Fallen Corrections Officer Remembered

Sgt. Barbara Ester was simply doing her job one Friday morning, responding to a report that an inmate had contraband items. That was her duty as a property officer at the East Arkansas Regional Unit. But when she attempted to investigate, the inmate stabbed her with a sharp object. Sergeant Ester was rushed to the infirmary and later transported by helicopter to a hospital where she died. She was 47 years old.

A founding member of Local 2899 (Arkansas Council 38), Ester was a 12-year veteran of the facility. Her husband and co-worker, Lathen Ester, said that his wife of six years was loved by everybody who knew her.

“She was a mother to a lot of the younger inmates coming in who didn’t have the mother figure in their lives. She just cared about people.”

Local 2899 Pres. Willie Robinson asked for prayers for her family and fellow corrections officers. “Sister Ester went to work every day knowing she may not come home alive,” Robinson said.

Yet she went about her job with a great sense of pride, because she cared. She will be greatly missed by our AFSCME family.”

The alleged killer has been in jail since 2001, serving a sentence for first-degree murder. He was immediately moved to a maximum security wing at the prison. Corrections officials say Ester’s killing is the first death of a corrections officer at the hands of an inmate since 1995.

Private Prison Advocate Loses Recall Election

Russell Pearce, the controversial architect of Arizona’s immigration law and once considered the most powerful politician in Arizona with strong ties to the private prison industry, became in 2011 the first Arizona legislator ever to lose a recall election. He was also the first state Senate president in U.S. history to face such defeat when he lost in November to fellow conservative Republican Jerry Lewis. Lewis does not support cracking down on undocumented immigrants and has vowed to reject gifts from lobbyists.

The private prison industry had worked with Pearce to craft a law that would benefit for-profit firms by providing a steady stream of new inmates, notably undocumented immigrants. In 2010, Pearce authored Arizona’s anti-immigration law, SB-1070. It was drafted at a meeting of the powerful, corporate-funded American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), known for crafting model bills aimed at enriching specific industries like private prison firms.

Pearce was instrumental in pushing the ALEC-inspired model to lock up illegal immigrants – a controversial plan that made no sense to Arizona voters but made a lot of money for private operators. According to Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the nation’s largest private prison firm, immigrant detention is the next big market. As more undocumented workers end up in jail, more profits will fill up the privateers’ pockets.

To highlight the issues raised by the ACLU report, National Public Radio devoted a two-part series in November to private prisons. NPR described what happened to towns like Hardin and Littlefield, and the impact of the for-profit industry to the people who live there. The facilities were meant to be an economic stimulus instead of an economic drain. For more on NPR’s coverage, visit afscme.org/whobenefits.
After working a long overnight shift at the New Lisbon Correctional Institution in Wisconsin, Corrections Officer Tina Cottingham could be forgiven if she drove right past what looked like nothing more than a pile of trash in the road.

But something about it didn’t look right to Cottingham, a member of the Wisconsin State Employees Union Local 134 (Council 24). She decided to take a closer look. What she found was a disoriented elderly woman, curled up on the road shivering in the darkness of a cold morning in January this year.

Cottingham ran back to her car and positioned it in the road with its lights shining on the woman to protect her from other traffic. “She easily could have been run over,” Cottingham recalls.

After calling 911, Cottingham began tending to the woman, who was freezing on the 18-degree morning. “I had a wool blanket that I wrapped her in,” she said. “Then I let her lean against me for warmth.” A sheriff’s deputy was soon on the scene, followed by an ambulance within about 10 minutes.

Like any hero, Cottingham downplays her efforts that morning. “I would hope that anybody would do what I did,” she said. But she is troubled when she remembers that at least two other vehicles rolled on by as if nothing was wrong during those first desperate moments when she was alone with the victim.

The victim, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, was hospitalized. She suffered broken bones in a confused journey that apparently took her over rough terrain before she collapsed in the road about a half mile from her home.

“We are proud of Tina Cottingham,” says Marty Beil, executive director of Council 24. “She risked her own safety to save the life of a citizen in great peril.”

Corrections Officer’s Sharp Eyes Save a Life

Tina Cottingham

Photo: Cottingham Family
For decades, the multi-billion dollar private prison industry used to get its way. But not anymore. Sensing an increasingly wary public opposed to prison privatization, several states immediately slammed the door on an enticing offer in January this year by Corrections Corporation of America. CCA, the nation’s largest private prison firm, offered to buy and operate corrections facilities in 48 states in exchange for a 20-year management contract and a guarantee that these prisons would remain at least 90 percent full.

But prison departments in California, Georgia and Texas all dismissed the idea. A divided Florida Senate struggled to get a massive prison privatization scheme passed, but 10 Senate Republicans joined Democrats in stopping the move. Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal had to back off from a similar plan when his legislative allies couldn’t round up enough votes to pass the bill. CCA tried to buy five in Ohio, but had to settle for one.

And through it all, it was a coalition of AFSCME activists, union members, religious congregations, community supporters and civil rights activists that effectively rebuffed the privateers. The coalition raised doubts about their claims of cost savings and program effectiveness – claims that have been debunked by authoritative studies. State legislators, including Republicans, are also standing up to brazen attempts by corporate-backed politicians to muscle through prison privatization bills.

**PEOPLE OVER POLITICS** In Florida, a bipartisan, anti-privatization coalition of 21 senators killed Senate Bill 2038, a reckless measure that would have led to the largest expansion of private prisons in American history. After hours of heated debate pitting colleagues of the same party against each other, the fate of the legislation was sealed with a 21 to 19 vote, handing Gov. Rick Scott a major defeat.

Edwin Buss, head of the Florida Department of Corrections, was forced to resign last year after expressing doubt that a proper “business case” for cost savings could be made. Republican Sen. Mike Fasano was stripped of his chairmanship of the Committee on Criminal Justice Appropriations when he questioned the bill’s accelerated process and the “pay-to-play politics” of private prison companies who value profits over public safety.

Opposition to the legislation came from every part of the political spectrum, and included Senate Republicans, the tea party and the NAACP. They were united in decrying the bill as bad for Florida because it jeopardizes communities at risk and eliminates good-paying Florida jobs. Beating back this bill saved 4,000 public jobs in a state that suffers the fifth-highest unemployment rate in the country.

“This is an important victory against prison privateers,” says Pres. Gerald W. McEntee. “It proves that together, we can win. AFSCME will be there to fight back every step of the way to defend public safety and expose the anti-worker agenda.”

Last year, Ohio Gov. John Kasich’s fire sale of state prisons stirred angry protests from corrections officers and community supporters. State legislators raised doubts about the safety record of for-profit companies and...
conflicts of interest for the Kasich administration. Kasich backed off ultimately and ended up selling only one out of the five that were up for sale. And it appears the privatized prison could cost Ohio taxpayers more in future years. A nonpartisan research organization, Policy Matters Ohio, points out that while the state gets $73 million immediately for the sale, the lease commits the state to pay $4 million annually for 20 years. The sale thus ends up costing the state anywhere from $8- to $15-million more.

Also unanswered is the question of how CCA will generate savings for the state and profits for the private owner. Possible answers could include fewer guards, lower pay, less money spent on training and overcrowded prisons.

In Maine, a bill to allow a privately run prison carried over from last year’s session, died in committee after lawmakers were told no one is interested in running the facility. The bill lacked enough support to pass and was voted dead by the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee.

Arizona has announced plans to award 2,000 additional prison beds to private contractors, despite a recent statement by the Arizona auditor general that for-profit imprisonment in Arizona may cost more than incarceration in publicly-operated facilities. According to news reports, private prison employees and corporate officers contributed money to Gov. Jan Brewer’s re-election campaign, and high-ranking Brewer administration officials previously worked as private prison lobbyists.

In Louisiana, AFSCME stalled a move by Gov. Bobby Jindal and his allies to sell the Avoyelles Correctional Center to a private prison operator. Working with a national coalition to fight prison privatization, AFSCME members flexed their muscles and raised a public outcry. Some legislators continue to express deep concern about the wisdom of selling off the state’s assets. In 2011, the Legislature narrowly defeated Jindal’s proposal to sell three state prisons to private companies.

LEGISLATIVE LIMBO In Michigan, the Senate already passed legislation to allow the state to house prisoners in privately operated prisons – provided they could save 10 percent in costs. But the bill remains stuck in the House of Representatives where Republicans enjoy a 63 to 47 majority and only 56 “yes” votes are needed for passage. That’s because eight House Republicans, along with all the House Democrats, are unwilling to back the measure.

What forced the stalemate on prison privatization legislation in Michigan was the effective campaign launched this year by a broad coalition of immigrant rights, criminal justice and other organizations targeting private prison companies like CCA and the GEO Group. Early this year, the United Methodist Church Board of Pension and Health Benefits voted to sell off nearly $1 million in stocks from both private prison companies. The decision by the largest faith-based pension fund in the United States came in response to concerns expressed last May by the church’s immigration task force and a group of national activists. The church, they asserted, should not profit from corporations making billions of dollars from the incarceration of illegal immigrants and minorities.

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Prisons and Profits Don’t Mix

In February, AFSCME scored a major victory in Florida when we overcame overwhelming odds to beat back a prison privatization bill. It was a bruising blow to Gov. Rick Scott and his continued efforts to sell off the Sunshine State.

Our efforts to galvanize public opposition to prison privatization also succeeded in Louisiana when Gov. Bobby Jindal backed off from a plan to sell state property.

In Michigan, a controversial bill – currently stuck in the House of Representatives – was introduced by state Rep. Jon Bumstead in November last year – nine days after he accepted a campaign contribution from a vice president for GEO Group, Inc., a Florida-based private prison corporation. GEO Group’s rocky finances leave little doubt that the company has a vested interest in the privatization of Michigan’s prisons. The company publicly acknowledged that its survival depends on “its ability to secure, develop and manage new correction, detention and mental health facilities, with government partnerships most vital.” And GEO has a prison sitting empty in Michigan that it desperately wants to open. The prison, formerly a juvenile facility, had a horrible safety record and was closed in 2005.

In all three cases, our members forged a national coalition of union members, faith-based leaders and community supporters that put the heat on state legislators. We rallied on the Capitol steps in Tallahasee and Baton Rouge, made calls and visits to local representatives, and used the airwaves to educate the taxpayers and move them to action.

We commend those courageous lawmakers who stand with us, like Florida State Sen. Mike Fasano (a Republican), who oppose prison privatization because they value public safety more than the profit for private prison companies.

But prison privateers, especially Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), will not back down. They have grown rapidly during the past few decades – first during the expansion of state prison systems at the height of the “war on drugs” and more recently in the federal government’s drive to lock up undocumented immigrants. To make sure they get legislators to do their bidding, these for-profit firms have donated large sums to political campaigns.

Executives from the GEO Group and its affiliates donated more than $800,000 to campaigns in Florida alone in the 2010 elections. We exposed CCA’s offer to 48 states to buy public prisons in exchange for a guarantee to keep them at least 90 percent full for 20 years. The motivation, of course, is to ensure that CCA’s growing business in incarceration will remain profitable. AFSCME, along with our allies, also wrote to all governors who got CCA’s sales pitch, urging them to decline the offer. CCA’s proposal is an invitation to fiscal irresponsibility, prisoner abuse and decreased public safety.

Prisons and Profits Don’t Mix

Corporate-backed politicians are sure to keep pushing prison privatization efforts, but AFSCME will be there to fight back every step of the way to defend public safety and expose their anti-worker agenda. AFSCME is committed to ending the reckless privatization that threatens the jobs of the 100,000 law enforcement officers we represent, and public safety for all Americans.

Corrections Officer of the Year

Members of AFSCME Corrections United (ACU) honored Ethelind Baylor with the “Corrections of the Year” Award during the Spring meeting of the ACU National Steering Committee. A corrections officer for 11 years at the Detention Center in Philadelphia, Pa., and a member of Local 159 (Council 33), Baylor teaches full-time at the facility and helps inmates earn their GED (General Education Development) diplomas. More than a dozen inmates received their GEDs last year, a feat that makes Baylor very proud. “I’m just glad to have made a difference,” she says, “so they can turn their lives around and be assured of job opportunities when they get out.” With Baylor, from left, is husband Kenwin (also a CO), Local 159 Pres. Lorenzo North and ACU National Chair Glenn Middleton, also an international vice president.
Bloated Profits, Bankrupt Towns

Prosperity. Jobs. Increased revenues. That’s what the GEO Group, the nation’s second largest for-profit prison company, promised the 5,700 residents of the west Texas farming town of Littlefield in 2000. All they had to do was build a prison and the inmates would come.

Lured by that promise, city officials borrowed $10 million and constructed the Bill Clayton Detention Center, a 372-bed, medium-security facility with a razor wire fence, state-of-the-art control room, gymnasium, law library, classrooms and five living pods.

For eight years, the prison operated by the GEO Group took in contract inmates from Idaho and Wyoming. Revenues filled the town’s coffers. And local residents found jobs as prison employees.

But what seemed like a good idea then soured two years ago. Idaho cancelled its contract and pulled out all of its inmates. Shortly afterwards, GEO Group gave up and left. One hundred prison jobs disappeared. And the facility has been empty ever since. To avoid defaulting on the loan, Littlefield raised property taxes, increased water and sewer fees, laid off city employees and paid $65,000 a month to pay the note on the prison.

An activist pickets the Nashville, Tenn., headquarters of Corrections Corporation of America to protest corporate profit from incarceration.

‘BANKING ON BONDAGE’
And that’s exactly what happened. A scheme to build a 460-bed detention facility in Hardin and create more than 100 high-paying jobs didn’t work. After two years, the $27 million jail remained empty, completely unused. Meanwhile, the private company that pitched the speculative and risky prison project continued to reap millions in profits from their other ventures.

According to Brave New Foundation, a media organization that champions social justice issues, CCA and the GEO Group have spent more than $20 million to lobby local, state and federal officials and donate to candidates. They do so to have more facilities built and to increase their already bloated profits. It’s the privateers who clearly benefit when a private prison comes to town.

Last summer, Littlefield auctioned off the empty prison for $6 million. Saddled with more than $9 million in debt, the town still owes $3 million on the facility.

The same thing has happened to other towns in Texas and across the country. Desperate for funds, the impoverished town of Hardin, Mont., fell for the same promises of jobs and economic payoff. “The private prison industry looks for struggling small towns,” says Frank Smith of the Private Corrections Institute, a Florida-based group that opposes privatization. “They come in looking very impressive, saying ‘We’ll make money rain from the skies.’ In fact, they don’t care whether it works or not.”

During the past four decades, the private prison industry has become a lucrative business, thanks to high incarceration rates. CCA and The GEO Group rake in profits of more than $5 billion a year.

A scathing report released recently by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “Banking on Bondage: Private Prisons and Mass Incarceration,” details how private firms feed and profit from mass incarceration in the United States. The report also provides more examples of towns across the country, like Littlefield and Hardin, which were promised economic benefits, only to end up wishing they’d never have gotten in the private prison business.

“For private prisons, more crime equals more prisoners and more prisoners equals more profit,” the report states. “It’s no wonder that for-profit prisons support immigrant detention, mandatory minimum sentences, and ‘truth in sentencing’ and ‘three strikes’ laws. Large prison populations and harsh sentences result in greater profits. In fact, the success of the private prison industry relies on the country’s opposition to criminal justice reforms and fair