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For Immediate Release

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Attention: News Desk

Despite Public Pressure, General Assembly Caves to DOC Budget Increase

Harrisburg, PA – Despite statewide opposition, on Sunday, June 30, the Pennsylvania General Assembly approved a budget for FY2013-2014 that provides a \$75 million budget increase for the Department of Corrections (DOC). Despite massive protests and hundreds of calls, postcards, and emails from constituents in districts across Pennsylvania, legislators inexplicably gave the state prison system an even larger budget increase than Governor Corbett initially requested. This expansive increase flies in the face of efforts by grassroots groups like Decarcerate PA, who recently marched from Philadelphia to Harrisburg to demand that the legislature vote no on an increased prison budget, cancel ongoing prison expansion projects, and invest in creating strong communities instead.

“We marched 113 miles - through rain and heat, from Philadelphia all the way to Harrisburg - to demand that legislators invest in building strong schools and communities, not expanding the state’s prison system.” said Nikki Grant of Decarcerate PA. “This weekend, the majority of legislators proved that they don’t care about what their constituents want. They care more about padding the pockets of the prison system than keeping high-quality teachers in classrooms.”

While this year’s budget avoided some of the draconian cuts to essential public services that have been the hallmark of the Corbett administration, it did little to nothing to restore or repair the devastating damage of prior slashes and still reflects a government that prioritizes incarceration and corporate tax breaks over education, healthcare, and the environment. Public education funding in particular received only a modest increase, leaving 81% of the funding cuts from previous years intact. Statewide healthcare also took a blow, with outpatient Medical Assistance receiving a \$140 million cut, and the budget for inpatient medical assistance being cut by more than 50%. Funding for conservation and natural resources was also slashed by 43%. In contrast, the Department of Corrections is receiving an additional \$75 million, taking their total state funding from \$1.87 billion to over \$1.94 billion. This is in addition to the \$400 million in capital funds currently being used to build two new prisons in Montgomery County.

Despite the budget receiving the majority vote in both the House and Senate, there were some legislators who had the courage to take a stand against out-of-control prison growth. Representatives Ronald Waters and James Roebuck, Senator Daylin Leach, and others, voted no on the budget in part to express their opposition to the increase in DOC funding.

“It is critical that Pennsylvania fund education over incarceration,” said State Representative Ron Waters. “I am disappointed that my colleagues chose to pour even more money into the prison system instead of allocating much needed resources towards creating brighter futures for children in Philadelphia and across the state. As the saying goes, “he who opens a school door, closes a prison”; but here in Pennsylvania, we have gotten into the practice of closing school doors and opening prisons in their stead.”

As communities across the state struggle to deal with two years of drastic budget cuts – resulting in school closings and thousands of teachers laid off from Philadelphia to Reading to Harrisburg and beyond – the Department of Corrections is embarking on the second most expensive construction project in Pennsylvania history. Costing over \$400 million, the controversial SCI Phoenix I and II will hold 4,100 people, adding over 700 beds to the state prison system even if the Department of Corrections makes good on its promise to “mothball” or decommission SCI Graterford. Over the past two months, hundreds of people in counties across the state have contacted their legislators to demand that they cancel this unnecessary prison expansion, refuse to give the DOC another massive budget increase, and invest resources in building strong communities, not more prison cells.

Voicing his opposition to the budget, State Senator Daylin Leach said, “Any time we increase funding for Corrections more than we increase funding for Education, Environmental Protection, or other programs that help Pennsylvania families, our priorities are out of order.”

Activists across the state vow to continue the fight against education cuts and prison expansion. “Everywhere we go in Pennsylvania, we hear from people that their communities are hurting because of Governor Corbett’s backwards budget priorities,” said Tot Metz of Decarcerate PA. “We are disappointed in the legislature for ignoring the needs of the people, but this isn’t over. Communities across the state are fighting back. The General Assembly would be wise to stand with the people and against prison expansion, or see themselves out of a job next election.”

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Decarcerate PA is a grassroots campaign working to end mass incarceration in Pennsylvania. We demand that PA stop building prisons, reduce the prison population, and reinvest money in our communities.