

The Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association would like to commend Sen. Jim Rhoades for introducing legislation to help improve the safety of our state prisons. Our institutions are bursting at the seams and Corrections Officers are being routinely assaulted because they are grossly outnumbered.

Statewide, no less than 35 Officers were assaulted in January. Of those, the most assaults happened at SCI-Mahanoy (11) and Frackville (6). The volume and viciousness of attacks are escalating because inmates understand they have a numbers advantage. But such attacks aren't a new phenomenon. Last November at SCI-Mahanoy, an Officer working alone because there weren't enough Officers on duty was jumped and stabbed twice.

Unfortunately, the Department of Corrections has saved money each year by not using money allotted by state lawmakers to hire enough Officers. As our prison population continues to explode – 6,000 inmates have been added in just the last two years – the number of Officers remains largely stagnant.

Overcrowding should concern all Pennsylvanians because 15 years ago, overcrowding and understaffing were key factors in a riot at SCI-Camp Hill that lasted four days and put a community in danger.

Senate Bill 362 sponsored by Sen. Rhoades will mandate minimum staffing levels at each institution. Keep in mind, this legislation would not call for one additional taxpayer dollar or the creation of one extra job. It merely would compel the department to fill the openings it created – and the General Assembly authorized.

This legislation also doesn't guarantee the number of Officers will always increase. It's tied to a formula based on prison population. If the population decreases, the number of Officers needed to minimally staff an institution will fall proportionately. In the end, what this legislation will do is ensure we have enough Officers to get the job done.

Making our prisons safe makes Pennsylvania safe.

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