

Oral Statement of
Director Colette S. Peters
July 23, 2024
House Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Crime and Federal
Government Surveillance

Good morning, Chairman Biggs, Congresswoman McBath, and members of the subcommittee. I first want to offer my sincere condolences for the loss of your colleague. I am grateful for the conversations I have had with her and her fierce advocacy and accountability for the Bureau will be missed.

I am honored to be here today representing our employees who are dedicated, and courageous corrections professionals committed to our mission and the agency's core values of accountability, integrity, respect, compassion and correctional excellence.

Nearly two years ago, I took the helm knowing that it was a struggling agency and that it would take time and resources to make positive change.

What I found was that our recruitment and retention crisis and our dilapidated facilities are at the core of nearly all our challenges. Low staffing-levels impact our institutions' operations, including safety and security, medical care, education, programming, and treatment. So, our priorities are clear: recruitment, retention, employee wellness and maintenance and repair.

Fortunately, we are making progress with our recruitment and retention crisis. When I joined the Bureau, we had 986 new hires for that entire calendar year. Already this year we have onboarded over 1,400 and the even better news is that we are now hiring more people than are leaving the agency.

Yet challenges remain. The bottom line is: we simply do not pay our people enough. Our average base salary of \$55,000 for new officers is not competitive. So even when we onboard people, some leave for better pay. As an example, at our facility in Massachusetts, one of our officers left because he got a better offer with better pay at the local grocery store. Ads in New York city offer corrections positions that pay \$130,000 after three years, while our federal officers make tens of thousands of dollars less.

And, our staffing crisis is very expensive as we rely on overtime, augmentation and incentives to keep our prisons operational. Last year alone, we paid more than \$128 million in incentives and more than \$345 million in overtime. I also want to note the human cost of overtime and augmentation which we know are incredibly difficult on our corrections professionals' physical and mental health.

Incentives, augmentation and overtime should be short-term fixes. To solve our long-term problem, we are working closely with the Department and OPM to create Special Salary Rates for employees in our institutions. That request, if approved, will require your support and we estimate the need for an additional hundreds of millions of dollars (~\$600 Million).

Our dilapidated infrastructure also affects our mission. It impedes our ability to offer safe, normal, and more humane environments for our employees and those in our custody. Our over \$3 billion in maintenance and repair needs tells you our infrastructure is crumbling. We have created a five-year plan to attack the most serious repairs first and are preparing our 10- and 15-year plans.

Before I conclude, I want to celebrate the passage of the Federal Prison Oversight Act which enhances our ongoing collaboration and good work with the Office of the Inspector General. I share the Inspector

General's and your commitment to greater accountability and oversight and have said so from day one on the job.

I would like to thank Rep. McBath for her leadership on this legislation and her acknowledgement on the House floor of our brave men and women and the need for additional resources to improve environments for them and those in our care and custody. I also want to thank every member of this subcommittee who supported this legislation.

As I have mentioned publicly, we will need more resources from Congress to implement this Act efficiently on a couple of fronts.

The legislation limits the Bureau's use of augmentation. While I agree with the sentiment of limiting augmentation, today in the midst of our staffing crisis, without augmentation, we will mandate more overtime which will not only cost tens of millions of dollars more per year (~\$60 million) but again, I will note the human cost and the physical and mental wear and tear on our people.

We will also need to hire employees to effectively respond to the additional oversight and make impactful change. All of us at the FBOP including our national union look forward to working closely with Congress to ensure that we have the needed resources to hold up our end of the bargain.

As I have said before, I believe in good government, accountability, transparency, and the importance of oversight.

Thank you for your time, and I stand ready to answer your questions.