



## PENNSYLVANIA STATE CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

2421 NORTH FRONT STREET  
HARRISBURG, PA. 17110-1110  
(717) 364-1700 PHONE  
(717) 364-1705 FAX  
1-866-GOPSCOA (PA)

•••Patrolling the Toughest Blocks in the State•••

[www.pscoa.org](http://www.pscoa.org)

*Don McNany, President*  
[dmcnany@pscoa.org](mailto:dmcnany@pscoa.org)

*Ed McConnell, Executive VP*  
[vp@pscoa.org](mailto:vp@pscoa.org)

*Roy Pinto, Vice President*  
[rpinto@pscoa.org](mailto:rpinto@pscoa.org)

*Percy Poindexter, Vice President*  
[ppoindexter@pscoa.org](mailto:ppoindexter@pscoa.org)

*Sam Brezler, Secretary/Treasurer*  
[sbrezler@pscoa.org](mailto:sbrezler@pscoa.org)

### A Prison Without Towers?

On Friday, March 19, 2010, Department of Corrections (DOC) Secretary Dr. Jeffrey Beard announced that the DOC had found a fantastic way to save taxpayers \$5 million. His solution: remove Corrections Officers from the towers, the last line of defense, at Pennsylvania's five oldest prisons: SCI Dallas, SCI Camp Hill, SCI Graterford, SCI Rockview and SCI Huntingdon. He said that improvements in electronic surveillance have eliminated the need for officers in the towers and will save taxpayers \$5 million in overtime costs.

The Pennsylvania Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA) believes that this decision is not only irresponsible, but puts Corrections Officers, residents and even the inmates themselves at risk. Eliminating our last line of defense at a time when prison populations are on the rise and there are fewer Corrections Officers to protect us makes no sense. Once again, the DOC has decided to put bureaucratic budgeting ahead of the lives of its officers and Pennsylvanians.

Except Secretary Beard's idea doesn't really save taxpayers any money. If no positions are being eliminated and DOC still has to pay overtime because of current understaffing, where are the savings? Since prisons are so severely understaffed, moving officers from the towers to the inside of the prison is like putting a band-aid on a gunshot wound and saying that you are healed. The DOC is trying to tell taxpayers it's saving them money, but in the end they will pay with their safety.

This is not a new idea for the DOC. In 1996, Corrections officials came up with what they thought was a great way to save money: remove officers from towers at prisons to save overtime costs. They thought that the security improvements they made were sufficient and officers in towers were not necessary. In 1999, a convicted murderer and a convicted arsonist escaped from SCI Dallas. Their escape route was in view of the three unmanned towers and the men became entangled in razor wire underneath a tower as they climbed an exterior fence as they escaped.

Residents in Jackson Township and nearby Wilkes-Barre were paralyzed with fear. Local law enforcement spent hours hunting the convicts down. Four days later, they were captured and returned to the prison. In the end, the officers returned to the towers, but not before state and local law enforcement had to absorb the cost of the manhunt.

Apparently, the Department of Corrections hasn't learned from its past mistakes and is willing to repeat them in the guise of "cost savings."

Prison populations in Pennsylvania have risen by 17 percent since 2005 and show no signs of slowing. In fact, Secretary Beard is shipping prisoners out of state as a way to alleviate the situation. At the same time as prison populations keep rising, the number of officers who protect us continues to remain stagnant at best, rising only 7 percent during the same time period.

Over the past five years, 30 positions have been eliminated at SCI Camp Hill, the site of one of the largest prison riots in Pennsylvania history. SCI Camp Hill currently has fewer than 600 corrections officers who are responsible for nearly 4,000 inmates at any given time, including the state's most violent offenders.

Secretary Beard's cost saving "plan" is to remove the armed officers and replace them with electronic surveillance and make manning the towers with dedicated human beings obsolete. Right now, at SCI Camp Hill only one officer is watching electronic surveillance for several cellblocks at the same time. That is pure bureaucratic window dressing! It is ludicrous to think that one officer, watching several blocks at the same time, is sufficient to prevent escapes, quickly respond to incidents that may happen when prisoners are on the prison grounds or substitute for an armed Officer whose only functions is to prevent convicted felons from fleeing into the trusting host community and terrorizing its citizens.

Secretary Beard's plan does nothing but substitute bureaucratic smoke and mirrors to hide the undeniable fact that Corrections Officers, residents and even inmates are at greater risk each and every passing day that this "plan" is in place. Without armed officers manning the towers, our collective risk continues to rise.

Just ask John Wilkes III, Jackson Township Board of Supervisors. Jackson Township is the host municipality of SCI Dallas, the first free ground on which fleeing inmates will step when they scale the now-unprotected walls. On Monday, March 22, 2010, he told the Wilkes-Barre Citizen's Voice:

"This is crazy. I think those towers are the last line of defense of the residents of the township. The electronics and all those things are great and they're precautionary, but if someone gets through, we need someone there."

Eliminating our last line of defense - your last line of defense - against convicted murderers, rapists and child molesters as a quick way to save a few dollars, is not a solution to the very real security issues facing Pennsylvania's prisons that directly and immediately impact upon the citizens of the communities in which they placed.

There is, however, a simple solution to this crisis: properly staff prisons with enough officers to effectively control the prison population. Electronic surveillance will never replace human beings in either effectiveness or dedication. The DOC's ill-advised decision to expose citizens, its employees and even its inmates to certain and needless danger demonstrates a shocking willingness to value dollars over safety. If the DOC is not willing to protect the citizens of its host communities from needless danger, then those citizens must - and should - take such steps as necessary to achieve that safety regardless of the DOC, rather than because of the DOC. For the safety of our communities, I urge you to contact the DOC and demand they keep armed officers in the towers.

Sincerely,

Don McNany

President, PSCOA