

COMMISSIONER JOE SCHMIDT keynote address to the Correctional Officer Academy No.103 graduating ceremony, April 13, 2007, at the Wilda Marsden Theater in Anchorage:

Good afternoon. You all came together from around the state to take on an important challenge. You studied both the physical and academic aspects of our business. And you came together as a team.

By now you all know the importance of working together, supporting each other and being true to your team, and your department. These traits will be invaluable when you all return to your facilities next week.

A correctional academy is not an easy course to pass, congratulations.

The work we do is vital to the success of our communities, and it is much more important than most people think. Our communities function the way they do, in part as a result of the service we provide. We provide separation between offenders and the community, we offer tools to offenders for use in their lives and we provide supervision as an offender re enters his or her community. These important tasks help the people of our communities trust our justice system as a whole.

Our work allows communities to turn its offenders over to us and to know that they will be safe – both the prisoner and the community.

Societies no longer take matters into their own hands, or live in fear of offenders; because of the work we do. The public knows a fair system exists to remove and separate individuals who set out to do harm.

The police, the courts and corrections all work together, to make up our system, and we provide a vital piece of the public safety family. We provide separation, control, consistency and a sense of fairness. We safely hold offenders while the courts determine guilt or innocence and we manage them throughout their sentences.

Control of our prison population is accomplished through fair and impartial management.

Our nation was founded on the premise of freedom, and we have fought wars over our freedom, or the freedom of others. Now think about what we do. We limit freedom. We must be thoughtful every day of the important role we play.

The public must never lose confidence in our ability to maintain the highest standards of professionalism. And they must never lose confidence in our judgment

The public knows that if mistakes are made in our business, they could have dire consequences. The public must always know that we will do our best, and that our judgment is sound.

Many times, correctional staff only has a few seconds to make a series of decisions, and these decisions may be evaluated for great amounts of time. Because of the importance of these decisions, they are scrutinized by a number of people in a number of venues. Supervisors evaluate the officers' decisions as well as the Officers' decision making process. Local administration evaluates the tone set by the supervisors, and state administration evaluates the entire organization.

Evaluation doesn't stop there.

The legislature holds hearings whereby the direction of the department as a whole is evaluated. They ensure the direction and approach to our business is current with the needs of the public we serve

And the Governor's office stays apprised of current correctional issues, and is consulted prior to large scale directional changes. This oversight serves a vital role in maintaining our ability to effectively serve the public, and it highlights the importance of the job required of us.

Many times, the decisions made by Correctional Officers, and effective procedures as demonstrated by Correctional Officers drive statewide policy. Try to keep this in mind when you return to your facilities next week. The decisions you make on shift are part of a much larger operation; and they have statewide implications.

Our communities depend on us for protection, sound judgment, and fair treatment. The public is depending on us, and they must always receive our best.

I'm sure they will. Thank you all for your commitment, and the work that you do. And remember, do things right, but always do right things.