



2026 CLA On the Hill

Remarks of ADAG Diego Pestana

DATE: Tuesday, June 23, 2026

TIME: 9:15 AM

LOCATION: Hilton Capitol Hill

Good morning. It's a privilege to join all of you here today. I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to Director Rob Jeffreys and the entire Correctional Leaders Association for your leadership, for bringing together correctional professionals from across the country, and for the invitation to speak here today.

I also want to acknowledge the leadership of President Trump, Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, BOP Director Bill Marshall, and Deputy Director Josh Smith and their commitment to supporting law enforcement and correctional officers nationwide.

And finally, to all the state and local correctional leaders here today: thank you for the work you do and for the partnership you bring to our shared mission.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to share briefly where we will go today. I will start by discussing the strength of our federal–state partnership in corrections, the indispensable role of correctional officers, and our efforts to reinforce institutional integrity, including through the prosecution of corruption cases.

From there, I will turn to rehabilitation and reentry, including important updates to BOP’s food service policies and the alignment of national menus with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

I will also discuss new Bureau policies, which replace a prior framework shaped heavily by ideology with one grounded in science, caselaw, expert review, and correctional best practices.

Finally, I will address an emerging set of threats that affect all of us: the criminal misuse of drones and how DOJ is supporting SLTT partners under the Safer Skies Act.

Taken together, these topics all point to the same core truth: that our success—your success, our officers’ safety, and the stability of our institutions—depends on evidence-based policy, strong collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to integrity and professionalism.

I. The Federal–State Partnership in Corrections

One of the core themes of our work at DOJ is the strength of the federal–state partnership in corrections. We operate separate systems, but we face remarkably similar challenges: staffing shortages, rising inmate complexity, contraband threats, and evolving security risks. These challenges do not respect jurisdictional boundaries, which is why collaboration between BOP and state correctional leaders is essential.

Our success—in safety, reentry, and operational stability—depends on close, continuous, and candid coordination across systems.

It is worth remembering that this partnership rests on deep historical roots. More than 155 years ago, in Cincinnati, a remarkable gathering took place—the first National Prison Congress. Delegates from across

the United States and even from Europe came together not simply to manage prisons, but to define what corrections *should* be in a free society. They elected as their first president the Governor of Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes—a man who would later serve as the 19th President of the United States.

At that historic meeting, they adopted the Declaration of Principles, which articulated a profoundly American and forward-looking vision: that the treatment of those in our custody is ultimately for the protection of society, but must be directed toward the reformation and rehabilitation of the individual. This was not mere punishment for its own sake, but a belief in human potential for change—through education, industry, moral guidance, and opportunity.

As correctional leaders today, you are the direct heirs of that vision. Every day you balance the imperative of public safety with the harder, quieter work of creating conditions in which change remains possible.

The modern federal corrections system was born in 1930, when President Herbert Hoover signed legislation creating the Bureau of Prisons. Before

that, there was no centralized federal prison agency. Federal offenders were scattered across state prisons and local jails under inconsistent standards. The catalyst was the dramatic expansion of federal criminal law during the Prohibition era—with its wave of alcohol-related offenses and organized crime cases—that overwhelmed the patchwork arrangement.

Assistant Attorney General Mabel Walker Willebrandt had already begun building specialized facilities for women and for younger offenders. She advocated for professional standards and hired reformer Sanford Bates, who would become the first Director of BOP. The new Bureau was charged with centralized management and providing more progressive and humane care.

One fascinating detail: the United States Penitentiary at Leavenworth—one of the first three federal penitentiaries authorized in the 1890s—was itself largely constructed by inmate labor from the neighboring military disciplinary barracks. Prisoners quarried the stone and raised the massive walls that still define that institution. It is a striking historical

reminder of both the scale of the federal commitment and the complex, enduring relationship between those confined and the institutions that confine them.

These foundations remind us that our federal–state partnership today continues a long American tradition of professionalizing corrections while balancing secure custody with opportunities for positive change.

II. Supporting Correctional Officers

Corrections officers are the backbone of institutional stability. They manage complicated inmate populations, de-escalate volatile situations, and ensure the safety of their colleagues, inmates, and the surrounding communities.

This Administration has been clear in its support of all law enforcement, including correctional officers. At DOJ, we reflect that commitment in our litigation posture, operational decisions, policy development, and resource prioritization.

Under Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche’s leadership, the Department is delivering enhanced training, grants, and resources to federal and state

correctional officers. From advanced professional development and wellness programs to critical funding for recruitment and equipment, we are ensuring that those who serve behind the walls have what they need to maintain safety, foster positive outcomes, and sustain their own long-term effectiveness.

It is also important to recognize that corrections *is* law enforcement and forms a vital part of the broader criminal justice system. Correctional officers and leaders are not simply administrators of facilities—they are sworn professionals who enforce the law daily within our institutions. They uphold court-ordered sentences, maintain order and security in challenging environments, investigate incidents, prevent contraband and violence, and ensure the rule of law extends fully behind the walls just as it does on our streets.

Under Acting Attorney General Blanche and this Department of Justice, that reality is fully acknowledged and strengthened. We treat corrections as a core component of the broader law enforcement community—providing the same level of respect,

resources, training, and interagency coordination afforded to other dedicated officers who protect the public.

The Bureau of Prisons exemplifies this integrated approach by actively assisting law enforcement efforts across the country. For example, BOP has provided critical support to the Memphis Safe Task Force, working hand-in-hand with the local sheriff's department and other partners to combat violent crime, disrupt criminal networks, and enhance community safety.

These collaborative efforts demonstrate how correctional expertise and resources directly bolster state and local operations. Similarly, BOP has lent its operational capabilities to support enforcement against immigration-related offenses, contributing to broader national and homeland security priorities. This work underscores that the daily contributions of correctional officers extend far beyond facility walls—they are essential to the integrity of the entire criminal justice system and to protecting our nation's security.

Your work is foundational to public safety, and you deserve the tools, respect, and protections necessary to perform that mission. As President Ronald Reagan remarked when he instituted the first National Corrections Week, no group of Americans has a more difficult or less publicly visible job than the brave men and women who work in our correctional facilities. To every leader and every officer you represent—thank you for carrying out that difficult and essential work with professionalism and humanity.

III. Institutional Safety, Integrity, and Insider Threats

Institutional safety is not just about physical barriers and staffing ratios—it is also about integrity. Insider corruption remains a real challenge across correctional systems. When correctional officers are recruited or compromised by criminal networks to introduce contraband or facilitate illicit communications, the consequences are severe.

At DOJ, we have aggressively prosecuted corruption cases within BOP. A recent example involves a former corrections officer at a BOP facility who

pleaded guilty to accepting over \$80,000 in bribes for introducing contraband including meth, K2, cell phones, postage stamps, and cigarettes into the facility, and admitted laundering money through fictitious accounts.

Prosecutions like this send a clear and essential message: insider corruption endangers officer safety, compromises institutional security, and will not be tolerated.

IV. Rehabilitation and First Step Act Implementation

Correctional officers and leaders also play a critical role in rehabilitation and reentry. You create the environment in which programming succeeds. You often identify individuals who need specific interventions. And you help maintain order so classes, treatment programs, and vocational initiatives can run safely.

This Administration, under President Trump and with the leadership of Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, firmly believes in the power of second chances—for those who have earned them. We recognize that true justice is not only about

accountability but also about redemption for individuals who demonstrate genuine rehabilitation and a sincere commitment to reintegrating as productive, law-abiding members of society.

This belief is not abstract. Through the continued implementation and expansion of the First Step Act and related initiatives, we are prioritizing evidence-based programming, earned time credits, and reentry support that reward positive change.

For inmates who engage in recidivism-reducing programs, maintain good conduct, and show readiness to contribute responsibly upon release, we support pathways such as expanded home confinement and transitional opportunities. These measures strengthen public safety by reducing recidivism while affirming that America is a nation of second chances—rooted in personal responsibility and the possibility of renewal.

DOJ continues to work to implement the First Step Act as it was originally intended—ensuring eligible individuals receive earned-time credits and have access to programming that supports their successful return to their communities. BOP is being deliberate

with compassionate release and reductions in sentences for inmates, carefully reviewing each request on its merits rather than reflexively denying or granting them. This measured approach ensures fairness, public safety, and fidelity to the law while recognizing genuine rehabilitation. We appreciate the innovation many of you have developed at the state level and look forward to deeper collaboration.

As part of strengthening rehabilitation and reentry outcomes, the Bureau of Prisons has undertaken significant improvements to food service operations. Drawing from the updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans, BOP has issued national menu adjustments that prioritize healthier, less-processed, and nutritionally balanced meals—such as replacing skim milk with Vitamin D milk, reintroducing eggs throughout the week, phasing out processed breakfast cakes, eliminating most pre-packaged desserts, and making fresh fruit the default dessert option.

These changes do more than improve daily meal quality. They help reduce chronic illnesses—such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease—that burden correctional health systems. They also

decrease costly medical complications that taxpayers ultimately fund, both during incarceration and after release. When individuals leave custody healthier, the long-term costs to taxpayers decline because they require fewer emergency treatments, less intensive medical intervention, and fewer public-health resources in the community.

Good nutrition stabilizes institutions today, strengthens rehabilitation tomorrow, and delivers savings to the public over the long run. Good food is not a luxury; it is a public-safety and fiscal-responsibility strategy.

Cesare Beccaria, in his influential work *On Crimes and Punishments*, argued forcefully against excessive or arbitrary penalties and for swift, certain, and proportionate justice aimed at deterrence and the greater public good. He warned that overly harsh punishments could undermine the very moral order they sought to protect, while measured, humane responses better served both the offender and society. His ideas profoundly influenced the Founding generation and the development of American criminal justice, reinforcing that punishment must

serve reason and humanity rather than mere vengeance.

In our modern correctional systems, Beccaria's emphasis on proportionality and reform continues to guide efforts like the First Step Act—reminding us that effective rehabilitation, when paired with accountability, benefits everyone by reducing future crime and strengthening communities.

Similarly, philosopher Immanuel Kant offered a powerful complementary view: that holding people accountable for their actions is a fundamental demand of justice itself. Punishment should respect the dignity of the individual as a rational person capable of responsibility, rather than treating them merely as a tool for other goals. At the same time, this approach leaves room for genuine reformation and improvement.

That same balance of accountability and hope for change runs through the 1870 Declaration of Principles and the creation of the Bureau of Prisons. In your daily work supporting rehabilitation, you embody this synthesis: firm accountability that protects society and upholds the rule of law, paired

with programs that affirm the potential for redemption.

V. Data-Driven Policy and Learning from the States

One of the most important principles guiding federal correctional policy is our reliance on data, caselaw, and correctional expertise—not ideology.

Take, for example, the gender-dysphoria policy adopted by BOP. In crafting that policy, we looked extensively at the experiences and best practices you have developed in your systems. Many state correctional institutions have managed this issue longer than BOP has, and your insights helped shape federal policy that enhances safety, compliance, and operational clarity.

This is how our systems should work: federal authorities learning from states, and states learning from federal experience.

BOP’s revised policy on Management of Inmates with Gender Dysphoria significantly updates the federal approach to gender dysphoria in custody. The previous policy relied heavily on guidelines that

numerous courts, experts, and medical reviews criticized for insufficient scientific rigor and ideological bias, especially in correctional settings. Sound policy must rest on evidence, not ideology.

Justice Clarence Thomas addressed this in his concurring opinion in *United States v. Skrmetti*. In that opinion, Justice Thomas highlighted how one of the organizations at issue allowed its recommendations to be influenced by non-medical pressures. That resulted in allowing ideology to shape what should be evidence-based medical guidance.

The new BOP policy moves away from that approach. It is grounded in clinical evidence, caselaw, medical-expert analysis, and practical experience from state systems. It emphasizes individualized treatment plans—including psychotherapy, counseling, psychiatric support, and appropriate medications—while ensuring decisions reflect security needs, correctional realities, and constitutional obligations. The goal is a policy built on evidence and sound correctional practice, not on ideology or external pressure.

Before joining DOJ, I represented clients inside prisons as a defense attorney. I saw firsthand the importance of stable conditions—consistent access to counsel, reliable communication systems, and well-run health services.

These experiences help remind me that correctional decisions are not abstract—they affect people’s constitutional rights, health, and chances for successful reentry.

In recent months, I’ve visited correctional facilities and met directly with wardens, correctional officers, medical teams, and regional leadership. These discussions highlighted the operational pressures you face—staffing, contraband trends, inmate mental-health needs, and aging infrastructure—and they informed our policy updates, including nutrition reforms, gender-dysphoria guidance, and counter-drone strategy. Your front-line expertise is essential, and DOJ will continue to rely on it as we move forward.

VI. Transition: Emerging Threats That Affect All of Us

Even with robust officer support, reentry efforts, and integrity protections, correctional institutions today face a rapidly evolving landscape of external threats.

Among the most significant: the criminal use of unmanned aircraft systems—drones—to threaten the security of correctional facilities.

And so I want to turn now to that growing threat and discuss what DOJ is doing—and how we can continue doing that work together.

VII. Drone Threats Facing Federal and State Facilities

Drones have transformed how criminal organizations attempt to move contraband. We are seeing:

- Contraband drops containing narcotics, cell phones, and weapons components
- Drone-enabled surveillance of correctional facilities
- Complex criminal coordination between outside actors and compromised insiders

These developments have reshaped contraband-interdiction strategies at both federal and state institutions.

Drone threats do not stop at a jurisdictional fence line. When a method shows up in a state prison, it soon shows up in a federal facility—and vice versa.

VIII. DOJ Enforcement and Legal Frameworks Supporting Counter-Drone Work

Under Acting Attorney General Blanche's leadership, the DOJ issued guidance to all U.S. Attorney's Offices identifying the federal criminal statutes most commonly implicated when drones are used to introduce contraband, conduct illicit surveillance, or interfere with protected operations—including operations at correctional facilities. The purpose of that guidance is clear: to help U.S. Attorney's prioritize, charge, and aggressively pursue drone-related offenses, ensuring prosecutors apply the right statutes quickly and effectively.

In addition, Acting Attorney General Blanche recently issued a memorandum providing critical clarity for law enforcement and correctional officers. The memo acknowledges the growing threat posed

by drones and directs federal prosecutors not to bring charges under particular federal statutes, when state and local law enforcement or correctional officers engage in defensive counter-drone actions of the type contemplated under federal law.

This policy ensures officers can take lawful defensive action without fear of federal prosecution.

Together, these guidance documents strengthen DOJ's ability to pursue offenders while supporting officers who act to protect their facilities.

IX. Examples of DOJ Enforcement Actions

Recent federal prosecutions highlight how seriously DOJ treats unlawful drone activity:

- In the Middle District of Tennessee, a man pleaded guilty after planning to attack an energy facility with a drone containing explosives.
- In the District of Maryland, a man pleaded guilty after operating a drone over a Stadium during an NFL game, underscoring DOJ's enforcement in national defense airspace.

These cases show how quickly drones can threaten sensitive operations—and why we must treat drone threats to correctional facilities with the same urgency.

X. Safer Skies Act and Support for SLTT Counter-Drone Missions

One of the most significant recent developments is the Safer Skies Act, which expands legal authority for state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement—including correctional agencies—to participate in drone detection and mitigation missions in coordination with federal partners.

Under this framework, SLTT correctional officers can:

- Participate in joint counter-drone operations
- Receive DOJ-approved training
- Conduct authorized detection and mitigation activity at or near correctional facilities

DOJ strongly supports increasing SLTT participation in counter-drone operations. These missions are essential to addressing contraband delivery,

preventing drone-enabled surveillance, and disrupting criminal networks.

XI. Continuing Federal–State Collaboration

At DOJ, we have prioritized drone-related threats to correctional facilities and will continue building cases with your help. At the same time, we know enforcement alone is not enough. That is why we are expanding:

- Technology partnerships
- Real-time information sharing
- Investigative collaboration
- Training and guidance for correctional agencies

BOP is also being proactive in its discussions and outreach to Congress—providing data, operational insights, and practical recommendations to inform federal policy.

This mirrors the proactive approach many of you in the Correctional Leaders Association take when engaging with your state legislatures. By sharing frontline experience and evidence-based perspectives, we all help shape smarter, more effective laws and

resources. We will also continue aggressively prosecuting insider corruption cases that destabilize facilities and undermine officer safety.

XII. Closing

I want to close by reaffirming that DOJ values its partnership with the Correctional Leaders Association. Our shared mission—protecting officers, securing institutions, and maintaining public safety—depends on strong collaboration, open communication, and mutual support.

Thank you for your leadership, your service, and your commitment to this essential work.

Thank you.