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Testimony presenting LD 271, “An Act To Recruit and Retain Department of Corrections Facilities Support Staff”

Presented by Representative Bill Pluecker, House District 95. Presented to the Criminal Justice & Public Safety Committee, Monday, February 22nd, 2021.

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and other distinguished members of the Criminal Justice & Public Safety Committee. I am Representative Bill Pluecker from Warren and I represent House District 95 which is Appleton, Hope, the eastern half of Union, and Warren. Today, I am presenting LD 271, “An Act To Recruit and Retain Department of Corrections Facilities Support Staff”.

The genesis of this bill was the legislature voting to give a recruitment and retention bonus to the correctional officers a number of years ago. The presenters following me can give a clearer picture of the history of this bill in terms of the previous law. However, in the process of giving the stipend to the correctional officers, we left out the support and maintenance staff. These employees are extremely vital for the healthy functioning and rehabilitative function of the facilities. Leaving them out of the picture was a serious oversight that deserves remedy.

I was before this committee in the last session making the case for pay increases for state correctional officers and discussed how short staffing plagues the prisons. The same issues surface as we work to fill the staffing vacancies for support staff. Every bit of rehabilitative programming that we expect to reduce recidivism is dependent upon these people showing up to their job, feeling supported in their work by their employer, and delivering professional programming. When we short these workers, we short the programming, and the fundamental mission of our criminal justice system.

District 95: Appleton, Hope, (part) Union & Warren

We know that if more residents of the prisons had access to re-entry programming and education - recidivism rates would drop. We have seen the data from around the country that when a resident gets a bachelor's degree while inside the rates of recidivism drop precipitously. When our residents are sent out into the world with a solid re-entry plan: knowing where they will work, where they will live, and where they will find mental health and medical resources - they can stay out of prison. When we cannot fully staff these positions to offer this programming, or we have a hard time recruiting and retaining these staff - we have a much harder time running this invaluable programming for our residents.

During the hard times that the DOC faced during the COVID outbreaks, many of these support personnel showed up and performed functions well outside of their job description in order to keep the facilities running. The chronic short staffing of the facilities became a crisis, but people stepped up from all over the system to ensure that the facilities were safe and secure. The employees realized how needed they are in a time of crisis. It is important that we recognize that willingness to go above and beyond and tell them with this stipend that we also recognize how necessary they are for the State as a whole, and the functioning of the Dept. of Corrections in particular.

I wanted to take a moment to address some recommendations from the Attorney General's Office in regard to this bill. They recommend changing the term "guard" to "Correctional Officer" in the bill. I wholly support this change. As a society, we need to recognize that the function provided by our correctional officers is so much more than merely physically guarding the residents. The AG's office also recommends that more work will be needed in order to clarify which positions will be included in this stipend increase. I recommend that the committee work with the collective bargaining agent to nail down exactly which positions need to be included.

When we short our staff, we short our programming and our residents. This results in the same men and women back to prison in a cycle which is unproductive for them, our budgets, and our society as a whole. Please support me in finally moving this bill forward.