

Taking Steps to Improve Prison Conditions

The bipartisan Federal Prison Oversight Act, which was signed into law on July 25, provides opportunities to improve a prison system that has been deteriorating for decades and affecting not only incarcerated people but also those who work in the system.

This new law requires that every federal institution have a designated ombudsperson to receive complaints and ensure that concerns are investigated and addressed. Those complaints can come from employees, inmates, and family and community members who have concerns about the health, safety, welfare and rights of inmates and staff.

The Lewisburg Prison Project, which spent years documenting and calling attention to the issues that this law intends to address, welcomes this first step toward ensuring safe and humane conditions for incarcerated people and the staff who work with them.

Taxpayers should be pleased with this development and, we hope, will pay attention to the changes in the federal system. Given the almost 8 billion dollar annual budget, 30,000 employees, and 158,000 inmates, citizens need to be aware of how significant the federal system is to our community and economy, including our local community and economy.

Many may not be aware that staff wages vary widely across even Pennsylvania's federal institutions. For example, starting federal prison employees at USP Allenwood earn less for the same jobs than employees at USP Canaan and USP Schuylkill. We believe pay inequities at the Allenwood Complex have contributed to the staffing shortage there. Staffing shortages increase safety risks for both inmates and employees.

Senator Casey and Representative Cartwright were among those who introduced the Pay Our Correctional Officers Fairly Act in February to ensure fair pay for Federal Bureau of Prison (BOP) employees, especially in rural areas.

The LPP supports pay equity in the prisons and hopes this initiative will help reduce staffing shortages and inequities in the federal system. We encourage community members to learn more about this proposed bill and how it might help the BOP, as well as to stay informed as the Oversight Act is implemented.

Lewisburg Prison Project Board of Directors

Angela Trop, Deirdre O'Connor, Jennifer Thomson, Ben Vollmayr-Lee, Stephen Becker, Martin Ligare, David Sprout, Laura Lanwermeyer, Erica Delsandro