

# AFSCME Corrections United

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Jon Melegrito



VMOs, front row from left, Katie Ziegler, Jason Battin, David Galle, Leo Gansen, Kenton Cole, Anna Koktan. Back row: David Dirks, Ken Sharkey, Brian Balzer, Eric Allen.

## Striking the Match

### VMOs Step Up Organizing Drive in Colorado

As soon as they appear on his driveway, John Stanko, a corrections officer in the La Vista Correctional Facility in Pueblo, Colo.,

tells volunteer member organizers (VMOs) Kenton Cole and Leo Gansen he's "not interested" in talking to them about joining a union. "I don't see

any value in paying union dues," he declares. "I can put that money to better use for my kids."

The polite, affable duo — members of Iowa Council 61 and fellow corrections officers — won't take 'no' for an answer. Cole, a 29-year-veteran with the Mt. Pleasant Correctional Facility and president of Local 2995, does most of the talking. "It's great that you want to invest in your children's future," he says. "But you know that in Colorado, you pay a lot for health care benefits. With a union, you can negotiate lower health premiums and get better insurance for you and your family. That puts you in a much better position to protect your kids."

First, Cole continues, Colorado's anti-labor laws need to change. And that, he says, is "why we need to sign up more members. Contract negotiations are coming up soon. When there are more of us, they stop and listen."

Stanko remains skeptical and raises a lot of questions while Cole and Gansen

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## Cutbacks Raise Public Safety Concerns

As state and local governments feel the pinch from the nation's economic woes, they're tightening corrections budgets and asking correctional agencies to weigh fiscal responsibilities against public safety.

In a survey conducted by the American Correctional Association in December 2008, 41 state adult cor-

rectional agencies and New York City reported almost \$692 million in cuts during the current fiscal year, representing almost 3 percent of their operating budgets. On the chopping block were staffing, staff training and non-education related offender programs.

In Maryland, the corrections and public safety department is underfunded

by about \$55.8 million. As a result, the agency says it must eliminate 400 vacant positions out of 837, including 200 corrections officers. That leaves the department with about 11,250 regular positions, the lowest since 2005.

AFSCME MD Director Patrick Moran says that the state is down about 97 COs in the first six months of the

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## Striking the Match

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listen intently, nodding their heads to acknowledge Stanko's comments and concerns.

After about 30 minutes, Stanko asks about dues. Gansen, a CO at the Anamosa State Penitentiary and president of Local 2994, provides an amount. "As a dues-paying member, you get union representation at the bargaining table and a good contract," Gansen explains. "It doesn't make sense that you work a 28-day period to avoid overtime, or pay your own lawyer when you get in trouble. With a union, you're not out there by yourself."

Cole adds: "I have two sons who are COs in Iowa. It's a good career to have because of what our union has done. It can also do the same for you. But as leaders here in Colorado, you have to take ownership of it. As VMOs, we are only here to strike the match. But you have to fan the flames."

After a few more questions, Stanko asks for a membership card and signs. They all shake hands and the VMOs get into their car for the next door knock.

It's been a long day for Cole and Gansen. They've knocked on 38 doors

since 10 a.m. Now, it's almost 6 p.m. After a three-week stint (a third time for both), they're headed back to Iowa the next day, pleased with the results.

"I'll do this again," says Cole, who helped bolster the organizing efforts of COs in Kentucky last year. "I don't think I can give back enough for what the union has done for me."

**Seeing the Light.** Cole and Gansen were among 15 corrections officers from AFSCME affiliates in Connecticut, Iowa, Minnesota, New Mexico and Oregon who knocked on 1,835 doors in Pueblo in late March and early April this year. These VMOs, including COs who participated in last year's organizing drive, have signed up nearly 400 of the 4,300 COs working in the state's 24 correctional facilities.

The Colorado Workers for Innovations and New Solutions (COWINS), a partnership that includes AFSCME, the American Federation of Teachers and SEIU, launched the organizing campaign soon after Gov. Bill Ritter (D) signed an executive order in November 2007 allowing state employees to form "partnership units" and

negotiate "partnership agreements."

"It's been a rewarding experience, to see the light on their faces when they know they have a choice," recalls Katie Ziegler, a CO at the Shakopee Correctional Facility in Minnesota and a member of Local 1988 (Council 5). Teamed up with co-worker Anna Koktan, both COs were in Pueblo for two weeks. Last year, they also helped home care workers in Missouri who are also organizing a drive of their own to win a voice on the job. "They are actually pleasantly surprised when we come to their doors and they find out we came all the way from Minnesota," says Koktan. "It makes them realize how important it is to have a union."

Ken Sharkey, a CO for 19 years at the Radgowski Correctional Center in Connecticut and president of Local 1565 (Council 4), was among the first VMOs to come to Colorado. "I've walked in their shoes before," he says, referring to poor working conditions of state workers. "I'm here to convince them that they have a choice, that I'd like them to walk in mine, *now*." ●



Jon Melegrito

*John Stanko (right) signs membership card after chatting with VMOs Kenton Cole (left) and Leo Gansen.*



Jon Melegrito

*Anna Koktan (right) and Katie Ziegler share their door-knocking experience with fellow VMOs.*



Jon Melegrito

*Ken Sharkey prepares to board his flight home after another long stint as a VMO in Colorado.*

# WE NEED UNION SOLIDARITY!



Adam Schwalter

*Betty Cotton in front of the Norton facility.*

In Kansas, volunteer member organizers (VMOs) have been working hard in the last two years to organize more than 2,000 COs who work at the state's eight correctional facilities. VMOs are AFSCME members who take time off from work to talk to fellow workers about joining the union.

Betty Cotton, a member of the Kansas Organization of State Employees (KOSE)/AFT/AFSCME/, is leading the effort to organize COs at

the Norton Correctional Facility. She is dedicated to making sure Norton's 216 COs have a strong voice. She spends most of her "off hours" recruiting more members to KOSE. When her shift ends, she heads to the gate where she hands out union sign-up cards and talks to co-workers. On her days off, she knocks on their doors. "They are so scared of being seen with me at the work site so I go to their homes," she explains. "I've signed up everyone I've

visited so far. But we have a long way to go. I won't retire until all of them are on board with KOSE."

She notes with dismay that Kansas is 49th in the nation in terms of pay and benefits for state employees. They haven't received a step increase in 10 years. "There was a time when we would lose an average of 20 COs in two months," she points out. "Not having adequate and well-trained staff poses serious risks to personal and public safety."

Despite the challenges of organizing, Cotton finds her volunteer work "very satisfying and rewarding, realizing that these individuals have a secure and safe job, that they are not going to be disposed of and destroyed by management."

Cotton is especially concerned about her female co-workers. "Discrimination against women COs has become commonplace here," she says. "These sisters aren't willing to fight and force the issue. They are afraid of retaliation or being passed over for promotion. But I assure them that as union members we have backup."

"If we can't fight for our own, nobody else will," she adds. "We need union solidarity and a strong membership to change the minds of management and our legislators." ●

## Congress Poised to Pass Public Safety Officer Collective Bargaining Bill

After visiting their U.S. representatives and senators during an all-day lobby on May 7, corrections officers are confident that the U.S. Congress will soon pass the Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act of 2009 (H.R. 413).

"We are heartened by growing public support for this legislation and we look forward to this bill being signed into law before the end of the year," says ACU President and International

Vice Pres. Glen Middleton.

Early this year Rep. Dale Kildee (D-MI) re-introduced the measure, which establishes minimum state collective bargaining standards for police, emergency medical technicians, corrections officers and firefighters. It would also allow states to decide how the rights are conferred and does not provide for mandatory binding arbitration. States with collecting bargaining laws in force would be exempt and in

the interest of public safety, the bill does not permit strikes.

Last Congress, the bill passed the House, but stalled in the Senate. At a May breakfast meeting with ACU Steering Committee members, Kildee assured the COs of the measure's impending win.

Contact your members of Congress now at (888) 460-0813 and urge them to co-sponsor this important piece of legislation. ●

## Cutbacks

*continued from Page 1*

current fiscal year compared to the year before. “This is very serious because public safety is at stake,” he says. “We’re also fighting plans to extend the current eight-hour shifts to 12. This change puts a huge demand on COs who have to be alert at all times.”

Maryland lawmakers are also raising public safety concerns about cost-saving measures. Del. Galen Clagett (D) says he is especially “sensitive to prison security” and not having enough properly-trained COs. Del. Gail Bates (R) says she is concerned about high turnover rates.

**Early Release.** Governors in other states, including Kentucky, New York, Virginia and Wisconsin, are looking to save millions of dollars by shortening the time prisoners spend behind bars.

In Virginia, Gov. Tim Kaine (D) has authorized the director of corrections to release nonviolent offenders 90 days before their sentences end. Current state policy limits early release for good behavior to 30 days. Kaine says that the growth of incarceration costs has been “dramatically much higher” than, for example, higher education. He says he wants to put more funds into education while “pursuing strategies consistent with public safety.”

A parole credit program in Kentucky, which has resulted in the early release of thousands of inmates and parolees, may soon become permanent. The panel of criminal justice officials recommending the action says it will reduce the state’s \$456 million budget deficit. Gov. Steve

Beshear (D) notes that his state had the largest percent increase last year in incarceration costs. “We just need to find ways of delivering appropriate punishment ... and at the same time not incur a huge cost,” he said.

**Closures.** Shutting down prisons is another issue that plays into the hands of government officials looking for ways to save money.

In Nevada, Gov. Jim Gibbons (R) has been trying to close the old Nevada State Prison in order to produce \$37 million in savings. Key lawmakers in a senate budget subcommittee say they are likely to oppose the governor’s recommendation and keep the facility open for the next two years.

Before he was impeached, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D) allowed the Department of Corrections to shutter the Pontiac Correctional Center, a maximum security prison that houses 1,600 inmates. But Gov. Patrick Quinn (D) decided, soon after he took office, to keep the facility open.

A drop in the state’s inmate population has prompted Michigan to do away with three corrections facilities, for a total savings of \$40 million.

Kansas is also planning to shut down two minimum-security facilities this year.

Escalating budget woes in Ohio prompted the closing of two juvenile corrections facilities – one in Marion and another in Delaware County. This move, supposedly, will save the state an estimated \$24 million annually.

But OCSEA/Local 11 President

Eddie Parks says the closures aren’t necessary. He points to a January 2008 report which indicates both facilities are overcrowded and understaffed and in need of 188 additional positions. The “Final Fact Finder Report,” filed as part of a pending settlement in a federal class-action lawsuit against Ohio, recommended hiring more corrections officers to help deal with a growing juvenile population.

“They should have addressed the overcrowding, which would have served the interests of youth and staff,” Parks says. “Instead, they’re taking a step backward and closing facilities.”

At the February founding convention of the Kansas Organization of State Employees (KOSE) AFT/AFSCME Local 300 in Topeka, Kan., and at a budget crisis strategies conference held in Washington, DC, later that month, Pres. Gerald W. McEntee noted the closing down of correctional facilities by states that “are hurting big time.” (KOSE is a joint AFT and AFSCME local for Kansas state employees.) He urged government officials not to balance budgets on the backs of dedicated employees who carry out essential functions. “There are smarter and fairer ways to close budget gaps,” he said. These “reasonable and workable alternatives,” he pointed out, include suspending tax cuts; tapping state and local budget reserves (“rainy day” funds); reducing health care costs (a major portion of state budgets); and providing more federal aid to the states. ●



Billy Beucher

*Texas corrections officers (Council 7) lobbied their legislators in Austin for a much needed pay increase.*



Adam Schowalter

*Lauren Kreigel, a CO from Topeka Correctional Facility, testifies at the state house about low wages.*



Joe Lawrence

*AFSCME Maryland COs met with Del. Steven J. DeBoy Jr. (D) urging him to oppose 12-hour shifts for corrections officers.*

# Connecticut Corrections Employees Win Major Victory

Five-thousand Connecticut state corrections employees – members of Locals 387, 391 and 1565 (AFSCME Council 4) – will get a wage hike totaling 8 percent over three years. The increases were due in January.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell (R) initially urged legislators to reject an arbitrated contract award, citing a projected \$5 billion budget deficit over the next two years. But the corrections employees fought back. The General Assembly rebuffed the governor and the award became law on February 13.

“Instead of rolling over, we used the economic crisis as an opportunity to mobilize prison employees to stand

up for their rights,” says David Moffa, a CO at the Cheshire Correctional Facility and president of Local 387. “We reminded them that public services face higher risks during these difficult financial times and must be protected.

“When we have union solidarity and are politically involved – calling legislators, attending hearings and showing up at the Capitol to demonstrate our resolve – we can achieve great things.”

Contract talks between the union and the Department of Corrections began in September 2007 and went to arbitration in February 2008. ●



Larry Dorman

Local 1565 members, from left, Brett Owen, Tonia McCown, Ken Sharkey and Pres. Luke Leone at a recent House Appropriations Committee hearing.

## Pontiac Prison Saved



Line Cohen

Hundreds of Council 31 members and supporters march on the Illinois State Capitol in March.

Shortly after Gov. Patrick Quinn (D) took office in February, he looked at the facts about the Pontiac Correctional Center and then announced that it will stay open. He noted that a Livingston County judge, acting on a lawsuit brought by Council 31, temporarily blocked the layoff of Pontiac workers pending resolution of the union’s grievance that the state failed to meet its obligation to bargain with AFSCME first. Quinn also took into account a temporary restraining order by a Johnston County judge last November that prevented further

prison transfers pending a hearing.

The 137-year-old prison is the city’s largest employer with nearly 600 people. The decision will “prevent hundreds of families from being uprooted, and allow Pontiac to maintain one of its largest sources of revenue,” Quinn said.

For almost a year, uncertainty surrounded the future of the facility. Ousted Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D) had wanted to shut it down by Dec. 31.

But thousands of AFSCME members, residents and supporters rallied

to save the maximum-security prison, which houses more than 45,000 adult inmates. School children wrote letters to Blagojevich describing how their families would be hurt by the closing. “Everybody did a great job of pulling together, letting the governor’s office know that this is a bad idea, this is not good for Illinois,” said Danny Jarrett, president of Local 494 (Council 31).

Added Cameron Watson, a CO at the high minimum-security Jacksonville Correctional Center and president of Local 3549 (Council 31): “By closing a maximum-security prison, they were pushing maximum inmates into medium facilities and medium inmates into facilities like mine. They were juggling all these balls to try to implement the Pontiac closure, and something was going to fall.”

“We have a lot at stake here,” Jarrett explained further. “Transfers from Pontiac’s population would affect the safety of officers at every correctional center.”

Corrections officers, employees and the city’s residents welcomed the news of the governor’s action. Even Pontiac Mayor Scott McCoy (R) “got up and did the happy dance,” according to news reports. ●



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## The Latest Buzz

**W**ant to know where other ACU members stand on critical issues, like shift lengths, the benefits and dangers of reduced prison terms, stress, survival on the job and the public image of COs? Visit [www.afscme.org/corrections](http://www.afscme.org/corrections) and join the ACU Online Network.

Online participants are also exchanging information about the cost-saving measures of corrections departments across the nation. Ohio prisons are cutting out the free coffee, while inmates at the Des Moines, Iowa County jail may have to start paying for toilet paper. "I'm all for rationing products and eliminating those that are not necessary," says Amanda Rasmussen of the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and a member of Local 405 (Oregon Council 75). "At a time when employees in our state are being asked to take 24 furlough days and pay cuts, it's about time someone trims the fat served to inmates."

More than 80,000 AFSCME members put their lives on the line working in our nation's prisons and jails. Join your brothers and sisters in the ACU Online Network to discuss the issues you care about, learn what's going on around the country and exchange information and ideas. Through this network, you can also sign on to access documents on workplace stress, MRSA and other issues. ●

## CORRECTIONS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT CONFERENCE **SAVE THE DATE!**

AFSCME Corrections and law enforcement officers will hold their second joint conference **Friday, November 13 through Sunday, November 15, 2009** at Planet Hollywood in Las Vegas, Nev.

Each group will have individualized workshops and training sessions.

Information and registration forms will be available soon at [www.afscme.org](http://www.afscme.org).

