

COMMISSIONER JOE SCHMIDT'S SPEECH TO CORRECTIONAL OFFICER ACADEMY
Friday, December 15, 2006

COMMISSIONER JOE SCHMIDT keynote address to the Correctional Officer Academy No. 102 graduating ceremony, December 15, 2006, at the Wilda Marsden Theater in Anchorage:

Good afternoon. And congratulations. Completing this academy is not an easy task. It is one you should all be proud of.

Many of us didn't grow up thinking we wanted to work for the Department of Corrections one day. Most of us didn't grow up knowing how important our job is, probably because much of the public does not know what we do or why we do it.

Our country was founded on the premise of freedom—freedom to move about, freedom to pursue a career, freedom to make choices.

Our business serves to limit the freedom of those who harm our communities. Think of how important that is—we ensure the freedom of our communities by limiting the freedom of those who harm them. No one does more to ensure our families and neighbors live without fear. Think of how important it is that we are accountable to the public. The public looks to us for safety and protection. This is no small task; it is a task to be proud of.

Remember how important the Iraqi prison scandal was to the American people. This scandal was concerning prisoners from a different country and a different culture, and it was during a war. Even so, the American public would not stand for that type of treatment. The American people wouldn't stand for it because we are better than that. We realize that the treatment of our prisoners is a strong indicator of our character as a nation. Try to keep this perspective as you conduct business. Every day we represent the character of our nation.

We work in our facilities and field offices 24 hours a day, seven days a week and we exercise more control over people than any other agency. We often times don't work with the public close by, and the public at large does not know much of what we do or why we do it. Due to this dynamic, our boundaries and controls must come from within each and every one of us. You are the front line of our business and the importance of what you do cannot be overstated. Maintaining the highest standards of respect and professional conduct starts inside every single employee.

With the recent private contractor scandal, the eyes of the public are on us now, and we must be vigilant throughout the entire Department. From the Commissioner's Office to our field offices and institutions we all must hold ourselves to the highest standard possible. Always remember that we are public employees, and we will always serve the best interest of the public.

While in public, carry yourself with pride and dedication to our field. While at work, your partners on shift will become like your family. Sometimes you will agree with each other and sometimes you will not, but like brothers and sisters, you would never let anything happen to each other, even at your own risk.

Our primary purpose is to protect the public. From the new Correctional Officer who has a door lock behind them for the first time to the probation officer who is learning to search a house without getting hurt to the new administrative clerk learning how and why we pay our bills, we all work to protect the public from those who harm our communities.

One of the goals of this administration is cooperation. We will respect the process by which the legislature appropriates our budget. Our three divisions will work together helping one another achieve their goals. When one of our divisions has a new or better way to do something, the other divisions will not only be aware of it, but they will be expected to help accomplish the goal. One goal; one department.

As we move forward with the new prison project, this class right now begins a new era. Even though opening a prison is three years in the future, this class is the beginning. You are the beginning because when we open the new facility you will all have three to four years experience in our system. The Mat-Su facility will be the largest in the state. And I know we are up to the challenge.

When you return to your facilities next week, carry yourselves like supervisors. As you decide to say or do something, always think, "Would a supervisor do or say this?" "If I were responsible for the shift or the facility, would I say or do this?" You are the leaders we will depend on when our prisoners are brought back to Alaska. I would like to congratulate each and every one of you on your accomplishment today.

And remember: Do things right . . . but, always do right things.

Thank you.