



**New York State Correctional Officers
& Police Benevolent Association, Inc.**
"Keeping New York Safe"

Recruitment, Retention of Staff Continue to Plague DOCCS

***Eight Year Veteran of Five Points Correctional Facility Resignation Letter
Highlights Several Issues***

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Albany, NY – As correctional and law enforcement agencies across the country struggle to recruit and retain officers, a resignation letter sent by an eight year veteran corrections officer at Five Points Correctional Facility was made public and highlights what she detailed as a number of issues that led to her resignation and what she feels will lead to a number of other staff resigning from many issues that originated from the HALT Act legislation in April of 2022.

In her resignation letter, which was dated July 13, and addressed to the superintendent of the facility, Jessica Coughlin details the mental, physical and emotional toll working in a prison in this era of weakened disciplinary systems and low staffing levels that force many officers into mandatory overtime on top of their regular 40 hour workweek. The officer speaks about new programs that resulted from the HALT Act that rewards bad inmate behavior and inmates who are well aware the mockery of a disciplinary system that exists now when staff are attacked by inmates. The officer also makes mention of the rise in alcohol and substance abuse, suicide attempts, domestic violence and divorce among officers as a result of the immense pressure and stress they are currently under. **(resignation letter attached)**

In 2022, assaults of staff rose 31 percent from the previous year after HALT was implemented on April 1, 2022. As staffing issues mounted and assaults skyrocketed, the department began to follow a mounting trend nationwide of officers retiring early or resigning their position. In many correctional agencies across the country, the annual attrition rate has risen to between 20 and 30 percent, with some agencies reaching the 50 percent level. Departments simply can't recruit and train new officers to replace those leaving in a timely manner, leaving many departments to struggle with increased violence, staffing shortages, burnout and low morale that former Officer Coughlin described in her resignation letter. The attrition rate at DOCCS exceeds 100 officers in one month with the combination of retirements and resignations. In Five Points alone, over 100 officers resigned in a 18 month period. Recruitment classes, which take eight weeks to train, are nearly half that number in size, causing a severe staffing shortage and mandatory overtime for a majority of officers in the 44 prisons across the state.

The staff shortages have also drawn the attention of State Senators and Assemblyman who have long supported the hard work of the men and women of NYSCOPBA and now are calling on their colleagues to immediately address the on-going violence and amend the HALT Act.

“The policies and so-called reforms passed by Albany Democrats continue to create a dangerous and unstable environment within our state’s correctional facilities. Sadly, it is no surprise the HALT Act is leading to retention and recruitment problems. Since the implementation of HALT, inmate attacks on Corrections Officers and inmate attacks on other inmates have increased dramatically. We must have the backs of the men and women who protect our communities-whether it is inside or outside our prison walls. I will continue to support a full repeal of the HALT ACT and fight to change the laws that do nothing to hold criminals accountable or ensure public safety.” – stated Senator Pam Helming.

Assemblyman Phil Palmesano said - “The words of Jessica Coughlin speak to the unfortunate truth of the increased danger, violence, hardships and challenges that every one of our brave and dedicated correctional officers face each and every day inside our correctional facilities. Their job was very dangerous before HALT was passed and implemented. The danger and violence they face has compounded exponentially since the implementation of HALT.

The continued embrace of HALT by the governor and my Democrat colleagues in the Assembly and Senate, coupled with their refusal to provide the necessary staffing, tools and resources needed to assist and protect our correctional officers, has created a dangerous, ‘powder-keg’ environment inside our prisons. Not only have correctional officers been severely restricted in the use of this important safety tool to separate the most violent and dangerous inmates from the rest of the inmate population, but they continue to be burnt out with mandated overtime and inadequate staffing levels.

It is long past due for the governor and my Democrat colleagues in the legislature to stop rewarding violence and start protecting staff inside our correctional facilities. Equally as important, it is long past due for the governor and my Democrat colleagues to start putting the interests, well-being and safety of our correctional officers over the interests of dangerous and violent murderers, cop killers and child rapists.”

As we approach the 52nd anniversary of the end of the Attica Riots on September 13, 1971 and the 11 employees who died in the riots, many officers fear a repeat of that deadly riot as staffing reaches a breaking point in many facilities. Officers who are overworked and facilities that are understaffed, are vulnerable to the type of uprising that occurred on September 9, 1971.

“We want to thank Officer Coughlin, and our brothers and sisters that worked alongside us that had resigned or retired to put their families first over coddling convicts. Nobody is ever prepared to spend days and weeks without seeing their loved ones, especially while watching inmates spend time with theirs. They will always be a part of our family and we wish them all the best. The members of the legislature that supported the HALT Act failed to consult with any officer or sergeant, who are the front line employees, about how this act could affect day to day operations

inside New York State prisons, specifically in our region. Instead, they passed a bill that only empowered the convicted felons, with no regard to the safety of wellbeing of anyone working or living inside the walls and fences. Clearly the legislature thinks they know how to run the Department of Corrections better than DOCCS itself. At this point, everyone walking into these prisons are wondering if they are going to make it home to their families. What's even worse is that they all feel that certain members of the legislature, specifically the ones who supported HALT, don't care if they get killed serving the Citizens of New York. Something has to change, not next year, now. Our members deserve their attention and support, give them the resources to do their jobs, and start protecting us. We have families too, and the lack of dialogue regarding HALT screams certain members of the legislature couldn't care less." – stated Kenny Gold, NYSCOPBA Western Region Vice President.

7/13/2023

Dear Superintendent Lowerre,

Effective 7/28/2023, at the close of business, I, Jessica Coughlin, am resigning from my Correction Officer position. I can no longer work under the conditions created by NYSDOCCS. After 8 years serving this department, solely at Five Points Correctional, I have made the decision so many other officers recently have made to better themselves mentally, physically and emotionally.

NYSDOCCS has become a shell of what it was 8 years ago. The ones suffering are the officers who are forced to put their lives as well as their family and friends lives second to a thankless career. When I first took this job a huge perk was the time off. That perk has slowly disappeared. Being mandated to work on not one but both RDO's after already putting in a 40 hour work week is taking its toll on your already exhausted staff. This is NOT a solution to the staffing shortage and is clearly NOT sustainable. Something as simple as picking up your child after school, planning a birthday party or being with your friends and family for the holidays has almost become impossible. On our RDO's we should be watching our kids play by the pool, instead we are mandated to watch "gallery rec" on inmates who have assaulted and thrown urine/feces on staff.

Officers are being stuck to run a RRU program which rewards bad behavior. Due to this program and the almost depleted disciplinary system there is no incentive for inmates to follow the rules or listen to direction from staff. They are forced to act out more violently towards staff in order to be sent to SHU and get the benefits (ie. phones, static tablets, rec, etc.) offered through the RRU program. Countless times I've been told by inmates that they want to go to SHU and have asked what they need to do to get there. Assaults on staff have skyrocketed causing more holes to be filled by your already strained staff. The lasting effects of these assaults is a statistic nobody could ever maintain. I am witness to these effects every day. My husband comes home every day from our facility with his knee so swollen it can hardly bend, making it almost impossible to climb up the stairs to our living room. Why? He was violently assaulted trying to protect his officers after they told an inmate "no". I have a close friend who suffers so much shoulder pain he can only hold his newborn daughter for minutes at a time. Why? He was violently assaulted for trying to get an inmate off the phone. How many officers must be kicked, punched, choked, stabbed, just trying to gain compliance with simple orders before someone that sits safely behind a desk a hundred miles away finally wakes up and realizes this is all wrong.

The physical trauma endured is not the only abuse we suffer. We suffer mentally even more. The stress of “what could happen” is almost too much to take. Is it worth getting punched in the face to tell an inmate to sit down? Is it worth getting feces and urine thrown in your face because his commissary was late to be delivered? Gimmicks such as “Wellness Bingo” and employee appreciation days are not the answer to relieve this stress. Officers are turning to alcohol and substance abuse to get them through the fear and stress of “what could happen”. Suicide attempts, domestic violence, divorce, DWIs are all on the rise. These are even statistics that are being tracked yet nobody who can make a difference seems to care. The mother that stands next to her sons/daughters casket because the stress was too much for him/her, she cares.

The disciplinary system has almost become non-existent. Officers are told to write tickets and are promised the inmates will be held accountable for their actions through sanctions. Although tickets are continually thrown out, left to go untimely and unjust time cuts are given. If inmates are given sanctions they do not fit the offense. For example, an inmate who commits an offense involving a phone/tablet and never goes to the yard is given 30 days loss of rec. That is a slap in the face to the officer/s who have had to deal with that inmate and will have to continue to deal with him. The inmate population knows what a mockery the disciplinary system has become and they have zero trepidation in receiving a ticket. It's bad enough to be constantly harassed and called names by the inmate population but to be called names by supervisors for doing your job, writing tickets and trying to keep order in an environment that we are losing control over is disgusting. Like a good friend and former co-worker once said, It's like we're lion tamers at a circus. At one time we were able to tame the lions and keep them back with a stool and whip giving the illusion we had control. Now the department has thrown more lions in the cage and taken away the tools (whip/stool), yet are asking us to keep the same illusion of control.

If you were curious as to why morale is at an all time low and continuing to drop, there it is. If things do not change drastically and go back to the department I once was proud to be a part of 8 years ago, I fear we are going to lose control completely. It seems like just as you think the policies and procedures couldn't get any worse, the sticking couldn't get any worse, and morale couldn't get any worse NYSDOCCS looks its officers in the face and says, hold my beer. So many times we've heard “Well, that's what Albany wants” and “Albany says we have to do it that way”. What our facility needs is for someone to stand up to Albany and say, what you're asking of us jeopardizes the safety and security of this facility. We need someone to say, NO... I am NOT going to put my officers at risk. We need someone to have our backs rather than the backs of people who sit behind a desk in Albany. Unfortunately, I can not wait for the department to return to what it once was and just pray for the officers who still have to try and maintain control in an environment without consequence and common sense.

Respectfully submitted...for the last time,
Jessica Coughlin