



## **Statement for the Record**

### **Defending Against Drones: Setting Safeguards for Counter Unmanned Aircraft System Authorities – May 20, 2025**

**By Ricky Dixon, 109th President of the American Correctional Association**

#### **United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary**

My name is Ricky Dixon, and I serve as Secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections and currently serve as the 109th President of the American Correctional Association. I am honored to speak today on behalf of the American Correctional Association, which represents thousands of correctional professionals across the United States. Thank you, Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Durbin, for holding this hearing on the urgent public safety threat posed by the criminal use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS).

Drones have become one of the most dangerous and rapidly evolving tools used by organized criminals to penetrate the secure perimeters of our nation's correctional facilities. Drones are routinely being used to smuggle contraband, including fentanyl, heroin, razor blades and cell phones directly into prison yards and housing units. These incidents are not isolated; they are frequent and highly coordinated.

Organized criminal groups, including domestic gangs and transnational drug cartels, use drones to bypass traditional security systems and smuggle contraband that contributes to violence, drug distribution, and gang activity inside correctional facilities.

The consequences are immediate and severe. Facilities are experiencing overdose deaths from drone-delivered narcotics. Contraband cell phones delivered by drones are used by incarcerated individuals to coordinate gang violence, target witnesses, and orchestrate drug operations. Weapons smuggled in by drones have been used to commit serious assaults.

Most disruptive to correctional operations, however, is the institutional response required when a drone is detected. Any confirmed or suspected drone incursion triggers a full facility lockdown. This means all rehabilitative programming must be suspended, including educational classes, vocational training, substance use disorder treatment, and mental health services. Staff are redirected from therapeutic and rehabilitative functions to search for contraband. These disruptions are not brief. They can last for hours or even days. Repeated incidents undermine the long-term stability of a correctional environment and stall critical progress for individuals preparing for reentry into society.

#### **Executive Committee**

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The American Correctional Association has long supported bipartisan efforts to reduce recidivism, expand treatment, and support reentry success. We have been proud to back critical legislation such as the Second Chance Reauthorization Act and the Residential Substance Abuse Treatment (RSAT) for State Prisoners Reauthorization Act - both of which strengthen the continuum of care and provide vital programming inside correctional facilities.

But these programs cannot be fully effective in facilities where drone activity is constantly disrupting operations and flooding correctional facilities with narcotics and weapons.

Every time a drone breach forces a lockdown, educational and therapeutic services come to a halt, and incarcerated individuals miss opportunities for progress. Counter drone authority is not just about interdiction. It's about safeguarding the very programs Congress has worked hard to support.

And these disruptions come at a time when correctional agencies are already stretched to the limit. Across the country, we are facing significant recruitment and retention in some systems. In some facilities, staff are working mandatory overtime simply to maintain basic operations. The added burden of drone incidents, requiring all-hands responses, extended lockdowns, and increased security operations, further exhausts a workforce already operating under extreme strain. This is not sustainable.

Despite the seriousness of these threats, state and local correctional agencies remain legally prohibited from taking meaningful action against drones. Current federal law limits the use of counter-UAS technologies, such as signal jamming, tracking, and drone interdiction, to just four federal agencies. Even though correctional facilities are among the most frequent and vulnerable targets of drone activity, they are specifically excluded from the tools needed to defend themselves.

This legal gap is dangerous and must be addressed. While many critical infrastructure sectors face drone threats, correctional facilities present a uniquely high-risk environment. Prisons and jails cannot simply evacuate when an incoming drone is spotted. Our staff and those in our custody are on-site 24/7, with no option to pause operations. When drones breach the perimeter, correctional agencies cannot afford to wait for federal authorities to respond. We need lawful authority and tools to act immediately.

This gap in authority is untenable. The legal restrictions imposed on state and local corrections must be lifted if we are serious about securing our facilities and protecting our communities. On behalf of the American Correctional Association, I urge Congress to act now to extend tailored counter-UAS authorities to state, local, and especially correctional agencies.

The federal government has previously recommended pilot programs that would allow state and local governments to implement counter-UAS technologies under federal oversight. During the last Congress the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee advanced legislation to do just that. And importantly, it included correctional institutions as eligible sites. We appreciate that recognition and view it as a meaningful step forward.

However, pilot programs alone are not enough. The threat we are facing is not limited to a few jurisdictions. It is widespread, organized, and escalating rapidly across the country. Hundreds of facilities across the country are seeing daily attempts to deliver dangerous contraband by drone. Limiting counter-UAS capabilities to a small number of pilot sites while the rest of the system remains unprotected is a temporary solution to a permanent and growing threat.

Congress must go further than pilot projects. Lawmakers must establish a legal framework that provides broad-based, but carefully regulated authority for correctional agencies - in addition to other state and local entities - to deploy and operate counter-UAS systems. This framework must be supported by funding, training, oversight, and transparency. It must be scalable and actionable across the entire correctional system, not just in isolated test locations.

Any legislation must explicitly include correctional facilities as part of the national counter-UAS strategy; provide resources to acquire drone detection and mitigation tools; ensure comprehensive staff training on UAS threats and response protocols; and establish oversight mechanisms to safeguard civil liberties and lawful drone use.

Every drone that breaches a prison fence is a direct threat to public safety. Each drone-triggered lockdown halts rehabilitation efforts and disrupts daily operations. And every day without action adds pressure to a correctional workforce already operating under extreme strain.

We are confronting 21st-century threats with outdated tools and without the legal authority to respond. That must change.

On behalf of the American Correctional Association and the corrections professionals we represent, I urge you to act swiftly to empower our institutions with the lawful tools, training, and support they need. We stand ready to assist in advancing a balanced, bipartisan solution.