

***Testimony of Wynn Timer Testamark, Director
Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections
Committee on Budget, Appropriations & Finance
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Good afternoon, Chairwoman Donna Frett-Gregory, distinguished Members of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations & Finance, other distinguished Members of the 35th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, and our listening and viewing audience.

I am Wynn Timer Testamark, Director of the Bureau of Corrections (“Bureau” or “BOC”). On behalf of the dedicated men and women of the Bureau, thank you for the opportunity to provide an overview of Governor Albert Bryan, Jr.’s Proposed 2024 Fiscal Year Budget for the Bureau of Corrections. I will also give a summary of some of the Bureau’s accomplishments over the past fiscal year. Joining me are members of the Bureau’s management team who can respond to inquiries that fall within their areas of responsibility.

But before we begin, allow me to express my deepest condolences, on behalf of the Bureau of Corrections, for the loss of a fellow member of the Virgin Islands law enforcement community, V.I. Police Detective Delbert I. Phipps, Jr. Our prayers are with his family and with our brothers and sisters in the Virgin Islands Police Department during this very difficult time. When any member of the law enforcement community falls in the line of duty, all of us grieve.

A critical part of what we do as an agency is to protect our Virgin Islands community by providing proper care and supervision of all offenders under our jurisdiction while assisting, as appropriate, their re-entry into society. The Bureau promotes public safety by providing sustainable, modern, and evidence-based correctional services which maximize rehabilitation and reduce recidivism.

Governor Bryan's Proposed 2024 Fiscal Year Budget invests in both security and reentry. It gives the Bureau the resources it needs to operate and maintain secure facilities while at the same time recognizing that 90% of persons in our prison and jail will eventually return to our community. Our challenge as an agency – and as a community – is to encourage incarcerated persons to use the time they spend in BOC custody wisely to make meaningful changes in their lives.

And that's what makes corrections in the Virgin Islands somewhat different from corrections in many other places. We are a small, close-knit community. For the most part, the people in our prison and jail are not strangers. They are our neighbors, our classmates, our friends, our brothers, our sons and daughters. At the direction of Governor Bryan, the Bureau has increased its focus on preparing those in its custody with improved life and work skills and better education so they can support their families when they return to our communities.

Make no mistake. Not everyone in BOC custody can be rehabilitated. Some will never be released because of the nature of their offenses. But for the 90% who eventually will be released who are willing to change, our goal at the Bureau is to give them an opportunity to recognize their mistakes, embrace change, and transform their lives.

Inside the Numbers

Turning to the figures in the Bureau's 2024 Fiscal Year Budget, the Governor has recommended a General Fund appropriation of \$37.4 million, an increase of less than 1% over last fiscal year. General fund appropriations are projected to increase by \$237,606 or 0.64% from FY 2023.

Last fiscal year was a windfall year for the Bureau for federal grant funding. The Bureau spent nearly \$1 million in federal grants in FY 2023, some of which were awarded in previous fiscal years.

But that level of federal grant funding is not available to the Bureau every year. Governor Bryan's proposed 2024 Fiscal Year Budget estimates that roughly \$345,000 of federal grants will be used by the Bureau this year. But thanks to our diligence in past years – when we found 8 years' worth of federal grants sitting unused – the Bureau has identified and is in the process of drawing down over \$3.8 million in grants that have already been earmarked for various projects over the past 4 fiscal years.

As always, personnel costs represent the biggest share of the Bureau's budget. The Bureau's projected payroll for the upcoming fiscal year is \$15.3 million or approximately 40% of its overall budget. Fringe benefits for its employees are estimated at \$6.8 million, or 18% of our budget. For the 2024 Fiscal Year, employee payroll and fringe benefits account for roughly 58% of the Bureau's budget. That percentage of personnel and fringe benefit has held relatively steady over the past 3 fiscal years.

Personnel Costs & Staff Initiatives

Let's drill down on those personnel numbers for a moment. For the 2024 fiscal year, the Bureau has 260 budgeted positions, 174 of which are filled, and 86 vacant. Of the 174 filled positions, roughly 73% are classified. The vacant positions are funded at 50% of general fund appropriations.

The 86 vacant positions include funding for a physician, 10 registered nurses, 7 licensed practical nurses, 2 dental hygienists, and 6 mental health professionals including a forensic psychiatrist, a psychologist, a mental health professional, and a social worker. These mental

health vacancies, which the Bureau has been diligent in trying to fill – reflect the fact that the Bureau is now one of the largest providers of mental health services in the Virgin Islands. Today, roughly 40% of all inmates at Bureau facilities receive some form of mental health treatment.

Supporting Our Corrections officers & Supervisors

The vacant positions also include funding for an additional 18 corrections officers, 5 sergeants, and 3 lieutenants. Our consent decrees require that we maintain these corrections officer vacancies based on staffing plans approved by the Court. Two weeks ago, the Bureau offered promotional exams for corrections officers for the first time in 4 years.

Corrections officers and supervisors make up approximately 53% of the Bureau's overall staff. They are some of our hardest working employees. Staffing challenges and shortfalls often require them to work overtime. As of July 31, corrections officer overtime for Fiscal Year 2023 totaled approximately \$4 million, which is 17% less than overtime totals for the same time in Fiscal Year 2022.

Our officers have been working 12-hour shifts – 60-hour weeks – since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began and have sacrificed much over the past 3 ½ years to ensure that the Bureau fulfills its obligation to provide essential services to those in its custody. Corrections officers are the foundation of what we do.

They do the grueling, difficult work needed to keep the public and inmates safe. Because they work out of public view, their work is often overlooked. But consider what it takes to safely secure and supervise inmates from all walks of life, some homeless, some with serious mental illnesses, others who are habitual offenders, and some who have never been willing to follow society's rules. Our community owes these unsung heroes an enormous debt of gratitude. They

are richly deserving of our highest of praise, and we salute them for the work they do behind the scenes every day.

Madam Chairwoman, as the former director of operations for the Department of Justice, you know just how difficult it is to recruit and retain qualified staff for the Bureau. Several times over the past year, we were confident that we had finally filled a position, only to have the applicant withdraw at the last minute. Corrections officer recruitment and retention are among the top 3 challenges facing correctional agencies nationwide.

So, to address the issue of corrections officer recruitment and retention, we've undertaken several initiatives over the past two fiscal years. First, and perhaps most importantly, we've paid our corrections officers what they're owed. Thanks to Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., in February 2022, the Bureau implemented the first across-the-board salary increases for corrections officers in more than 10 years. Corrections officers received a 43% raise on average – some as much as 73% – thanks to the Governor's action. All salary increases, retroactive pay, and uniform allowances have been paid. The Bureau is current on its financial obligations to corrections officers and supervisors.

Under Governor Bryan's leadership, the Bureau also entered into a new collective bargaining agreement ("CBA") with corrections officers on September 30, 2022, the first new CBA in 8 years. The new agreement addressed many of the labor issues that plagued the Bureau in the past. Based on the language in the new CBA, the Bureau promptly paid retroactive holiday pay to all corrections officers going back to October 1, 2020.

We also hired a payroll specialist to resolve the payroll issue surrounding calculation of corrections officer overtime pay. That issue has been fixed, and we've heard no complaints or grievances about the proper calculation of overtime pay, since we beefed up our payroll staff.

To supplement corrections officer staffing and to help ease their workload, the Bureau also created the position of correctional tech. Correctional techs are unsworn civilians who perform auxiliary, non-security tasks in our facilities that do not require inmate contact – such as monitoring cameras, answering phones, or operating an Xray machine. Corrections techs do not compete with corrections officers. Rather, they are a force multiplier: they free up officers to perform those duties that only sworn staff can do. We have one corrections tech on St. Thomas and 2 on St. Croix. Three (3) more corrections techs are expected to begin work in St. Thomas next week, and we have budgeted for 8 correctional tech positions for the 2024 Fiscal Year.

The Bureau has paid its civilian staff as well. All salary increases for the USW Supervisor and SIU Masters unions have been paid, as well as general scale increases for classified, nonunion employees.

At the Bureau of Corrections, our staff is our greatest asset. Providing them with the tools, resources, and training they need to carry out their job responsibilities safely is our number one priority. We have invested heavily in our people – by paying our staff what they are owed and by training them to do the difficult work asked of them.

In addition to the initiatives mentioned above, here are some of the things that the Bureau has done over the last fiscal year to train, motivate, and reward with its staff:

- **Completed Reorganization of Nursing Division** – In February 2023, the Bureau completed the reorganization of its nursing division. Doing so will raise nursing salaries across the board and place our nurses on a wage scale that will give them not only pay equity, but also regular salary increases. Some of our nurses have not gotten a raise in over 10 years!! The Bureau has begun the process of implementing the

salary raises for its correctional nurses. Getting our nurses on a pay scale that gives them regular salary increases was a major milestone for the Bureau.

- **Increased Training & Opportunities for Career Development** – The last fiscal year was a banner year for training at the Bureau. We trained more staff and provided more off-island training opportunities than ever before in the history of the Bureau. We increased spending on training and equipment by more than 500% compared to Fiscal Year 2021. One hundred percent (100%) of our civilian staff and 85% of our sworn staff completed all required training. That level of overall training participation has never been achieved before at the Bureau. Equally important, we’ve developed our training curriculum and updated our training policy to ensure a systematic approach to keeping our staff up to date on evolving practices in the correctional field. Providing training opportunities for our staff not only gives them the tools to work smarter and more efficiently but it also reduces the risks to the Bureau. Below are some examples of the training offered by the Bureau since 2022:
 - a) Pre-service training for all new Bureau employees, and in-service refresher training for all sworn officers & civilian staff in over 40 topics;
 - b) Counterterrorism First Responder Training in New Mexico;
 - c) Classifications Training in Fort Lauderdale, FL by the Broward County Sheriff’s Office;
 - d) K-9 Handler Training (5 weeks) in Troy, Missouri with the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department as part the establishment of a BOC K-9 Unit;
 - e) National Commission and Correctional Health Care (“NCCCHC”) Spring Conference in Atlanta, Georgia;

- f) NCCHC Mental Health Care Conference in Denver, Colorado ;
 - g) Firearms certification training for all sworn staff;
 - h) Key Control Officer Training in Miami, Florida with the Miami-Dade County Corrections & Rehabilitation Department;
 - i) Baton and OC Spray certification training;
 - j) National Jail Leadership Command Academy training in Huntsville, Texas;
 - k) First Aid, CPR, and AED Training of all security and medical staff;
 - l) Fire Life Safety training provided by the V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Service;
 - m) Coalition of Adult Basic Education Conference in Seattle, Washington;
 - n) American Jail Association Recruitment and Retention Summit for Jail Professionals in Columbus, Ohio;
 - o) American Correctional Association Winter Conference in Orlando, Florida;
and
 - p) GLOCK armorers training in Smyrna, Georgia.
- **New Equipment** – The Bureau also has invested in its corrections officers by giving them new equipment and resources to do their difficult work, including:
 - a) new badges and uniforms;
 - b) new radios;
 - c) new flashlights, restraints, batons, and vests
 - d) All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) to patrol the perimeter at John A. Bell;
 - e) Vans, trucks, and new correctional vehicles to replace those that had served their useful life;

f) special needs vans and equipment to help with geriatric and disabled inmates.

- **Staff Wellness** – Because of the stressful nature of our work, staff wellness is a major priority for the Bureau. In April we conducted emotional and mental resiliency training for all staff with the assistance of the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). We also encourage staff to cope with job-related stress by taking advantage of opportunities for counseling and healing afforded by the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

These significant personnel and training initiatives over the last fiscal year didn't happen by accident. They are part of a comprehensive 5-year strategic plan. One of the major objectives in our 5-year plan is “engaging and valuing our employees.”¹ To measure progress, we rely on key performance indicators (KPIs). Our KPIs for the period ending April 2023 show

¹ Bureau of Corrections, *Strategic Plan 2025: Transforming Lives for a Safer Virgin Islands* (Nov. 2020).

steady upward improvement over the previous fiscal year. Of 14 key performance indicators, the Bureau is ahead of its target in 11.

We are working on making improvements in our three underperforming categories which are

- percentages of vacancies filled;
- percent of inmates participating in re-entry services, and
- percent of inmates and detainees participating in educational or vocational programs.

The Bureau is hopeful that with the start of the inmate tablet program, which began at John A. Bell last month, the percentage of inmates and detainees participating in educational and vocational programs will increase significantly.

Vendor Payments and Consent Decree Update

Vendor payments account for the most significant slice of the Bureau's FY 2024 budget after payroll and fringe benefits – \$14.5 million or 39% of the Bureau's overall budget. These are the expenses the Bureau incurs to house inmates on the mainland, operate its local facilities, and carry out its mission objectives. Since my tenure began, the Bureau has reduced accounts payables owed to vendors by roughly 90%. Purchase orders for goods or services are secured in advance and requests for payments for authorized vendors are promptly sent to the Department of Finance.

The largest portion of vendor payments is used to house and feed off-island prisoners. That amount is budgeted at \$7.9 million in FY 2024, which is roughly 55% of all vendor

payments, and 21% of the Bureau's total budget. This amount does not include health care costs for off-island inmates, which will add to the overall cost.

Inmates in BOC Custody

As of July 15, 2023, the Bureau houses 236 inmates locally – 76 at CJC and 160 at John A. Bell. Of the inmates housed locally, 227 are male, and 9 are female. In addition, the Bureau houses 148 inmates at mainland facilities: 83 at CoreCivic in Florida, 39 at three prisons in Virginia, and 26 in Mississippi.

Earlier this year, I traveled with members of the Bureau's medical, mental health, and security staff, to visit our inmates in Virginia to ensure that they were properly treated and to respond to their concerns. We met with prison officials, reviewed inmate files to verify that they were accurate and up to date and – importantly – held one-on-one discussions with each inmate willing to meet with us to discuss any issues related to their confinement at these agencies. We intend to schedule a visit to our inmates in Florida and Mississippi by the end of this fiscal year.

All 384 prisoners in Bureau custody – including those housed off-island – must be fed, housed, transported, and cared for at the Bureau's expense. It is critical, therefore, that the Bureau find ways to drive down those costs. Bear in mind that it costs more to incarcerate a pre-trial detainee in the Virgin Islands than it does to incarcerate a sentenced inmate on the mainland.

That means that the longer pre-trial detainees remain in BOC custody, the higher the cost to the Bureau. Based on current statistics, the average length of stay in BOC custody for pre-trial detainees, who are either denied bail or unable to post a bond, is roughly 13 months. Naturally, the more serious the offense, the longer the time in pre-trial custody. Until the Legislature approves new correctional facilities that lower local operating costs, the disparity between housing pre-trial detainees locally and housing sentenced inmates off-island will continue.

Consent Decree Matters

Our 2024 Fiscal Year budget also includes \$800,000 for fees to monitors and experts who the Bureau is legally mandated to pay as long as the consent decrees remain in place. The Bureau is a party to 2 separate consent decrees: a consent decree covering conditions of confinement at John A. Bell Adult Correctional Facility (“John A. Bell” or “JABACF”) on St. Croix and a consent decree covering the Alexander A. Farrelly Criminal Justice Complex (“CJC”) on St. Thomas. By providing funding to fill corrections officer vacancies, expanding mental health and medical care, investing in infrastructure upgrades, and hiring the critical staff needed to execute the Bureau’s goals and objectives, the Bryan Roach Administration has made an unprecedented commitment to moving the Territory out of these long standing and costly consent decrees.

a. **St. Croix Consent Decree Case**

Thanks to the tremendous efforts of the men and women of the Bureau and our legal and compliance teams, our hearing in the John A. Bell consent decree case in January 2023 was extremely positive and promising. Both the monitors and the United States Department of Justice praised the Bureau for the work done to move the Virgin Islands forward. In fact, the United States characterized the Bureau’s work as “excellent” and commended the Bureau for its transparency and cooperation.

As a result, none of the 123 provisions of the Settlement Agreement (a/k/a “consent decree”) are in the red; all have achieved varying levels of compliance. These 123 provisions span the range of prison operations and include: general security; contraband; use of force; prisoner supervision; incident reporting; security staffing; medical, mental, and dental health;

fire, life, and environmental safety; classifications; and prisoner housing. This is a solid achievement for the Bureau.

The Court held a status update on the St. Croix consent decree on July 21st. At that hearing we demonstrated to the Court the progress we've made over the last six months in completing court-ordered tasks that move our compliance measures forward.

Part of the reason for our progress and our optimism is the decision we made last year to retain experienced outside legal counsel with a nationwide track record of resolving complex prison litigation cases. We made that decision in collaboration with the Attorney General's Office, and it is now bearing fruit. Thanks to the guidance of outside counsel, and with the assistance of the Attorney General, we now have a plan and a pathway for moving out from under both consent decrees.

b. **St. Thomas Consent Decree Case**

After remaining relatively dormant for 2 years, the St. Thomas consent decree case is now moving into gear. In March the Court appointed 3 additional subject matter experts, to bring the total number of experts to 5. Our Proposed 2024 Fiscal Year budget allocates \$100,000 for each expert. All five court-appointed experts as well as the ACLU, the attorneys for the inmates, were in St. Thomas from July 18 to 26 conducting an CJC. It's way too soon to know what the findings of the experts will be; they don't have to submit their reports to the Court until October. But the Bureau is cautiously optimistic that these experts will recognize the work the Bureau has done over the past few years and will collaborate with the Bureau and its legal team to chart a path out from under this 29-year-old consent decree case.

But there's an important point to be made here. The consent decree cases in St. Croix and St. Thomas are not only brought against the Bureau of Corrections. They were also brought

against the Government of the Virgin Islands as a whole. The Virgin Islands Government was made a party because the plaintiffs understood that some of the structural issues affecting the Bureau cannot be solved by the Bureau alone. For example, the Bureau has no control over the length of time pretrial detainees remain in its custody awaiting trial. Nor does it control the length of time severely mentally ill detainees are held in its facilities while waiting to be placed in a treatment center on the mainland. As Director, I have no statutory authority to release anyone from BOC custody.

Nevertheless, the Bureau has been proactive and has worked with the judicial branch, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Office of the Territorial Public Defender to address these larger issues of Territory-wide concern. The Bureau will confront those challenges that are within its power to resolve. And we will look favorably on appropriate legislation from this body that tackles the larger structural issues confronting the Bureau like treatment for the mentally ill, alternatives to pretrial detention, speedy trial legislation, and funding for modern correctional facilities.

In the long run, the resolution of these long-standing consent decrees will depend on a united effort across various executive agencies in the Government of the Virgin Islands, not on BOC alone. And it will demand collaboration between all three branches of government.

Grant Funding

Since my tenure began, the Bureau has been vigilant in ensuring that none of the federal grants awarded to it have been returned unused. Over the last 4 years, we've identified and encumbered close to \$4 million in grant funds to offset agencies expenses such as offender programming, medical technology services, and infrastructure upgrades. Every dollar in grant funds the Bureau unlocks is one dollar less from the General Fund. As mentioned earlier, the

Bureau was able to use \$971,651 in federal grants in the 2023 Fiscal Year for a variety of projects. Under my leadership, we will continue to focus on maximizing grant funds to defray the cost of operations.

The Bureau has two federal grants that are set to expire by the end of calendar year 2023. Both grants have been encumbered, and planning for how those funds will be used is well under way. The 2 expiring grants are:

- Adult Education and Family Literacy Act Grant (expires 12/31/2023) – to create local partnerships that will provide adult education and literacy activities, including Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and English Language Acquisition (ELA). The total grant amount was \$88,437, half of which has already been used, with the remaining half to be rolled over into Year 2; and
- Residential Substance Abuse Treatment (“RSAT”) Grant 18 (expires 9/30/2023), in the amount of \$99,894.60 – the Bureau has contracted with UVI CELL to provide Thinking 4 a Change and RESET classes used in reentry services. This contract gives the Bureau the opportunity to provide comprehensive substance abuse and reentry counseling to inmates; and

One of the more far reaching of those was a 2022 TAP Grant in the amount of \$499,550.00 that was used to fund our new inmate tablet program.

Accomplishments and Initiatives During Last Fiscal Year

Please allow me to share a few of our significant achievements with you since I came before you last year.

Capital Projects and Infrastructure Upgrades

The Bureau made significant infrastructure upgrades over the past several fiscal years and has completed temporary hurricane repairs to existing facilities. Madam Chairwoman, when I first came before this Committee in the summer of 2019, the housing units at John A. Bell had no air conditioning, the roof leaked in numerous places, the perimeter fencing had been knocked down by the storms, and the facility lacked reliable backup power. No more!

All housing units at John A. Bell are now air conditioned; we made temporary repairs to the roof to stop the leaking and eliminate the presence of mold. We installed industrial-sized ice machines to make sure the inmates have adequate drinking water, and we finished renovation of the kitchen, a project that had been stalled since the hurricanes of 2017. And we installed a 900 kw generator to power the entire facility – not just small parts of it – in the event of a storm. We cleared the gut, rebuilt the perimeter fence, and installed on-site fuel tanks to prepare for future storms.

Other upgrades and projects include the following:

John A. Bell Adult Correctional Facility Upgrades

- Acquired a 60-bed, prefabricated modular jail unit to increase bed capacity at John A. Bell. The modular unit is already on island, and we are in the process of executing a contract for the construction of the concrete slab that will be the foundation.
- Created a dedicated mental health unit for the seriously mentally ill in BOC custody; the official ribbon cutting for this unit was last Monday;

- Installation of an electronic Keywatcher[®] System at both John A. Bell and CJC for control and management of critical facility keys;
- Relocation and modernization of the central control room to allow staff to monitor the newly installed cameras using high-definition television displays;
- Repaved the parking lot and interior access roads;
- Installed the LiveView[®] Remote Surveillance Camera system to monitor perimeter security at John A. Bell;
- Construction of a secure evidence room to safely store contraband and other items for later use in administrative or criminal proceedings; and
- Installed solar panels for perimeter lighting.

CJC and St. Thomas District Upgrades

- Resurfacing and repainting of the basketball court;
- Installation of network and telephone system upgrades;
- New computers and copiers for staff;
- New chairs for staff;
- Moved to a new office space on St. Thomas.

By the end of this fiscal year the Bureau will begin a pilot program for the use of body worn cameras in its facilities. Body worn cameras in correctional facilities have been shown to increase accountability and reduce prisoner complaints. Training on the body worn cameras has already been completed. We anticipate this pilot program to be fully functional at John A. Bell later this month and at CJC in St. Thomas by the end of the calendar year.

Designing and Implementing an Effective Reentry Program

Although deterrence and punishment remain key goals at the Bureau, at Governor Bryan's direction, the Bureau is now placing greater emphasis on reentry. When reentry succeeds, it promotes public safety, reduces recidivism,² and saves taxpayer dollars. When it fails, the costs are high: more crime, more victims, and more money spent returning offenders to prison. For those inmates who are truly willing to change the trajectory of their lives, we have a duty to give them a reasonable opportunity to do so.

Over the past fiscal year, the Bureau has been focused on preparing inmates with improved work skills and better academic training so they can support their families when they return to their communities. Here are some of the initiatives the Bureau has undertaken in this area:

- The Bureau's Transforming Lives Academy held graduation ceremonies last month, including at Government House on St. Thomas.
 - On St. Croix:
 - 3 inmates received their high school diplomas;
 - 4 inmates received Penn Foster vocational certificates in various areas including automatic HVAC and physical therapy;
 - 14 inmates received certificates in anger management;
 - 4 inmates received certificates in NCCER Construction Safety; and
 - 4 inmates received recognition for completing the NCCER construction class.
 - On St. Thomas:
 - 4 inmates received their high school diplomas; and

² In 2013, the Bureau began a study of 136 prisoners who were released from its custody on St. Thomas and St. Croix. Our study found that 21% of these former inmates were arrested within 3 years. And of that amount, 55% of the re-arrests were for violent crimes, ranging from sexual assault to murder. A 2018 study of recidivism patterns across 30 states over nine (9) years found that almost 68% of prisoners were re-arrested within three (3) years of release, and 83% were re-arrested within nine (9) years. Mariel Alper and Matthew R. DuRose, *2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-year Follow-up Period*, U.S. Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (May 2018) (<https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/18upr9yfup0514.pdf>).

- 7 inmates received Penn Foster vocational certificates in several areas including automotive repair, medical billing and coding, and accounting.
- 11 inmates received certificates for completing a 12-week parenting program sponsored by the Department of Justice – Visitation and Access Division.
- At our graduation ceremonies on St. Croix, one inmate, who could barely speak English 10 years ago, was voted the most outstanding returning citizen over the last 5 years. Because of his commitment to transforming his own life, he was later granted parole by the Parole Board.
- The Bureau launched its Inmate Tablet Program last month at John A. Bell. Plans are now underway to bring inmate tablets to CJC on St. Thomas by the end of the calendar year. The Nucleous[®] inmate tablets will be used for re-entry, e-learning, and legal research. Inmates can now use them to get high school diplomas, take courses, and earn their GEDs or vocational certificates. This program was completely funded by a \$499,500 TAP Grant from the federal government.
- We have markedly increased the budget for reentry programs, from \$10,000 in FY 2019 to \$100,000 in FY 2023.
- When I first came on board, the Bureau had only a few vocational offerings in traditional areas like carpentry or plumbing, and our educational program was limited basically to getting a GED. Today the Bureau offers learning in 16 different programs, from equestrian therapy, to the culinary arts, anger management, basic computer literacy, and a host of programming from the Penn Foster vocational certificate program.
- We've hired 4 new case managers – we now have five times more than we had in 2019 – to develop a reentry roadmap for every inmate, that focuses from day one on preparing them for life after incarceration.
- We've developed a reentry manual that spells out in detail how the Bureau's reentry services will be tailored to meet the needs of inmates. Among other things, it mandates that upon intake, every inmate will be given an individualized reentry plan customized to his risk of recidivism and his educational and vocational needs.
- We applied for and were awarded \$1.3 million in grants to fund reentry programs over the last 2 fiscal years.
- We've created a community-based reentry council that meets every month to develop strategies to keep recently released inmates from returning to prison.

- We've begun the Equine Therapy Program at John A. Bell that teaches select inmates to care for and train horses and become certified as part of the Elite Program. Currently 9 inmates are enrolled in this program. The official ribbon cutting ceremony for the Equine program was last Monday.
- We've increased our vocational offerings as part of the Penn Foster Vocational Program; we've expanded the number of computers available to inmates to study online.

I invite members from this body to arrange a tour of the facility to see first hand how we've improved both our reentry offerings and the infrastructure at John A. Bell.

Conclusion

Madame Chairwoman, three weeks ago I received a letter from an inmate at John A. Bell. That in itself is not unusual. As Director, I get letters from inmates all the time, most of them complaining about the inmate's sentence, or their timesheet, or being required to serve their sentence at a mainland facility.

But this letter was different.

This was a letter from an inmate serving a lengthy sentence thanking me for implementing the Equine Therapy program at John A. Bell. I was taken completely by surprise.

Here's some of what the letter said:

Since my incarceration, this is the first program that I am participating in that has given me great benefits and joy. It has done well for me. . . .

My overall mental state has improved. No more anxiety attacks.

Thank God I am off my medication, and I feel much better than I have in the past.

I feel more energized and enthusiastic every day, which has not been the case for a long time.

I feel motivated to do more and feel like doing more with my life.

I enjoy the classes and consider them to be one of the best programs offered for the inmates. I am proud of myself.

Director Testamark, I really appreciate the fact that you brought this program for the inmates. I noticed a lot of attitude changes in some of my fellow inmates while we enjoy working with the horses. I feel very positive and enthusiastic that this program is helpful in managing stress and other difficulties due to being incarcerated.

I've never received an inmate letter quite like that. It makes the struggles, setbacks, and obstacles we encountered on the way to opening the Equine Therapy Program all worthwhile. It tells me that the Bureau's investment in vocational, educational, and reentry programs is slowly paying dividends in the lives of our inmates.

It also tells me that we're well on our way as an agency to achieving our mission objectives – to protect the public by providing proper care and supervision to offenders in secure prisons and jails while aiding as appropriate their rehabilitation and eventual reentry into our community.

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for the opportunity to give an overview of our Proposed Fiscal Year 2024 budget and to share the progress that we are making at the Bureau of Corrections. My team and I stand ready to answer your questions.