

**Comments by the Honorable Janet D. Howell
Public Safety Subcommittee
(Friday, January 15, 2010)**

Let me start by saying that we appreciate all of you getting up a half hour earlier this morning to meet with us at 7:30 rather than 8 o'clock. I think it's essential that we get an early start so that we can accomplish the tasks ahead of us, before our caucus meetings at 9:30 and the Senate session at 10.

We are in the midst of a critical downsizing of the agencies under the Secretary of Public Safety, and it's very important that this subcommittee have a clear picture of how the agency budgets are changing under the introduced budgets, SB 29 and 30.

The people who elected us to the General Assembly expect us to make well-informed decisions on how we allocate state funds, and so the purpose of this meeting is for us to take the time to make sure that we're well informed.

I made this point one year ago, and it bears repeating. The good news is that serious crime remains low in Virginia (compared to any year since 1967), highway deaths are down, and our prison and jail populations are not growing -- for now.

But we've got lots of bad news. With all of the facility closures already, and all of the other budget cuts this past year, along with layoffs, retirements, and job changes, and the dismal prospect of more to come, it is very understandable that morale is low, especially in our state correctional facilities and field offices in communities all across Virginia.

The decisions we make over the next several weeks will be talked about at great length around the family dinner tables of our employees, who will be looking to us for leadership in these incredibly difficult times.

The first message I would hope that we would send to those who work in our public safety agencies, is that we in this subcommittee recognize the tremendous amount of good work being done to achieve good results in Virginia's criminal justice system, and to keep Virginian families safe.

The men and women in law enforcement, corrections, probation and court services, forensic science, fire and emergency services, veterans services, and the National Guard are doing yeoman's work. They deserve our thanks for their dedication to public service -- especially in these challenging times. Without them, we could not function as a civil society.

I want to add another point. One week ago we read disturbing reports in the media that the Bureau of Justice Statistics had released a national report on sexual victimization in juvenile facilities, mentioning specifically our own Bon Air and Culpeper Juvenile Correctional Centers. There will be no tolerance from this subcommittee for any such incidents, period.

However, from reading some of the news accounts, it seems there may be a disconnect between what the report actually says, and the reactions the release of the report generated. There may also be some questions about the technical methodology of the survey process, the validity of the sample sizes, and the manner in which the results for Virginia are being compared to other states. Some of these questions were addressed on Tuesday by the Board of Juvenile Justice, along with a review of ongoing efforts in the Department of Juvenile Justice to maintain a safe environment.

These are important questions, especially at a time when we have sharply reduced the budgets for our state and local juvenile programs, including alternatives to detention. It is our responsibility to make sure that Virginia's secure juvenile facilities and other essential programs are properly funded. If we don't have the funds to do that, then we need to be very much aware of that in this subcommittee.

For that reason, if there are no objections from the other members of the subcommittee, this morning I will ask Senator Colgan, as Senate Finance Committee chairman, to submit a formal request to JLARC to review the Bureau of Justice Statistics report, and to advise us within a couple of weeks as to the soundness of the conclusions in the report.

We will work closely with JLARC, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and the incoming administration to make sure that Virginia is doing everything necessary to ensure that our state facilities are safe and secure.

And let me emphasize again the members of this subcommittee recognize that the vast majority of our Virginia juvenile correctional officers are very hard-working, conscientious, and professional in carrying out their duties, and that they care very much for the well-being of the young offenders they supervise.

Where there are problems, we will address them in a responsible manner, and we will look forward to working on this issue over the next several weeks.

These are serious times, and I want to have a serious discussion this morning.