



January 12, 2017

The Honorable Tom Wolf, Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
225 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Dear Governor Wolf:

We are writing to urge you and the Department of Corrections to remove the State Correctional Institution in Mercer from the list of state prisons that may be closed in 2017. SCI Mercer is a keystone in the community in and around Mercer and its closing would be a devastating blow to the local economy, an increased burden for countywide law enforcement, and a potentially counterproductive step in improving the Commonwealth's criminal justice system.

The decline of the manufacturing industry in the 21st century has devastated small-town America. Nowhere is that damage more apparent than in the communities of Western Pennsylvania. Blue-collar areas like Mercer County are struggling to attract high-quality, family-sustaining employment. The county's unemployment rate stands at 5.5 percent—higher than the Commonwealth's 4.9 percent. The population of Mercer County has been bleeding away since the 1980s.

Time and time again, the interests of Washington and Harrisburg have been prioritized over the need to protect small towns and cities like Mercer, Hermitage, and Jamestown. We cannot allow the Commonwealth to turn a blind eye on the men and women who have built this nation on their backs. In 2016, the working class throughout the old manufacturing heart of this country sent a loud, clear message to the seats of power that they will not be taken for granted. The protection of SCI Mercer is an opportunity for you to let these proud citizens know that you have heard their call.

SCI Mercer employs around 400 local workers, meaning its closure would drive the county unemployment rate up nearly one full percent. The corresponding lost wages would reverberate throughout the area's economy as the displaced workers would be forced to restrict spending at other local enterprises, with the potential to remove up to \$52 million from circulation. We are grateful that we were recently able to secure a multimodal transportation grant to preserve 700 jobs in Farrell, but coupled with the recent announcements that Macy's and Sears will be closing their stores in Hermitage, that investment would be wiped out by the closing of SCI Mercer.

In an area where the median household income is below \$30,000 per year and where 9 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, SCI Mercer is a source of competitive wages, life-saving benefits, and honorable, dignified employment. The prison also provides employment to veterans of our U.S. armed forces who deserve better treatment than a foreclosure on their post-service careers.

The Secretary's announcement that all workers will be offered alternate employment within the Department is a hollow offer, as the nearest facility to Mercer is over an hour away. As you well know, there is limited public transportation infrastructure in Northwestern Pennsylvania, and the cost of maintaining an automobile that must make a two-hour roundtrip commute each day would significantly drive down the benefits of continued employment within the Department.

In fact, steep costs are a broader issue for both the Commonwealth and Mercer County if SCI Mercer were closed. SCI Mercer has an average daily cost per inmate of \$107—the lowest of the five prisons on the list of potential closures. The Commonwealth will incur additional costs to shuttle inmates between their new facility and the Mercer County Courthouse for arraignments, hearings, and trials. Further, the Mercer County Jail was constructed within a half-mile of SCI Mercer with the effect of reducing costs for both the state and the county. The state Board of Probation and Parole is currently able to take state parolees directly to state prison in Mercer; the Mercer County Jail will be forced to absorb that additional cost to temporarily house parolees when there is a violation.

In addition, the facility analysis provided by the Department in announcing plans to close two prisons is inaccurate, with the effect of inflating the costs of maintaining SCI Mercer. The analysis indicates that the prison's perimeter road needs repair work and repaving; that work has been completed. Further, the analysis mentions an unspecified number of underground fuel tanks that must be replaced; that process has already begun at SCI Mercer. We are unable to determine if the analysis factors in the lower overtime costs at SCI Mercer as compared to higher costs at other facilities and are concerned this oversight may be painting an incomplete picture of the continued operating costs of the prisons.

The facility analysis also fails to capture some of the potentially sunk costs of recent investments in SCI Mercer. Pennsylvania has invested nearly \$20 million into upgrading SCI Mercer over the past decade alone—money that would be simply wasted if the facility is mothballed this year. The prison treats its own sewage and has upgraded its sewage system with a dewatering press that has the potential to save the Commonwealth upwards of \$300,000 annually. It is worth noting that the grounds of SCI Mercer are actually an asset to the Commonwealth, as it sits on additional acreage that would allow state-of-the-art expansion to house additional prisoners should the need arise.

Even more subtle costs would be shifted onto the community if SCI Mercer were shuttered. The Department's own website touts the benefits of SCI Mercer's participation in the Community Work Program, which has—among many other contributions—leveraged 9,376 hours of community service, saving at least \$67,976 in wages. And those contributions manifest in more important ways than simply dollars and cents: SCI Mercer serves local food banks, fire departments, recreation centers, fairgrounds, and the well-known highway cleanup initiative. SCI Mercer has implemented the innovative CARE Canine Program, in which inmates train stray dogs from Strayhaven Animal Shelter to ease their transition into adoption.

Our argument against the potential closure of SCI Mercer is not simply a case of elected officials trying to protect the local economy, as important as those jobs and cost-savings are. This is also a criminal justice matter. There has been broad recognition over the past decade across the political spectrum that policymakers must find a better way to punish and rehabilitate criminal offenders. We can significantly reduce prison populations—leading to even lower costs for the Commonwealth—and better protect our

communities if we can reduce the incidence of recidivism. Closing SCI Mercer would have the opposite effect, exacerbating the factors that lead convicted criminals to reoffend.

SCI Mercer is a minimum-security facility, housing the types of offenders who can successfully reenter society if they are given the supports they need. In fact, SCI Mercer has a reputation as one of the best state prisons for successful reintroduction of ex-inmates. Many of the inmates are from the area, and they are able to maintain ties to their families and support networks because they are housed locally. Those contacts will be stretched and, often, severed if inmates are removed to a location more than one hour away, especially in light of the region's limited public transportation systems. And when these inmates are released at the end of their sentences, we risk setting them free into an unfamiliar town with no safety net to help them reintegrate into society.

As the economies of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and other urban centers naturally leverage their growing populations into successful industry, the Commonwealth has the freedom to prioritize small-town and rural Pennsylvania for economic development. Many state prisons around the Commonwealth have their own challenges, including the deteriorating facility in Pittsburgh, and many of the unique services provided at other prisons have been recently implemented or can be readily transferred to a site such as SCI Mercer. We should be expanding facilities like SCI Mercer, not considering shifting their functions to other, thriving areas of the state.

We are speaking with a united voice—Senators and Representatives, Republicans and Democrats—and we are joined by community leaders representing the judiciary, law enforcement, community development, and other interests in urging you to remove SCI Mercer from the list of potential prison closings. We are requesting that additional public hearings be held so the Department can further evaluate the impact of closing prisons in small towns such as Mercer.

We believe you will agree with us that there are few places in this Commonwealth where the impact of jobs that pay will be greater than in Mercer County. Please hear our call and hear our citizens' voices when we ask you to stand up for strong small-town economies, prudent state investment, and smart criminal justice policies.

Sincerely,



Senator Michele Brooks
50th Senatorial District
Mercer, Crawford, Erie, & Warren Counties



Rep. Mark A. Longietti
7th Legislative District
Mercer County



Rep. Tedd C. Nesbit
8th Legislative District
Mercer and Butler Counties



Rep. Parke Wentling
17th Legislative District
Mercer, Crawford, Erie, & Lawrence Counties



Senator Elder A. Vogel, Jr.
47th Senatorial District
Beaver, Butler, & Lawrence Counties



Rep. Chris Sainato
9th Legislative District
Lawrence County



Senator Scott E. Hutchinson
21st Senatorial District
Butler, Clarion, Forest, Venango, and Warren Counties



Senator Daniel Laughlin
49th Senatorial District
Erie County



Rep. Aaron Bernstine
10th Legislative District
Beaver, Butler and Lawrence Counties

CC: The Honorable John Wetzel, Secretary, Pennsylvania Department of Corrections