor's Budget Opening Remarks

Good evening, Mr. Chairman and Committee members. My name is Brenda Brodeur and I am the Assistant Director of Administration at the Department of Corrections. I am here on behalf of Director Salisbury who was unable to attend due to recent surgery. I am grateful for the opportunity to address you regarding the proposed budget for the Department of Corrections. I would like to introduce who I have brought with me today, Assistant Director of Institutional Corrections – Rui Diniz, Chief of Staff – Ryan Crowley and acting CFO Jack Collins. Also sitting in the audience is Assistant Director of Rehabilitative Services – Barry Weiner, Medical Director, Dr. Glen Tucker and Dean Isabella, project manager for ACA accreditation.

I will begin with providing budget updates followed by a discussion of some of the ambitious undertakings that align with our Departmental mission of public safety, administering sound correctional policy, and being sensitive to the need for fiscal responsibility in the use of public resources.

Our Quarter 2 projections show the Department will remain within the Governor's revised budget; however, there are factors that remain capricious which may impact our expenses. These factors include the medical needs of inmates, population size, and increases in overtime based upon staff retirement, absenteeism, and the use of vacation and personal time. As discussed in prior hearings, over the next few years close to 300 uniform staff members are eligible for retirement and may leave our ranks.

Included in the Governor's budget are additional resources to address overtime issues caused by staffing shortfalls. The budget also addresses per diem expenses for items such as food, clothing, pharmaceuticals, and physician services. The department is federally mandated to ensure the incarcerated individuals have a clean, safe environment as well as sufficient food and medication.

The largest fiscal issue the Department continues to face is related to our overtime expenses. These costs are inseparable from our staffing levels. As of today, we have approximately 72 correctional officer vacancies, which is compounded by workman's compensation injuries and long-term sickness. Until these positions are filled, overtime will remain high. This remains an absolute top priority of the Department.

To address this, the Department has already graduated three classes in FY 2025 and is planning a fourth class to be held in June. It is worth noting that while the size of recent classes has been significantly lower than pre-COVID years we have seen an improvement on previous years. Last year, the Department held two classes of 13 and 15 graduates. Of the three classes held this year, we graduated class sizes of 41, 24 and most recently 23. The last class started with 40 candidates. While we still would like to see larger classes, this is a noticeable improvement compared to the past few years.

The Department continues to take action to address recruitment issues. We have recently founded a recruitment unit which is tasked primarily with the recruitment of correctional officers. This unit has taken a wide range of approaches to recruitment, and I would imagine some of you may have seen some of the material we've used, including the use of billboards, radio advertisements on both English and Spanish stations, attending career fairs, television ads and even playing a recruitment video on gas pumps. We are hopeful to continue to see improvements in class sizes as we expand these efforts.

Next, I would like to turn our attention to our recently published recidivism report. For context, as of the end of March, our FY 2025 inmate population average is 2,344 which is essentially consistent with the FY 2024 population average of 2,346. Last year's budget included language requiring the Department to conduct a study to evaluate recidivism trends and program outcomes by March 1, 2025. This report has been written and submitted by the required date. We have identified areas of concern and are working through potential policy solutions to address those areas to the best of our ability. This was a crucial first step to addressing one of the biggest problems faced by the Department.

I don't want to describe all the findings here as the document is quite long and extensive, but I do want to address some of the findings at a high level. The use of wellness and substance use disorder treatment showed the strongest negative correlation with recidivism. The completion of programs was also moderately associated with reduced recidivism. In short, programming and treatment works. It is imperative that the number of inmates who participate in these programs continues to increase, as well as working to expand our offerings to include additional opportunities.

Next steps will also include a look at the external release factors impacting recidivism. Some areas being explored include working with EOHHS to examine access to healthcare, housing and social services impacts on post-release outcomes and how to address peak periods of reoffending, such as within the first year of release. Recidivism is not an easy issue to address but is among the most important tasks we face at the Department. I am confident that our team, alongside our executive and legislative partners, will achieve the improved outcomes we all desire.

I would like to provide updates on some of the programming offered by the Department starting with Correctional Industries. Consistent with the quarterly report that is submitted to the General Assembly on the state of Correctional Industries, the Department has reviewed all programs and shops, closing those that are not profitable, nor provide proper training to participants to enhance employment opportunities upon release. The Department is actively researching new training opportunities to offer better marketable skills for those being released. Revamping and modernizing correctional industries is a priority of our department. The goal of this program is to ensure that people who exit our care are prepared to enter the modern workforce.

Last year, we secured \$500,000 of congressional earmarked funds to purchase additional equipment necessary to further enhance our training capabilities within industries. This funding will take us quite a way in ensuring that the opportunities to develop our population skills that reflect modern market job demands. We are actively researching obtaining equipment for embroidery, printing, and sign and metal shop fabrication. We continue to seek additional resources to allow us to partner with industry professionals, labor organizations, and acquire necessary equipment to provide such training.

In previous years we discussed the PolarisMEP manufacturing program. Of the 35 individuals who have completed the program, 17 have been released. Of the 17 released, 12 have been placed into manufacturing jobs. The Building Futures program at Minimum Security is also showing promising results. This program helps our population obtain the skills needed to do trade work. There have been 21 individuals who graduated the second phase of the program and have been released, including 12 who have been placed with their respective trade unions, 5 who have been accepted by their trade union and are awaiting job placement and the remaining 4 are waiting to apply to their trade unions, as applications for each open at different points of the year. In short, all 21 graduates are expected to join their respective trade unions and begin work.

The Last Mile, a program many of you are familiar with is a program that aims to reduce the rate of recidivism in the US by teaching marketable skills inside prisons. The program is active in six states (California, Indiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, Michigan, and North Dakota). It provides online training and education with professional instruction, to produce engineers, developers, and other workforce-ready professions to do computer coding and web development. The Last Mile program is a yearlong program broken into two six-month increments, including web development fundamentals and MERN (MongoDB, Express, React, and Node) which is a software used for building sites and web applications. These individuals are in the classroom five days a week of a minimum of five hours per day. The class are taught virtually, and the class has projects and work assignments. These students have secure laptops to take back to their cell to work outside the classroom. Included in this program are reentry services and help with job placement upon release. Successful participants have found work in web development, as entrepreneurs, project managers and in music, art and writing industries. The first cohort of 15 individuals began in April 2024 at Medium Security and recently had 10 inmates complete phase one. Three of the individuals who participated in the program have been released, in which two have gained employment in the field.

We have made significant progress on our Wi-Fi projects. All DOC buildings, including remote buildings, have access to Wi-Fi. We are currently working at enhancing the connectivity for inmates in their cells as we found the initial install left some uncovered areas. This expansion will greatly enhance our population's ability to access programming outside

of the classroom, including in common spaces and in their cells. As you can imagine, there is a high level of difficulty in conducting such a project in a prison environment and I want to thank our staff and our ETSS partners for their hard work and dedication to getting this done.

I also want to provide an update on the consolidation proposal we were exploring which would have merged our Minimum Security facility into Medium Security. As you know, as a matter of due diligence, we contracted with CGL Industries, a national leader in correctional practices, to evaluate whether the consolidation was feasible.

Just this month, we received the final report which ultimately determined that this proposal was not feasible due to security, programming, and financial resource issues. Initial estimates were based strictly on housing mod adaptations to accommodate a transfer of inmates from Minimum Security to Medium. However, once the feasibility study concluded, it was noted that due to the nature of programs at minimum and the operational and security requirements needed to continue in Medium, that a direct housing transfer was not feasible. Capital improvements were necessary, including the addition of housing tiers and administrative spaces, a new sally port and new bathroom and showers in the facility, to make the mod operational for the Minimum population. Additionally, programs like Work Release require specialized access to and from the facility which is not available to the general population, and square footage minimum requirements for new common areas need to meet modern standards.

Therefore, at the Governor's direction, we have shifted our focus to identifying budgetary savings through other channels such as overtime and staffing post analysis. We will work with the Office of Management and Budget to provide an update to the General Assembly on any new cost-saving proposals as soon as possible.

This leads us to our capital projects which is largely a continuation from last year. Our biggest project of approximately forty million is the replacement of the Intake Service Center's HVAC system. The current system is irreparable as the building is very difficult to be climactically controlled from day to day. This replacement is paramount to the well-being of the occupants and the staff. This project is currently on time and on budget. We also have several other ongoing projects going such as roof replacements at our correctional facilities, and security system upgrades.

We are not without operational challenges. As discussed last year, a significant issue we are confronting is the introduction of drugs into our facilities. The most popular, K2, is known as spice or synthetic marijuana. Examples of how this drug enters our facilities include soaking letters/paper in the K2 substance which, when given to the inmate, would be smoked by the recipient to get high. We will soon implement a digital mail system which would allow for inmate letters to be scanned into electronic form which would then be shared to the inmate's tablet. This would eliminate the paper that is received into the facilities that could be laced

with illicit drugs. This will reduce the introduction of drugs but not eliminate the threat completely. The processing of privileged legal mail will have a separate process.

The Department has demonstrated its commitment to safe and meaningful reform of restrictive housing practices through the implementation of its policies introduced in 2023. These changes were significant and included some key components of correctional practices of other states. Among the several significant changes are a discipline process that does not allow for a sanction of more than 30 days in restrictive housing, a higher minimum number of hours out of cell while in restrictive housing, the expansion of available privileges while in restrictive housing, a discipline hearing process that concludes with a decision by an impartial staff member, assigned to the Director's Office, who is not a uniformed correctional officer, and a complete evolution of the High Security Center to serve as our three-step Restorative Housing Program that aims to rehabilitate incarcerated persons to the point they are able to rejoin general population.

While these significant changes have been a shift in Department practices, we continue to review their impact and work with Plaintiff's Counsel and the Federal Court to ensure such changes are effective and do not adversely impact the safety and security of the Adult Correctional Institutions for our staff and the incarcerated population. The fact of the matter is we have seen, just as other states do, an increase in disciplinary bookings, most notably acts of violence and drugs.

Although we are proud of these accomplishments, I would be remiss if I did not share some of the security and operational challenges we continue to work through daily. For some incarcerated persons, disciplinary confinement is no longer the deterrent it once was. The most problematic members of the incarcerated population know that they must be released from disciplinary confinement no later than 30 days and behave in a manner knowing the options available to security staff and discipline hearing officers are limited. Another significant challenge we face is a direct result of our aging infrastructure and lack of a modernized correctional system. A small number of individuals who may complete the restrictive housing placement are limited in where they can reside thereafter due to enemy and gang issues across our small unified system. This has at times delayed their reintegration into the general population and is unfair to those who have been compliant with their case plan and successfully moved through the program. We are actively working to rectify this challenge by working with our Special Investigations Unit (SIU) to determine the validity of enemy concerns and working to construct a less restrictive block that will enable in-person visits and other privileges those who complete the program are entitled to. These are issues that we continue to work through and are working hard to resolve.

I want to end by highlighting some of our future goals and ongoing work rooted in data driven policy making. We are currently working toward having all facets of the Department become accredited by the American Correctional Association (ACA). The American Correctional

Association has performance-based standards and expected practices to address services, programs, and operations essential to effective correctional management. The standards required to meet accreditation reflect correctional best practices and include updates to relevant policies and procedures. We have begun evaluating and updating relevant policies and practices to align with national best practices where needed. This will be a multi-year process but will yield beneficial outcomes. Achieving this is one of our foremost objectives.

We have also begun the process of implementing our updated strategic plan. We have hired an individual, who is tasked with the implementation of this updated plan. The goal of the plan is widespread, but at a high level, we want to ensure we provide incarcerated individuals with the necessary skills, tools, and resources needed for a successful reentry upon release, as well as providing staff with all the necessary tools to facilitate this goal. We look forward to providing you with updates as this work continues.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them.

FY 2024 SCAAP

Date Range 07/01/2022 - 06/30/2023

Country	Number of Individuals
Afghanistan	2
Albania	5
Angola	1
Antigua-Barbuda	1
Barbados	1
Bolivia	4
Brazil	11
British Virgin Islands	1
Cambodia	2
Cameroon	1
Canada	2
Cape Verde	60
Chile	1
China, Peoples Republic	3
Colombia	10
Congo, Republic	1
Costa Rica	1
Cuba	7
Congo, Democratic Republic	1
Djibouti	1
Dominican Republic	171
Ecuador	5
El Salvador	6
Gabon	1
Gambia	2
Germany	3
Ghana	3
Guatemala	71
Guyana	1
Haiti	3
Honduras	14
India	3
Dominica	1
Iran	1
Iraq	1
Italy	1
Jamaica	6
Laos	2
Lebanon	5
Liberia	24
Liechtenstein	5
Marshall Islands	1
Mexico	15
Netherlands	1
Nicaragua	3
Nigeria	5
Panama	3
Peru	1
Portugal	15
Russia	3
Sao Tome and Principe	2

FY 2024 SCAAP

Date Range 07/01/2022 - 06/30/2023

Country	Number of Individuals
Senegal	8
South Korea	3
Slovenia	1
Spain	1
Switzerland	2
Syria	1
Thailand	3
Trinidad and Tobago	2
Turkey	1
United Kingdom	5
Ukraine	1
Venezuela	1
Vietnam	1
Zimbabwe	1
Total	525