



**Testimony of Brian McDonnell (AFSCME) and Ron Walsh (Council 82)  
before the Assembly Committee on Health and the Assembly Committee  
on Correction  
October 30, 2017**

Good morning Chairman Gottfried and members of the Assembly Health Committee and Chairman Weprin and members of the Assembly Committee on Corrections. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Brian McDonnell and I'm the Political and Legislative Director for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) here in New York. AFSCME is New York's largest public service union with nearly 400,000 members from six affiliates including CSEA, District Council 37, District Council 1707, AFSCME Council 66, AFSCME Council 82 and AFSCME Council 35.

AFSCME represents workers in every city, county, town, village and school district in New York State, as well as people who care for the sick and the elderly in public hospitals and nursing homes. Our members care for the mentally ill, the disabled and the infirm. We plow snow and keep streets clear. We monitor the drinking water in your community. Our law enforcement members maintain public safety and security. The AFSCME membership helps keep our state running every day. New York works because our members do.

I'm joined here today by Ron Walsh, who is the President of AFSCME Council 82. Council 82 represents thousands of County Correctional Officers, State Corrections Lieutenants, Local Police Officers, Deputy Sheriffs and 911 Dispatchers.

Council 82 represents Correctional Officers in 24 counties across the state. We're here today to speak about our members who work in County Correctional facilities, providing safety and security in these prisons and helping to keep their communities safe. In addition, our members take responsibility for the inmates under their supervision while they are in custody. It's not enough that our members keep watch on those who are incarcerated, but those serving time in correctional facilities are our responsibility while they are being held.

Each year, we hold a Lobby Day for County Corrections Officers here at the State Capitol. It's an opportunity for union leaders to meet with elected officials and push for bills that will benefit their members. One such bill is a twenty-year retirement bill for County COs that will soon be sent to the Governor's desk.

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These Lobby Days are also an opportunity for our members to tell elected State leaders about the jobs that they do, the conditions that they work under and challenges that they face. It was during one of these Lobby Days that I first found out from members about the problem that we will be discussing today. Namely, Correctional Officers with little or no medical training being instructed to administer medication to inmates in their facilities. Officers, without the assistance or the oversight of medical professionals, handing out medication to inmates for all sorts of conditions as well as overseeing inmates inject themselves with insulin, in syringes, in County Correctional facilities.

I'd like to turn the testimony over to my colleague Ron Walsh.

### **Council 82 President Ron Walsh**

Hello, I'm Ron Walsh and I'm the President of AFSCME Council 82. I've been a Correctional Officer for twenty years working at the Schenectady County Correctional Facility. I've been a local union President and have served as President of our statewide Council for 5 years. Thank you for inviting me to come speak here today.

Our members take their jobs and the responsibilities that come with those jobs very seriously. In addition to keeping our communities safe, we want to make sure that our fellow officers go home at the end of each shift AND that all of the inmates under our supervision and care remain safe and secure. That's why safe staffing is so important.

But another issue that potentially threatens the health and well-being of those under our supervision is the policy in place in many upstate, rural County Correctional facilities of having officers dispensing and administering medication to inmates.

Our officers are trained professionals. But they are trained in safety and security, not in medicine or health care. In Schenectady County, where I work, we have trained medical staff available 24/7 to handle medical issues of inmates and the dispensing of medication. The same goes for our neighboring counties in Albany and Rensselaer.

But in many counties upstate, particularly in rural areas, our officers tell us that they may have a doctor only come to their facility once a week, and many have nursing staff only available from 8 AM until 4 PM, five days a week. I don't need to tell you that our facilities run 24/7 every single day of the year. In these locations, officers have been instructed to hand out medication to inmates on those other shifts and on weekends despite having no training whatsoever in this field.

The potential liability on the officer or the County is staggering. The potential threat to the inmate's health is also a major concern. Imagine your son or daughter, your brother or sister or spouse being treated by someone in a healthcare facility with no training whatsoever in healthcare. It's beyond irresponsible. Regardless of what they've done to be in a correctional institution, the inmates that we are responsible for are people who

have families and loved ones. If your loved one was in a nursing home, would you be ok with a Corrections Officer handing them their daily medication? Of course not.

It's bad enough that our officers have to deliver medicine in pill form to inmates that they know nothing about. Try having an inmate tell you that they're not supposed to be receiving the blue pill, they always take the pink pill. Or that this is wrong sized pill, they always take the "round one". Our members are not medically certified or licensed. They certainly can't answer questions about dosage or medical concerns.

Even worse, in these same facilities, our officers are told to hand a syringe to an inmate who is supposed to draw out the proper amount of insulin and administer the medication themselves. Just Google "insulin overdose": Cold sweats, trembling hands, intense anxiety, sense of confusion are some of the effects. An insulin overdose can lead to death.

Maintaining a safe and secure facility – for the officers, for the inmates and for the communities that we live in - is hard enough. Our members expect and understand that important responsibility and they do it well. However, it's unreasonable and unacceptable that our members are expected to carry out potentially unsafe tasks that they are neither trained for, nor qualified to do. We're here today to tell you about this problem and to ask for your help.

In June, Chairman Weprin sponsored Assembly Bill 8480, which would prohibit County Correctional Officers from administering medication to inmates using syringes or hypodermic needles. We appreciate this support and the recognition of this potentially fatal problem. We ask that all dispersal of medication by County COs be prohibited. Medicine should be administered by medical professionals, not by officers who are also highly trained, but trained in ensuring the safety and security of inmates and facilities, not in practicing medicine.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and am happy to take any questions you might have.