

Testimony of Chris Summers, President, NYS COPBA

Public Protection Budget Hearing

Date: February 12, 2026

On behalf of the members of the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association (NYS COPBA), I would like to thank the Legislature for the opportunity to submit testimony for this hearing. We look forward to working with you and with the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to ensure a safer and more secure future for New York State's correctional facilities.

NYS COPBA previously testified before this panel regarding the escalating issues facing our members, the men and women who work in state prisons. We've told you these issues require immediate attention and serious investment. Despite our repeated warnings, you continue to overlook these issues. The correctional crisis in New York did not arise overnight. It has been years in the making. The State Legislature and the Executive have made it worse, and we have consistently sounded the alarm.

The problems plaguing the system are multifaceted and severe. They include increasing violence, unsafe working conditions, chronic staffing shortages, mandatory overtime, erosion of benefits, lack of meaningful time off, and an absence of incentives to counteract the rising attrition rates. These compounding failures have pushed the system into the crisis we face today.

New York's correctional officers and sergeants are on the front lines, expected to perform increasingly difficult tasks with significantly fewer resources. The State's public protection strategy is failing because you are not prioritizing direct investment in the professionals who ensure safety and stability inside our facilities. The Legislature and the Executive say that you are committed to security. But the current budget proposal does not live up to your words. It fails to address the real needs of our members. These people are your employees, and they need your attention.

Background and the 2025 Strike

The past several years have been exceptionally challenging for those working in corrections. In February 2025, many DOCCS employees reached a breaking point and used a dramatic measure to demand safer working conditions. NYS COPBA acknowledges that strikes are illegal under the Taylor Law and we condemn such actions now, as we did then. But the context surrounding that moment, when our members felt they had no option left but to go on strike, cannot be ignored.

Our members were facing crushing mandatory overtime with no end in sight, a dramatic increase in violence, rampant drugs and contraband, a dismal recruitment and retention environment, and the overwhelming sense that their voices were unheard. Security staff were forced to endure short-sighted political decisions that only made facilities more dangerous for both staff and incarcerated individuals. The deterioration of prison conditions, compounded by the indifference of elected leaders, pushed staff to the brink.

The crisis was not caused by the officers who wear the uniform every day. It was created in Albany. It was created by your policies. Your policies have weakened security, emboldened violence, and stripped officers of the tools they need to maintain order and keep themselves as well as inmates safe.

After the strike ended in February and March of 2025, DOCCS terminated thousands of employees. These terminations included employees who had legitimate absences unrelated to the strike. People were fired who were on approved sick leave, vacation, workers' compensation, FMLA, and parental leave. One member was threatened with termination if he didn't return immediately from his honeymoon. Another was dismissed for attending to a terminally ill parent. The sloppiness of these terminations sent a message to our members. The message was that their employer—the State of New York—could not care less about them. NYSCOPBA worked through thousands of grievances and successfully returned many of these members to their posts. But the damage was done, and staffing levels remain far below pre-strike numbers.

Executive Budget Priorities

NYSCOPBA supports the Governor's proposal to expand drone detection and mitigation technology. Drone-delivered contraband is a growing threat to the safety of both staff and incarcerated individuals. Criminal penalties, along with technological improvements, are necessary and appropriate. We also support investments in digital medical records and any initiative that improves the safety and health of DOCCS facilities.

However, while technology is essential, it cannot replace a fully staffed and well-supported workforce. Unfortunately, the Executive Budget lacks meaningful investment in DOCCS employees. This critical gap must be addressed.

Staffing, Recruitment, and Retention

NYSCOPBA is disappointed that the budget does not include sufficient allocations to address staffing shortages among correction officers and civilian staff. While we appreciate the assistance of the New York State National Guard, their temporary deployment does not and will never adequately address our critical staffing problems. Temporary deployments cannot replace a fully staffed and trained workforce.

NYSCOPBA urges the State to invest in its workforce through robust recruitment and retention initiatives, competitive compensation, adequate staffing levels, comprehensive training, and resources that allow our members to perform their duties safely while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. We are ready to be your partner. You have said the same. But we need you to act.

Death Gamble and Vacation Deferral

We also call on the Legislature to allocate the necessary funding for our "Death Gamble" legislation to retain retirement-eligible officers. While the Legislature has passed this measure before, the lack of funding has rendered it ineffective. If the Executive does not fund it, we urge the Legislature to take the lead and fully implement it.

Additionally, we request budget language that allows employees to defer unused vacation time when short staffing and mandatory overtime prevent them from using their earned time. Members are currently penalized when their vacation balances exceed contractual limits through no fault of their own. If the State mandates overtime and blocks time off, employees should not be forced to forfeit earned time. A vacation deferral and payout option upon separation is both necessary and fair.

HALT Act Committee Recommendations

In March 2025, a HALT Act review committee was formed pursuant to a Memorandum of Agreement with NYSCOPBA. After months of deliberations, the committee unanimously adopted ten recommendations to amend the law. NYSCOPBA strongly urges the Legislature to act on these recommendations, which include clarifying sexual misconduct offenses, addressing extortion and gang behavior, reducing subjective standards, improving placement flexibility, aligning violent felony definitions, and modifying incentive program eligibility.

These proposed changes would improve safety while maintaining rehabilitative goals within our correctional facilities.

Mental Health and Policy Decisions

Working conditions have become increasingly complex following the strike. Officers face heightened tensions, inconsistent policies, and eroding morale. Many officers are unable to take time off. They experience elevated stress and burnout, and exhibit symptoms consistent with PTSD due to repeated exposure to violence.

Mental health resources for correctional staff remain insufficient and difficult to access. While the State has prioritized mental health initiatives for the State Police, NYSCOPBA members have been excluded from similar programs. This discrepancy must be addressed.

NYSCOPBA is also concerned by DOCCS' unilateral decision to alter the definitions of assault. These changes were made without union agreement. They impact how violence is reported, prosecuted, and tracked. Any policy that seeks to deny or minimize the severity of violence against our staff undermines morale and safety. Despite our efforts to propose alternative definitions for menacing and reckless endangerment, DOCCS has implemented their own changes without full agreement, further widening the trust gap between staff and management.

The Human Cost

The impact of these policies is not abstract—it affects real people. We want you to hear their stories directly from them. We are submitting with this testimony a letter written by the spouse of a corrections officer. We urge you all to read it. And we are releasing a video after this testimony concludes, featuring some of our members telling their stories. We urge you all to watch it.

Correction Officer Joe Susino nearly lost his life after being struck with a fire extinguisher and stomped while he was unconscious. He now lives with chronic pain and trauma. And his wife Aubree describes a life for their family that has been forever changed by Joe's disability.

Bridgette Waninger, attacked while she was pregnant and now supporting her family while her husband works brutal hours, struggles with the anxiety and trauma that now affect her children.

Edwin Cedeno, a 17-year veteran, works extreme hours due to mandatory overtime, missing out on precious family time and raising young boys he barely gets to see.

When NYSCOPBA requests common-sense changes, we are asking for Joe, Aubree, Bridgette, Edwin, and every family impacted by unsafe policies and working conditions.

Conclusion

This crisis was created by your policy choices, and it is a crisis that you can fix. NYSCOPBA asks the Legislature to work with us in good faith to restore safety, staffing, dignity, and stability to New York's correctional system.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,



Chris Summers
NYSCOPBA President

To Whom It May Concern,

1/26/2026

I am writing not as a policy expert, but as the wife of an employee of New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NYSDOCCS); as someone whose family lives daily with the consequences of the actions and decisions made by the State of NY and NYSDOCCS.

When my husband chose this career, we understood it would be challenging at times. We understood the risks, the long hours, and the sacrifices. What we did not agree to—and what no family should be expected to endure—is a system that has become unsustainable, unsafe, and indifferent to the human cost placed on officers and their families.

Over the last two decades, the department has changed by leaps and bounds—and not for the better. Staffing levels have severely declined, policies have shifted, and the support officers once relied on has steadily eroded. What was once a difficult but manageable and proud career has become a constant strain, marked by uncertainty, fatigue, and heightened risk. From my family's perspective, the difference between when my husband started and where the department stands now is unmistakable.

Work-life balance no longer exists. Mandatory overtime, extended shifts, consistent loss of regular days off and constantly changing schedules have become the norm. We cannot plan our lives with any certainty because work can—and often does—override everything else. Birthdays, holidays, school events, anniversaries, and other milestones are missed repeatedly—not because my husband chooses work over family, but because he is given no choice. What was once an occasional inconvenience has become a persistent threat to safety, family stability, and mental health.

Since the wildcat strike, many officers, my husband included, have gone almost a year if not over, without a reliable vacation schedule, and some have been unable to take any meaningful time off at all. Time that was earned and depended on for rest and recovery has been denied or disrupted due to the critical staffing shortage. The exhaustion from constantly being in that environment does not stay at work—it comes home. I see it in my husband, and I feel it in our marriage, our children, and our overall family life. Compounding this, DOCCS policy limits how much vacation hours officers may bank, meaning that when time off is denied, they can lose earned benefits altogether. Officers and their families, like mine, bear the cost.

The dangers my husband faces at work, along with many other officers, are not all inherent to corrections—many are preventable. Basic safety measures, such as requiring every visitor to pass through body scanners or detection systems, are applied inconsistently, and visitors are even allowed to refuse them though still allowed to visit. Attempts to introduce contraband are rarely prosecuted, and incarcerated individuals are often protected from meaningful consequences for their poor choices. Accountability is how the real world functions, and correctional facilities cannot operate without it. When rules are ignored and enforcement is selective, danger becomes policy. Every day I wonder what will be overlooked next—and whether the cost will be my husband's safety or someone else's life.

This job demands constant awareness, quick judgment, and emotional control—yet officers are routinely asked to perform it while fatigued, often covering two or even three posts at once due to chronic understaffing. When 12-hour shifts are combined with mandatory overtime, fatigue stops being an exception; it becomes the baseline. I watch him leave for work already tired – physically and mentally, and I live with the fear of what exhaustion could cost him; what that exhaustion could cost my family.

The State's failure to keep the correctional academy operating at a pace that matches attrition has pushed this system to a critical breaking point. Officers are leaving faster than new ones can be trained and assigned, and I understand why. Few people want to go into or stay in a career where they are overworked, endangered by policy failures, assaulted with little to no consequences for their attacker and blamed for circumstances that are often beyond their control. Every resignation increases the burden on those who remain, forcing more overtime, more exhaustion, and more time away from families like mine. I see this strain not just in my own home, but in the lives of our friends as well—marriages stressed, children disappointed, families constantly adjusting to absences they never chose. This has become a self-perpetuating crisis, and the consequences are not abstract. They are lived every day -- in our homes, marriages and in **in the constant strain placed on our families**. Families, like mine, are paying the price for the State's conscious decision to ignore a crisis it created and fully understands. The warning signs have been clear, the harm is ongoing, and the refusal to act is intentional. This is deliberate abandonment by the Governor, State policymakers, and NYSDOCCS of the hardworking men and women who continue to do their part.

The State policymakers who create these policies do not do this job, nor would they ever work the schedule or live the life they are forcing these hardworking men and women to endure. They do not face 12-hour shifts, covering multiple posts at once, or walk into a facility knowing that exhaustion, understaffing, possible assault or injury and preventable risks await them. Even when officers speak up, sharing their experience and expertise about what is safe and what is not, their warnings are ignored. Yet officers are still expected to maintain safety under conditions that are unsafe by design. This is not oversight. This is **reckless disregard**—for the people who literally put their lives on the line, and for the families who live in constant fear for them.

I am demanding real, meaningful changes **before another large scale tragedy occurs or someone is seriously injured or killed**. Officers should never have to bear all the risk while accountability, safety, and staffing solutions are ignored or delayed. Waiting for a tragedy to take place before acting is unacceptable.

Correctional officers and their families are **not expendable**. We are the backbone of this system, and our lives—and our homes—are on the line every day. Relying on exhaustion, denying earned time off, tolerating preventable dangers, and ignoring staffing shortages is not just unsustainable—it is unsafe. Enough is enough.