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Testimony of Department of Corrections Secretary Edward Wall
Joint Committee on Finance
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Good afternoon Chairperson Darling, Chairperson Nygren, and members of the Joint Committee on Finance. I want to thank each of you for the invitation to come here and discuss the Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Corrections. With me today is Rollie Couey, the Department's Budget Director, Stacey Rolston, Administrator of Management Services and Melissa Roberts, Director of Legislative Affairs.

It is an honor to serve as the Secretary of the Department of Corrections and I am blessed to lead an incredibly dedicated and diverse workforce of over ten thousand employees who take the responsibilities of our mission of public safety very seriously.

In his biennial budget, Governor Walker has set a clear direction for corrections and criminal justice in Wisconsin -- one that enhances safety for citizens across the state and allows Corrections to continue to safely pursue the positive trend we are seeing in improving outcomes and reducing recidivism.

Over the current biennium, the number of adult inmates in our institutions has been relatively stable. What is dramatic is a change in the nature of those inmates. The current inmate is more likely to be older, more violent, more likely to have significant mental health issues, and more likely to be with us for a longer period of time. However, I am confident that with the tools the Governor has given us in this budget we can continue to work with our community criminal justice partners to further reduce repeat crime and lower the number of inmates returning to prison. By doing that, we can reduce the number of new crime victims while holding down costs. As the largest Cabinet level agency in the state, Corrections is one of the biggest consumers of GPR dollars. That responsibility is not lost on any of us and I want to assure you that the Department of Corrections plans to continue finding ways to save tax dollars while maximizing the funds we receive to their fullest extent.

We have seen somewhat of a stabilization in the prison population and our hope is that trend continues. We are projecting a conservative monthly increase of point zero two seven (.027%) in male inmates and a point three five seven (.357%) increase in female inmates. With this projected population increase in mind, the Governor's budget is basically a cost to continue request to maintain our operations in a safe manner.

One of the concerns that we always keep in mind is our aging prison population and the costs associated with that issue. We presently have nearly 1,000 inmates sixty years old or older. Going forward, I believe a key factor in reducing prison populations is our continued focus on reentry. That means continuing the ongoing emphasis to help offenders prepare themselves to be successful after release back into their communities -- and 97% of our population does get released.

This budget also includes an important initiative to change the way we use and staff our correctional institution towers. This idea has been discussed and studied since the mid-1990s and has been previously

recommended by the DOC to past Governors for consideration. This issue is being looked at nationwide and is really a question of modern technology and innovations related to prison design versus historical precedence. Across the country, as prisons were built in the 1800's to the late 1900's, towers were included in nearly every design. Today, prisons being constructed typically only include at most one or two towers for entry points, while the majority have no towers at all. Instead, the use of more reliable technology along with armed perimeter patrols has proven more effective and less costly.

The initiative to close towers was not entered into lightly and is one that administrations have considered for over 20 years. This is not a plan to eliminate or tear down towers, but instead keeps all DOC towers intact and staffed, except on third shift when inmates are fully secured in their housing units. In total, 60 DOC staff through both years of the biennium are directly affected by this change. We will be able to assign those staff to fill existing vacancies once the change is made later this year. We are confident that our staff, who run some of the safest and most secure prisons in the nation, will implement this plan without risk to the public or internal operations.

In the budget, the DOC is authorized to establish the framework for the Correctional Training & Standards Board, or CTSB. One of the goals of the CTSB is the continued development and professionalism of the Correctional Officer position. The CTSB will establish a training and standards certification level for Correctional Officers. The board will consist of representatives from the DOC, DHS, the state Technical Colleges and the public.

Under the Governor's budget, the DOC will be able to strengthen the tools we need to better identify an offender's risk to the public along with education, treatment and other programming needs. We also will be able to target the most successful programs at our most motivated offenders to improve outcomes. By focusing on these two things, I am confident that the Department, while working with local law enforcement and the courts, can not only hold down the recidivism rate, but also explore new safe ways to prevent some from coming into prison in the first place, thus holding down incarceration costs. The Governor's Budget continues full funding for Appropriation 112, otherwise known as the Becky Young Recidivism Reduction Funds, which was established in 2009 with bipartisan support.

Our June 2014 Recidivism After Release from Prison report shows a continued decline in recidivism rates since publication of the last report in 2012, with the exception of a slight uptick in the two-year follow-up recidivism rate. The latest report includes new data on recidivism rates broken down by race, release type, number of prior periods of confinement, length of prison stay, and recidivism offense and sentence types.

It should be noted that this past year, the Wisconsin DOC was recognized nationally by the Council of State Governments as one of eight states for the highest reduction of recidivism rates over a three year period. Additionally, after a highly competitive national process, Wisconsin was selected in the last two weeks by the USDOJ National Institute of Corrections as one of only three states to be part of the Evidence Based Decision Making Initiative designed to build a systems approach in implementing evidenced-based practices in order to reduce post-conviction reoffending and achieving safer communities.

As the Department continues to move forward implementing policy and practices that are grounded on evidence-based principles, it is important that we continue to measure the effect and impact of these changes and focus our resources on what works – and, when necessary, abandon those practices that do not prove effective.

Funding for new initiatives such as Hepatitis C and opioid addiction treatment are also included in the budget proposal. The cost of medical care for inmates continues to be a concern for the DOC budget and this new medication, while very expensive, has demonstrated it can have a dramatic impact on Hepatitis C

which can then avoid the need to spend millions of dollars long term to deal with the very worst effects of the disease, including organ transplant. As has been highlighted by Representative Nygren's HOPE Agenda, heroin use and addiction are a significant public health issue that is ravaging our state. We are certainly seeing its impact in our population of inmates and offenders. This budget includes funding for a trial program to use a medication to block the "high" of heroin while pairing the treatment with cognitive interventions to break the drug dependence. We are pleased to support the initiative and help lead the state's efforts to combat heroin and its devastating effects on our communities.

This budget also assures continued funding for GPS tracking of individuals convicted of serious sex offenses and those who violate domestic abuse or harassment restraining orders. The use of GPS tracking devices has proven to be a cost effective tool in helping to closely monitor different and high risk populations of offenders in the community.

In Governor Walker's proposed budget, the DOC retains the ability to fulfill its vitally important mission while remaining fiscally responsible. We share in the budget pain by tightening our belt – but also receive support for the important initiatives I have outlined for you today. This budget plan gives the DOC the tools it needs to both protect citizens *and* help offenders, whose success back in their communities is the key to cutting crime and the high cost of incarceration.

The 2015-2017 budget is the foundation of the Department's operations and will enable us to continue protecting Wisconsin citizens as we have since 1851. We will continue to deliver on our primary objectives to hold offenders accountable and give them the tools they need to be stable and productive citizens in the community.

Thank you for allowing me this time today to talk about our exceptional agency and I look forward to working with you and other members of the Legislature as the budget moves forward. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.