



Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association

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Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association (MSA) Testifies at the Joint Ways & Means FY25 Budget Hearing

WORCESTER – Today, the Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association (MSA) testified at the Joint Ways and Means FY25 budget hearing, underscoring their commitment to excellence for the populations and the communities they serve. Led by Hampden County Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi (MSA President) and Norfolk County Sheriff Patrick McDermott (MSA Vice President), the MSA expressed gratitude to the committee members, agency officials, and fellow Sheriffs for their leadership and collaboration on a number of shared priorities.

"Today's hearing underscores the importance of collaboration between the Sheriffs and the Legislature as we work to address the needs of our correctional operations and the individuals who live and work within," said Sheriff Cocchi. "Our testimony highlights not just challenges, but opportunities for innovation and partnership. Our hope is to navigate these complexities together to uphold our commitment to improving outcomes for all who live and work in our correctional facilities."

In their testimony, the MSA highlighted significant achievements and outlined enhanced commitments for the future, focusing on collaboration, communication, reporting, transparency, and innovation. Key points included:

No Cost Communication Implementation: The MSA reported the successful implementation of the "No-Cost Communication" legislation in the 13 Sheriff's Offices, facilitating equitable access between incarcerated individuals and their loved ones. Since December 1, 2023, calling minutes across facilities more than doubled, indicating a 101% increase and a 505% increase in e-messaging. While acknowledging the positive aspects of the "No-Cost Communication" legislation, the MSA also addressed operational challenges such as staffing needs to monitor the increased calling and messaging, witness intimidation, and concerns regarding excessive calling. They requested additional resources and funding to support security monitoring and reimbursement for lost programming revenues.

Commissary: The MSA raised concerns about the potential revenue loss from commissary commissions and the commissary legislation as written. The impending legislation, effective July 1, 2024, threatens to eliminate revenues critical for supporting programming. Estimated at \$4.49 million in FY25, this loss could significantly impact vital programs and re-entry services aimed at improving outcomes for justice-involved individuals. The language highlights the intricacies of the commissary procurement process, emphasizing the role of contracted vendors in ensuring secure delivery and meeting correctional standards. It underscores the advantages of working with national vendors who possess greater purchasing power and offer a wider range of products requested by incarcerated populations. Concerns were raised about the 3% commission cap (purchase cost), potentially deterring vendors and limiting variety. The MSA emphasized the necessity of dedicated revenue paths to sustain programming and urged legislative support to ensure the continuity of commissary services.

Access to a Dedicated Line Items: In their testimony, the Sheriffs highlighted challenges in accessing dedicated line items crucial for supporting mental health and substance use disorder treatment. The MSA stressed the importance of maintaining funding levels and advocated for legislative revisions to facilitate access to these critical resources. They emphasized the need to continue expanding substance use and mental health treatment initiatives to support justice-involved individuals, thanked the Legislature for the dedicated resources, and requested their support for access to the dedicated line items.

Officer Wellness: The Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association (MSA) reiterated its commitment to Officer Wellness Initiatives. Recognizing the challenges faced by correctional staff, the MSA emphasized the importance of supporting the physical and mental health of employees. Stressing the critical role of staff in ensuring the safety and effectiveness of correctional facilities, the MSA urged the Legislature to prioritize funding for Officer Wellness Programs in the upcoming fiscal year.

Other topics of discussion included funding requests for the Emerging Adult populations and highlighting the robust data collection and reporting of the Criminal Justice Cross Tracking Initiative.

“We look forward to continuing a productive dialogue with and support from the Legislature as we focus on our ongoing efforts to improve employee wellness and to address the health challenges and programming opportunities that positively impact successful reentry for those in our care and custody,” said Sheriff McDermott. “We will continue to work with our colleagues at the State House to address challenges and achieve meaningful change for our communities.”

The Massachusetts Sheriffs' Association (MSA) supports, promotes, and advocates for each of the 14 Sheriff's Offices in the Commonwealth. The MSA facilitates cooperative and collaborative relationships among the Sheriffs for the purpose of developing standardized training, providing governance over shared projects, discussing operational promising practices, and evaluating research and data on matters of mutual interest and concern. The MSA improves public safety by promoting a greater understanding of issues impacting the Massachusetts Sheriffs and by bringing together law enforcement and criminal justice professionals.