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NJDOC response to Ombudsperson Office report (dated April 22, 2025) regarding Garden State Correctional Facility inspection.

On April 22, 2025, the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson (OCO) released its inspection report for Garden State Correctional Facility (GSYCF), which included observations made during site visits on July 10th, 11th, 17th and 18th 2024.

The facility, located in Chesterfield, Burlington County, is responsible for the intake and objectively classifying all adult male State incarcerated persons and providing all intake examinations and evaluations including medical, dental, educational, substance use, classification, and mental health.

In addition, the facility houses approximately 997 incarcerated male persons that average between the ages of 18 to 67. Of the total 997 incarcerated persons, as of July 31, 2024, there were 504 housed in general population (GP). Overall, the facility provides rehabilitative opportunities for work, education, social services, medical, mental health, substance use and other opportunities. For example, comprehensive adult-oriented academic education programming is provided to include the Career Readiness, Career Technical Education, Child Study Team services, High School Diploma Program for school-age eligible students, and NJ-STEP postsecondary educational opportunities. Psychoeducational programs are available. Work opportunities are provided by State Use Industries which provides carpentry, professional and manufacturing experience, and job readiness.

The OCO's acknowledgment of the responsiveness and cooperation of the GSYCF Administration is noted and appreciated as staff work diligently to ensure that IPs are afforded a safe and secure environment with rehabilitative opportunities. As noted by the OCO, throughout the inspection process, when presented with OCO inquiries, the GSYCF staff undertook decisive action. As noted herein, there are particular capital construction projects that will require substantial time, work, and cost. Fortunately, a number of these vital projects have been funded and are in various stages of the capital project process. Below is a breakdown of the Commission on Capital Budgeting and Planning allotments for NJDOC at GSYCF:

Before and up to FY 2022: \$6.979 million for GSYCF

- Locking System Replacements
 - Locking System & Control Panel - \$337k
 - Sally Port Locking System - \$292k
- Switchgear replacement - \$1.85m
- “Facility Upgrades” – \$4.5m
 - Continued area asbestos abatements dating back to 2007 (multi-phase project and on-going with next area of abatement to be advertised for engineering by Treasury)
 - Gym Floor (Completed)
- FY 2023: \$9.142 million - GSYCF
 - \$7.2m - GSYCF boiler replacement (rather than rent – Completed)
 - \$1.0m - GSYCF chapel roof replacement (Completed)
 - \$942k - GSYCF switch gear Phase 1 replacement (90% Complete)
- FY 2024: \$16.366 million – GSYCF - roof replacements, fire safety, locking system, asbestos abatement (underway or coming to conclusion)
 - Vocational Roof (In Design)
 - Infirmary Roof (30% Complete)
 - Locking Systems (75% Complete)
 - Switchgear Phase 2 (In Design)
 - Counseling Offices Construction (In Design)
 - Fire Safety Repairs (In Design)
 - New Kitchen Exhaust System (In Design)
 - North 3 Housing Roof (In Design)
 - Asbestos (In Project)
 - Water Treatment Plant Well #7 update (Completed)
- FY 2025: \$16.356 million - GSYCF
 - GSYCF-4 additional housing unit roofs (In Scope)
 - GSYCF-Main Kitchen floor replacement (In Scope)

As such, with regard to infrastructure, over the course of the last 4 years in this Administration, the NJDOC has prioritized the infrastructure needs at GSCF, (and throughout the NJDOC), has sought and received significant funding to improve infrastructure and many projects are underway at GSCF as a result of the efforts of the Commissioner and NJDOC team. Moreover, there are several areas of the report that require clarification and, in some instances, corrections in order to provide for a more complete understanding of the infrastructure and conditions at GSYCF.

Sanitation and Maintenance

With regard to the OCO notations regarding water fountains, the NJDOC proactively removed the water fountains from use several years during the Covid-19 pandemic as an additional way to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 and other communicable diseases and

viruses. As such, to prevent access to these fountains, the Department's maintenance units generally cover the water fountains in order to prevent usage. Here, there are fountains that are not in service, and are to be covered by the maintenance team to ensure they are not accessible.

With regard to showers, the GSYCF Maintenance Department has been proactive in addressing the housing unit showers, has installed "hydro-plugs" to seal the areas with missing tiles in the showers and new hardware until the showers can be fully refurbished. (See **Photograph 1, 2 and 3**). In addition, daily shower sanitation by IP voluntary work details has been increased to prevent mildew build up and tile discoloration.

Moreover, to improve the overall aesthetic of the facility, an IP voluntary work paint detail has been established to paint the interior of the cells and window frames.



Housing Units

Fire extinguishers are appropriately operable at GSYCF. While the OCO facility inspection noted that 15 of the 19 fire extinguishers had tags that expired the month prior, it is important to note that this did not impact the effectiveness of the equipment. The NJDOC employs a Fire Safety officer who conducts a monthly inspection, and for the time of the OCO visit, provided that fire extinguishers were in place and properly charged and ready for use, if needed.

In addition to the Fire Safety officer's internal inspection, an independent external inspection of the fire extinguishers is required. This service, which includes updating tags, is conducted by an outside and independent vendor. In this instance, the external vendors inspection was scheduled for the week of OCO's inspection, and the Department was awaiting the updating of the tags by the outside vendor, which did not impact the effectiveness and operability of the equipment.

Linens and Furnishing in Cells

There is no question that IPs are entitled to pillows, and in furtherance of the OCO's observation, the GSYCF Administration had new pillows provided where needed. Cell to cell inspections were completed and any IPs that were missing essential items were addressed. This distribution included sheets, blankets, clothing items and pillow cases.

Garden State Administration ordered locking containers to assign to each cell at GSYCF.

Mitigating Summer Heat

As noted in several NJDOC reports and budget testimony, the Department has consistently sought funding for HVAC and HVAC upgrades in order to temperature control all facilities. 65% of NJDOC facilities are temperature controlled. GSYCF is temperature controlled in PRU 1/2, Annex East/West and Annex MSU which have operational HVAC units, and the remaining portions of the GSYCF are not outfitted with HVAC. As such, other methods are utilized in an effort to mitigate summer heat, including increases in showers, water and ice distribution, holding in of work details, education and messaging about heat mitigation, the opening of cell windows during the spring and summer for air circulation, and in addition to the potable water and increase in ice distribution, IPs have the ability to purchase two cases of bottle water per each canteen order. Pedestal fans and wall mounted fans are assigned to every unit and tier to assist in circulating the air in the day rooms and other common areas of the institution. IPs are permitted to purchase fans (with cost subsidized by the NJDOC) and ice containers from commissary.

IPs who have heat sensitivity due to psychotropic medications or other medical diagnoses are provided services in accordance with established healthcare internal management procedure.

IPs can also access potable tap water at all times with the water supply being monitored daily by an outside contractor. As a note, bottled water is supplied to IPs when there is a documented issue with the water, such as but not limited to hydrant flushing or plumbing repairs.

Kitchens Food Service

As the NJDOC has been proactive with securing funding for infrastructure improvements, GSYCF currently has several capital infrastructure projects proceeding to address the Kitchen and Food Services area. As capital projects take time to complete, and while the projects proceed, the GSYCF maintenance has worked to level the pitched flooring (**See Photograph 4**) and has fabricated metal grates to cover exposed drainage pipes (**See Photograph 5 and 6**). During the OCO audit, it was noted that Food Services did not routinely check the meal temperatures prior to the items leaving the kitchen area. This has been corrected with the assistance and oversight a newly appointed supervisor. Temperatures are monitored and the data is collected at each meal. The appropriate number of IPs are assigned to the food service detail and those who are removed or reassigned are replaced with appropriate IPs. To ensure appropriate staffing, Human Resources continues to monitor and remain involved.

Beverages are delivered to each unit with every meal. The OCO report details an issue with unit Kitchen workers (IPs) not delivering the beverages to the unit but with increased supervision and monitoring this was remedied via food services and custody staff. Additionally, Styrofoam trays are delivered to each unit for meal services. It is not DOC's policy to serve meals in personal bowls to mitigate contamination. Disposable trays are available during meals though IPs often elect to use their personal bowls. Custody supervisors have been directed to increase tours during meal services to ensure practices are adhered to.



Photograph 4



Photograph 5



Photograph 6

Cell Size and Crowding

The OCO's reliance on outdated materials to suggest that there is crowding in cells at GSYCF is not accurate given the enactment of pertinent legislation. The report referenced by the OCO was published in 1981, decades before the enactment of the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act (ICRA) which mandates that IPs be afforded a minimum of four hours of out of cell time daily. The 1981 report referenced by the OCO was published at a time when IPs had less out of cell time, and prior to the many research studies that provide that placing IPs in double cells is a safe way to manage IP wellness, mental health and ward against self-harm. Moreover, GSYCF has a current operational capacity of 1,557 with a current population of approximately 997. Additional operational capacity will be available after various projects are completed.

Regarding the OCO report and toilets, GSYCF maintenance has explored the possibility of converting old porcelain toilets in cells to updated stainless steel 2-in-1 units which will add to additional space inside double banded cells (**See Photograph 7**).



Institutional Violence and Discipline

Unfortunately, IPs do not always follow the rules. In an effort to mitigate misbehavior, GSYCF administration decreased the number of IPs that are permitted to congregate during recreation periods to mitigate IP-on-IP violence. This is not because cell mates are fighting due to overcrowding, it is due to extended time out of cell per the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act and, as such, access to other IPs not in their cell. A review of data regarding fights for the twenty-five-month period of January 2023-January 2025 revealed that 83% of all fights occur between non-cellmates. Simply, stated, the overwhelming majority of fights do not occur between cellmates. In short, data and experience working in prison illustrate that fights are a result of access to other IPs outside of the cell and not cell size.

Purposeful Activity

Programming and education at GSYCF, and throughout the NJDOC, are a priority and are an important aspect of community re-entry. In fact, the NJDOC recently published the latest recidivism rate of less than 5%, one of the lowest in the nation. Specifically regarding programming at GSYCF, in mid-July 2024 (during the time period of the OCO inspection), 64 unduplicated IPs were enrolled in Healthy Opportunities for Parenting Effectively (HOPE), Thinking for a Change (T4C), and Cage Your Rage (CYR), programs referenced in the Ombudsperson's report. The report did not account for 78 additional IPs enrolled in Family Reunification and Transition (FRAT), Success Transition and Reentry Services (STARS), and Successful Employment and Lawful Living (SEALL). In total, 126 unduplicated IPs were enrolled across all six programs.

Regarding educational opportunities, 13 unduplicated IPs were enrolled in music; 52 unduplicated were enrolled in SFEA; High Diploma School track; 101 unduplicated were enrolled in GED services; 27 unduplicated were enrolled in New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons (NJ-STEP) (college program); and 84 unduplicated were enrolled in Career Technical Education (CTE). As for the waiting lists, the CTE waitlist comprised 51 IPs, and the GED waitlist comprised 80 IPs.

Furthermore, 17 unduplicated IPs participated in the employee readiness services through the Providing Access to Community Employment Readiness (PACE). Of note is that this report does not reflect the numerous IPs who participate in the chaplaincy department's various worship services and classes.

Additionally, approximately 142 IPs participate in one or more Office of Substance Abuse Programming and Addiction Services sponsored services/programs, which include but are not limited to Engaging the Family, Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Wages and Cost of Living

Throughout fiscal year 2024, the Department engaged in an analysis targeted at wage increases in an effort to offset rising commissary costs. IP rates increased an average 25% and was standardized across all facilities. In addition, three one-time remittances were posted to IP accounts: \$20 on or about April 15th, 2024 for all IPs, \$10 on May 1st, 2024 (charge free) and \$10 on June 1st, 2024 (charge free).

In reviewing the GSYCF IPs who have job assignments, the following was noted as of February 21, 2025:

- 365 IPs are currently assigned to an institutional job other than tier sanitation.
- 71 IPs are identified as full-time students and are not authorized to hold an institutional job.
- 38 IPs are assigned to the NJ-STEP Program.
- 118 IPs are currently assigned to a Vocational Program (Carpentry, Welding, Cosmetology etc.).
- 184 IPs are involved in the initial intake process and not yet assigned a work detail.
- 13 IPs are assigned as Residential Community Reintegration returns under assessment.
- 55 IPs are assigned to the close custody unit which do not have job assignments.

NJDOC data reflects that 198 more IPs have been presently assigned to jobs as compared to mid-July, which demonstrates the department's commitment to creating employment opportunities for the population

In all, the Department appreciates the observations of the OCO, and the continuing support of the legislators, Governor's Office, community partners, outside stakeholders and staff, who collectively work together toward the common goal of rehabilitation, community reintegration, public safety and safety and security within the correctional facilities.