



**Opening Statement**

**Kathy Flicker**

**Commissioner**

**New Jersey State Commission of Investigation**

**Public Hearing**

**November 18, 2008**

Thank you, and good morning to you all.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the Chair has reminded us, one of the SCI's primary duties is to investigate and report upon organized crime in all of its disturbing facets.

Five years ago, in a forum similar to this, we examined the changing face of organized crime in New Jersey and, as a consequence, fundamentally redefined the threat posed by it to our society. The old mob – the Mafia, La Cosa Nostra, the ugly world of *The Godfather* – had been joined, if not entirely supplanted, by a vast network of violent, drug-trafficking street gangs – the uglier world of the

Bloods, the Crips, the Latin Kings and others. In response to this paradigm shift, our partners in federal, state and local law enforcement had already begun to deploy substantial resources to combat the widening criminal activity of these gangs in the cities and suburbs of our state. Over the past few years alone, this sustained action has resulted in literally hundreds of arrests and has sent gang felons to prison in record numbers. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a tribute to successful law enforcement.

But with this success have come new and difficult challenges. As more and more of these violent gang inmates come under the custody of our jails and prisons, what is that doing to the system? Can that system, the correctional system, respond safely, securely and effectively to the enormous pressures being brought to bear upon it by this alarming phenomenon? What should be done to make sure that it can?

These and other compelling, complex questions demand answers, and that is why we are here.

Today, the Commission, through sworn witness testimony and multiple exhibits, will detail the findings of an unprecedented investigation that has taken us from the streets and into the cellblocks of our largest correctional institutions.

You will hear how burgeoning numbers of gang inmates organize and thrive inside prison walls. How they exploit systemic weaknesses to communicate with cohorts both inside and outside of prison. How they secure, use and deal in contraband, including drugs and cellphones. How they carry out wide-ranging questionable financial transactions and launder money. How they extort fellow inmates and their families. How they are able to compromise correctional personnel.

All of this while they are locked up behind bars.

The focus of this hearing is on the state-run prison system, but it is just the first piece of a much wider SCI investigation into the transformational impact of the organized-crime/gang problem in New Jersey. Looking ahead to the future, we intend to probe and report upon how other sectors of the criminal justice and correctional systems are coping with these pressures and challenges as well.

Let me emphasize that we are not here to point fingers, to accuse or to play "Gotcha!" That is not what we do; that is not what the SCI is about. We also recognize the very, very tough job that confronts the people who administer and staff our prisons. They go to work every day facing almost impossible odds, and they are to be commended for their efforts in holding it together. You should also

know that since the inception of this investigation, the New Jersey Department of Corrections has undertaken a number of steps aimed at bolstering its operations with respect to the gang activity.

But having said that, we have identified problems that continue to exist in this system – some of them quite serious. We anticipate that our findings will be useful as the Department of Corrections struggles to manage the tangle of challenges brought inside its walls by this new wave of organized crime. As independent fact-finders, we have an obligation to address these issues, comprehensively, fairly and dispassionately. Our ultimate responsibility, of course, is to recommend sensible, practical reforms to fix the problems we have identified. And in doing so, please rest assured that we will build upon – and not detract from – administrative and legislative proposals that already are pending in a number of these critical areas. The goal for all of us, now and in the long run, is to ensure that the system works better in the service of the citizens and taxpayers of New Jersey.

Please call the first witness.