Good morning everyone,

My name is Elana Lamesse. I am a Probation and Parole Officer and I am also the President of the Probation Officers Association of Ontario. POAO is a voluntary, non-profit organization representing the professional interests of Probation and Parole Officers across Ontario. POAO is an association of like-minded professionals who believe in the work they do and the role they play in the criminal justice community. We are committed to the preservation of the fundamental role of the Probation Officer within community corrections. I would like to thank you for providing us the opportunity to present here today.

The Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services has a mandate to protect the public by establishing, maintaining and operating adult correctional Institutions, and Probation and Parole Offices in Ontario. In our communities, Probation and Parole Officers strive to meet that mandate by supervising convicted offenders who receive a sentence that allows them to stay in the community on probation, conditional sentence or early release on parole.

Corrections in Ontario has recently received a lot of media attention, partly because of the threat of a strike, but more so because of the ongoing major incidents that unfortunately have become far too commonplace in our business. Those incidents are not simply isolated events, but are the symptoms of a system that has broken down from neglect and poor management. Bear in mind that the public only hears about a fraction of the incidents that occur on an ongoing basis within the walls of our institutions as well as our probation offices. As a charter member of the Critical Incident Stress Management Team, I can tell you that these incidents are becoming more and more commonplace as officers find themselves in risky situations on a more consistent basis. I believe in the critical incident stress management model, but my heart sinks a little bit
each time I receive a call activating me to respond to the needs of a colleague who has suffered some form of trauma in the workplace.

Correctional Services, like any other system in government, requires resources to operate effectively. When those resources are denied, the system suffers. In Corrections this has come to a critical point where the safety of our community, our staff and the offenders we serve is being significantly compromised.

I am here today to focus on Community Corrections. Our Probation and Parole Services monitor over 50,000 offenders in the communities of Ontario on any given day.

The Ontario Auditor General, Bonnie Lysyk, identified some alarming trends in the 2014 Audit of Adult Community Corrections Services. I will share the following highlights:

- Ontario has the highest offender population of all Provinces and Territories.
- Ontario Probation and Parole Officers have the highest caseload averages in Canada.
- Ontario government spends the second least on Probation and Parole services in Canada ($5.81/day per offender)
- 44% of our offenders are classified in the high to very high risk category.
- By the Ministry’s own estimates, the number of offenders with mental health issues has grown by almost 90% since 2003 to about 10,000, or 20% of the entire offender population as of 2013, yet the Ministry has provided no resources and minimal training to help officers deal with this workload pressure.
As a Probation and Parole Officer for the last 25 years, I can say that I have some considerable knowledge of the subject matter. Our POs are a dedicated and skilled group of professionals who continue to give their all to deliver on the mandate of our Ministry. Sadly we just cannot meet all of the requirements of the job with the staffing levels that are presently in place. That means that public safety suffers, officers suffer from burnout and vicarious trauma and offenders are not supervised to our fullest capacity.

Almost all of the disconcerting facts uncovered in the Auditor General’s report can in some direct or indirect fashion be attributed to a serious lack of resources. Human resources. The recent agreement to hire 25 new officers is comforting however this action does not even drop the caseload average in Ontario by a single percentage point.

What the Auditor General’s report does not highlight, is that our Ministry does have a robust program model and the standards of supervision that our government sets, are as high as, if not higher than the rest of this country.

PPOs in Ontario have carried the highest national workload for more than two decades. Despite this fact, our Ministry continued to increase the duties and responsibilities of officers to administer their case supervision.

A new style of supervision is on our horizon as well. This style entails an intensive amount of training along with a new way of interacting with our clients. Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision, or STICS. Where Probation Officers are being trained to apply evidence-based principles of offender rehabilitation in all aspects of client supervision. Training for this initiative is designed to enhance the skills of probation officers to include structured one to one intervention techniques that target the criminogenic needs of medium and high risk offenders in the community. Make no mistake, POAO is behind this initiative and believes
that it can be an integral tool used by Probation Officers to rehabilitate offenders and keep our communities safe. Our fear is that there will be no resources to accommodate the extra duties that front line officers will be forced to take on in an effort to meet the increasing demands of our caseloads. This will also result in less time for other workload requirements. This has been an ongoing theme within this ministry for more than a decade. At some point, with enough pressure, any dam will break, and I put it to you that in our case, it already has, regardless of the creative ways we as Probation and Parole Officers try to maintain our service delivery.

POAO’s counterpart to the South, The American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) suggests a caseload average of 50 for a probation model that is similar to that which we utilize in Ontario. Our officers typically have caseloads of 60-75 and in some areas the numbers range between 80 and 90. This is unacceptable and unsafe. Public Safety is the most important aspect of the mandate of our ministry.

Our Minister recently posted a message about the Transformation of Correctional Services in Ontario, where he mentioned the need for our correctional system to better care for offenders with mental health issues. This is very, very true. In the past twenty-five years, I have seen the changes in the clients we are serving. These are high risk high needs individuals often dually diagnosed with complex issues. We are seeing individuals who are unable to cope with the stressors of everyday life. Often their Probation and Parole Officer is their only source of support. These are not cases. These are people. People who need us. People who we just do not have the time they deserve to serve them, because of our workload pressures.

Probation and Parole Officers are in need of cutting edge and ongoing training and professional development. We have to stay on top of the trends. Our communities depend on it. This is sorely lacking and when
training is available, it is difficult to get away from our caseloads in order to attend. Who supervises our clients when we are in training? No one. When we return from training we are so far behind in our work that we fear something or someone will be lost. When we drop the ball in our work, there can be dire consequences.

We are allocated $100 per Probation and Parole Officer annually to attend professional development. What kind of professional development do you think is happening with that kind of a budget? Yet we must keep on top of the trends in order to be effective in our profession. Does it make sense to force a professional, that society has entrusted to look after our most damaged population, to search for professional development based on cost? Is adequate professional development being received for $100 per year? I think not.

With a caseload of 51000 provincially, and anticipating more pressures on the community with changes to Parole and other alternatives to custody, Ontario would need another 100 Probation and Parole officers to achieve caseload sizes that are consistent with APPA recommendations.

Taking into account the 25 new Full Time Positions promised to us by this government, 100 new full time officers would require an increased contribution of approximately 7 million dollars annually to the current budget. That is far less than the amount of money spent in the last 14 months on preparation for a strike that did not occur. It is difficult to say how much would be needed to run an effective program with consistent, relevant and ongoing training for our Probation and Parole Officers, but I put to you today, that it is far less than we will pay down the road if we do not begin to heal this broken system we call corrections.

Thank you for your time.