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PENNSYLVANIA

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JOINT ECONOMIC

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 27, 2015

The Honorable Charles Grassley
Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Ranking Member, Committee on the
Judiciary
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Grassley and Leahy:

I write today, following the second anniversary of the death of federal correctional officer Eric Williams on February 25, 2013, regarding the safety of officers and other workers in our federal correctional facilities. As chairman and ranking member of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, I respectfully request that you hold a hearing on how Congress can act to better address the safety risks faced by the men and women who guard our federal prisons.

Eric Williams was a young federal correctional officer at the United States Penitentiary in Canaan, Pennsylvania who was tragically murdered by an inmate while working alone in a housing unit with roughly 130 inmates. He was outnumbered with no means of protection against a violent assault. Following Eric Williams' death, the Bureau of Prisons expanded their existing pepper spray pilot program to all high-security facilities. However, the current program does not provide pepper spray to all correctional workers who might be required to respond to a dangerous inmate situation, or any workers at medium-security facilities, leaving men and women in our federal facilities unprotected.

In January of this year, Senator Toomey and I introduced the Eric Williams Correctional Officer Protection Act of 2015. The Eric Williams Correctional Officer Safety Act would ensure the availability of pepper spray to all federal correctional workers who may be required to respond to an inmate emergency at medium or high security federal facilities. The legislation also includes a training requirement to ensure safe, responsible use of this self-defensive tool. Pepper spray has shown to be an effective tool for correctional workers in dangerous situations. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) found through a pilot program that the use of pepper spray reduced the time it took to contain incidents with staff and inmates from 4.34 minutes when pepper spray was not used to 2.73 minutes when pepper spray was used, a reduction of 1.61 minutes, which the BOP deemed statistically significant.

Providing correctional workers with the means to protect themselves is critical. However, federal correctional officers from my home state of Pennsylvania have expressed broad concerns about staffing, conditions in federal prisons, and administrative policies that affect their safety. As you are aware, federal prisons are currently operating at nearly 40% above capacity with more than 219,000 federal inmates incarcerated. The Bureau of Prisons projects system-wide crowding to exceed 45% over capacity through 2018. Medium-security prisons are currently

operating at roughly 51% over capacity. This overcrowding undermines the safety of both federal inmates and correctional officers. I was pleased that your Committee approved the Smarter Sentencing Act in the 113th Congress, which would work to alleviate dangerous overcrowding while also promoting equality in our criminal justice system. In the 114th Congress, I hope that the Judiciary Committee and the full Senate will take the opportunity to pass this and other critical criminal justice reforms.

As we work to address overcrowding with common-sense criminal justice reforms like the Smarter Sentencing Act, we owe it to our correctional workers to ensure that we are taking appropriate steps to protect their safety under the circumstances they currently face every day. A comprehensive hearing on the issue would provide Congress with valuable insight into issues that might otherwise be unaddressed. It is critical that the men and women who work in federal correctional facilities have their voices heard, and that their safety is prioritized as we work toward reform.

While some level of risk will always be present in a prison, Congress can do more to equip our correctional officers to respond to dangerous situations. I believe that a comprehensive hearing on correctional officer safety, including direct testimony from correctional officers, will enable us to better provide the support and protection these men and women deserve.

Thank you for your time and attention to my concerns. I look forward to working with you on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bob Casey, Jr." in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator