

Good Afternoon everyone. On behalf of the entire Department, I would like to extend my warmest appreciation to Lieutenant Governor Hochul, the members of the Legislature, Deputy Secretary Small, and all other distinguished guests, for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here. This event means a great deal to our Department and we are honored by your presence.

This is my 17th consecutive year joining all of you for this special occasion and my fourth as Acting Commissioner. For me personally, it has always been an honor to witness this solemn event. Each time, it has proven to be a bittersweet day for me since we want to celebrate and honor our medal recipients; those men and women who have gone above and beyond their regular daily duties. Yet, the Memorial behind me serves as a sobering reminder of how dangerous those duties can be. We must never forget the 42 individuals whose names are inscribed on the plaques inside our Memorial Room, and the price they paid to protect the people of New York State.

Last year's ceremony was held later in the year and on a smaller scale due to the incident at Clinton Correctional Facility. Unquestionably, that was a very difficult and strenuous time for all of us. However, because of that event, many changes have already been made, further changes will be forthcoming and as I stand before you today, I have no doubt that we are a better, stronger and safer corrections department.

Our agency is often defined by numbers. We have 54 correctional facilities and more than 52,000 inmates. We have 37 Community Supervision offices and roughly 35,000 parolees. People want to talk about the number of programs we offer, our recidivism rates, or the number of post release services we can deliver. But today, I think the one number we should focus upon is 29,000, which is the number of employees who come to work every day to make this Department one of the best in the country. The people we are honoring today are living proof that our staff do not leave their skills and experience behind in their facilities or office locations. Department employees do not hesitate to take action and make a difference in someone's life. We just presented medals to 10 employees, who are here today because of their heroic deeds. But we are also the agency which proudly boasts about the staff who generously give of their time and make donations to local charities, who receive community recognition and who represent this Department with dignity and honor. They too are deserving of recognition.

It is also important to recall the other important reason we have gathered here today. In a few moments, the names of the 42 individuals who lost their lives in the line of duty will be read. They too were brave and deserving of our respect, and we remember each and every one of them for their service to all of us. Every year, after the reading of the 42 names, I make a silent wish and a prayer that we should never have to inscribe another

name into our Memorial Room. We are more aware than ever of the dangers of the daily duties undertaken in our facilities and on the streets within our communities. I believe we have learned through the deaths of the 42 men and women that, in order to successfully carry out our mission, we must be one Department, one agency and one family, that looks out for and takes care of one another.

I would also like to take the opportunity today to briefly acknowledge and thank a number of people. A year ago at this time, many of us were stationed up in the North Country, in the middle of a situation we had hoped would never happen.

It was a very demanding, strenuous, and oftentimes frustrating situation, with a seemingly insurmountable challenge to find two escapees, who could have been hunkered down anywhere within vast stretches of thick wilderness. The assignment was made a little easier by the day in and day out actions of the well trained DOCCS deployed staff, as well as all of our state, federal and local law enforcement partners, but especially, the New York State Police. At this time, I would like to recognize a gentleman who displayed great leadership throughout the search for the escaped inmates. Major Charles Guess, would you please stand up and accept our appreciation for all of your efforts.

I spent a significant amount of time with Major Guess during that ordeal and he always conducted himself as a true professional, but I have to say, Major Guess, I much prefer to be in your company under these circumstances.

I would also like to take a brief moment to acknowledge someone else who has spent a virtual lifetime in the North Country. I have been with DOCCS for over thirty-one years and in that time, I have witnessed many different officials who have forged strong bonds and deep friendships with this agency. But I can honestly say that this Department has no friend more loyal, more considerate, more thoughtful, or more dependable than Assemblywoman Janet Duprey.

For me personally, there are many memories from the search for the two escapees that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. But one event stands out above all else. It happened after one of the canines hit on a scent in a very large wooded area within a sector that was bounded by a number of intersecting roadways. It was decided that if the escapees were hiding within this large wooded area, which covered about six square miles, fixed posts would be set up about every fifty yards on the perimeter roadways, to ensure that they would be spotted if they were to try and slip out. The posts were staffed in part by members of the State Police, but mostly by members of the Department's Correctional Emergency Response Teams, or CERT.

I decided that the best thing that I could do at that time was to go around and thank each and every one of these very brave and determined men and women, who were manning

these posts. So in two separate vehicles, I, together with my Deputy Commissioner for Correctional Facilities, Joseph Bellnier, the state-wide head of CERT, Colonel Denis Bradford, the head of the Clinton CERT, Lieutenant Menard, and the now head of our Crisis Intervention Unit, Scott Kelly, went post by post, where at each post, we exited our vehicles, greeted each CERT member or State Trooper, looked them in the eye, shook their hands, asked them if there was anything they needed, and thanked them profusely for the job they were performing.

I will never forget their reaction as long as I live. Each and every one of them was absolutely bound and determined, with a laser like focus, to complete the mission and retake the two escapees, no matter how long it took, no matter what the weather conditions were, no matter how many back-to-back shifts they had to work, no matter how exhausted any of them may have been, no matter how much sleep they had lost -- they were totally committed and absolutely undeterred. Nothing, and I mean nothing -- was going to prevent them from completing their mission. Unleashing relentless tenacity and unshakeable will power, they were not about to let these two escapees get away with it. It was an experience I will never forget and one that has left me feeling both proud and humbled to be the Acting Commissioner of this agency.

In addition to our CERT members, the total contingent of Department staff who were deployed to aid in the mission to recapture the fugitives included members of our Technical Support Unit, our Crisis Intervention Unit, our Office of Special Investigations, our Canine Units, and facility staff from the Clinton HUB. All of these staff came together as one and worked tirelessly and relentlessly in support of the mission. I would now ask every person here today, who participated in that deployment, to please rise.

For three weeks, all of you carried out round-the clock, grueling and exhaustive search efforts, sometimes in extremely nasty weather conditions and oftentimes over some of the most difficult terrain imaginable. It truly was an impressive feat and a testament to your professionalism, your perseverance, your tenacity and your dedication.

To honor your efforts and express our deepest gratitude, a plaque has been created, that will hang here at the Training Academy. It reads as follows:

In grateful recognition of and appreciation for your tireless efforts and dedicated response in support of capturing the fugitives and keeping the community safe. The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision salutes you.

This plaque will ensure that your hard work and perseverance in helping to get the job done, will never be forgotten.

Thank you and God bless all of you.

6/8/16