

# ACA's General Session



## "Your mission has changed"

Former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie headlines the ACA General Session

**O**n the morning of Aug. 5, the American Correctional Association's 149<sup>th</sup> Congress of Correction held its annual General Session, sponsored by Falcon and Aramark. Hundreds of conference attendees gathered at the John B. Hynes Veterans Memorial Convention Center for one of the most notable events of every Congress of Correction. The event began with the entrance of ACA's executive committee, along with the presenting of colors and the National Anthems of the U.S., Canada and Mexico. ACA President Gary C. Mohr called the day "a great day to be alive," and introduced the ACA executive committee, along with other guests who sat at the head table and the ACA past presidents who were seated in the audience. Mohr's words also rang true as the correctional officers and staff who had lost their lives in the past year, as well as ACA members who had passed away in the past year, were honored.

After that, the 72<sup>nd</sup> Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, took the stage. Baker, known for reducing the deficit completely and working to reduce the number of victims of the opioid crisis in Massachusetts, presented the Governor's Citation to ACA Executive Director James A. Gondles Jr. to "thank [him] for his 28 years of service," saying that he "made a tremendous difference during a particularly difficult time."

"One of the great challenges you all face ... is being able to continue to adapt to a changing set of facts, circumstances and situations with respect to how we deal with and provide and perform correctional services here in the United States and

Massachusetts," Baker said. "The work you do does matter. ... You should all know, recognize and understand that the reason people talk, care and participate in the dialogue is because this stuff is important."

Once Governor Baker concluded his speech, Betsy Johnson, Vice President of Marketing of Aramark, took to the podium to introduce the keynote speaker. This year's keynote speaker was former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. Johnson spoke about Christie and his "unparalleled perspective," not only as a former governor, but for his work as a senior legal and political commentator for ABC News and the managing member of the Christie Law Firm and Christie 55 Solutions, LLC. However, it was his role as chairman of the President's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis that was of particular note. Christie was appointed to the position by President Donald J. Trump after his work in combating the opioid crisis in New Jersey, which included a 2017 law restricting opioid prescriptions that led to a reduction of prescriptions by 26% in its first year.

Christie took the stage following this introduction. He began his speech by discussing the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio, which occurred during the Congress of Correction. Christie spoke about how the first and most important task of the government is to protect the lives of its citizens and that the nation was long overdue for a conversation about this matter. He stressed that this matter went beyond partisan politics and that he didn't "want to hear about cost or who is the right party to run it." →



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"We need to be speaking with one voice, not 25. We need to be working together to let the American people know that we are going to protect their lives, first and foremost," Christie said. "America cannot be a place where people don't feel secure to go out, to shop or to socialize."

He then began to speak about the opioid crisis, which he claimed stripped citizens of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, in reverse order." According to Christie, 72,000 U.S. citizens lost their lives to the crisis last year, although he claims the number of victims should also include the family and loved ones of those who died to the epidemic.

"There is nothing more heartbreak than watching a loved one battle addiction and lose," Christie said.

Christie called for more money to be spent on treatment and educating the health care community on the danger of drugs. He said that education needed to extend to physicians entering medical school on appropriate use and on the dangers of using these painkillers.

Christie also spoke about a notable survivor of the opioid crisis named Vanessa Vitolo. According to Christie, Vitolo was a college cheerleader and honor student who became addicted to Oxycontin after being prescribed the medication following surgery. A few years later, she was addicted to heroin and prostituting herself to get money for drugs, as she claimed that the one prescription bottle was enough to get her addicted. After

Vitolo's fifth arrest, a state court judge ordered her to either spend one year in treatment or four years in a state prison. She chose treatment and managed to overcome her addiction. When Christie brought her to the White House in 2017 at the announcement of the commission, he didn't tell anyone she was a person in recovery, something that shocked President Trump, who described Vitolo as looking "all-American." Christie said that they needed to eliminate the stigma around drug addiction, as Vitolo was someone who took the prescription her doctor gave her and easily fell into addiction.

"If Americans are to really confront this problem and defeat it, we got to change our mindset and stop making moral judgements on people who are addicted," Christie said. "Because in the end, their addiction is a disease."

Christie then went on to discuss how the corrections field has changed because of this crisis, and how people in the field need more support, saying "there are people all over this country who understand how difficult your job is and want to empower you to be successful at your job."

"We need you to be seen as healing human beings," Christie said. "You know how many families you can potentially affect, how many lives you can help save, and how many families you can help rebuild. Because when we get people on the road to recovery from this, they become better fathers and mothers, better husbands and wives, better sons and daughters."

"We rebuild families and at the core of all that, as a country, is the idea that part of the pursuit of happiness is to have an intact, loving family. Your work helps to rebuild those each and every day," he added.

Christie said that the contributions of people in the corrections field will help end "the biggest public health crisis this country has seen since the AIDS epidemic." He said that the corrections field needed to accept the responsibility to help treat people as long as the government gave them the tools to do so. He also noted that the stigma around the AIDS epidemic changed due to Ryan White (a teenager who got AIDS from a blood transfusion and was ostracized for it) and Magic Johnson (a former professional basketball player), as the "American psyche" changed once they went public and marches followed. Christie said that something similar needed to happen with the opioid epidemic, as the example set by the AIDS epidemic ensured the disease is no longer fatal.

Christie closed his speech by discussing his favorite American Founding Father, John Adams. Christie called Adams, "the lifeblood, the engine of the Revolution." He noted that Adams made

numerous sacrifices for his country and wondered how Adams would have viewed the U.S.'s responses to these various crises.

"I believe all of us are judged and we will be judged by future generations for how we dealt with the crises that confronted us," Christie said. "And so, I want you to demand for all the people in public life that they live to the Adams standard as close as they can. Will we repent in Heaven for having made the sacrifices to secure liberty for the next generation? ... We need to stand up and continue to fight on both of those issues. Fight for each other, with each other, as a united nation. If we can do that, there's nothing America can't accomplish. I'm confident of that."

Following a short Q&A with the audience, Christie received a token of appreciation from ACA for his powerful and heartfelt message. The General Session concluded with the presentation of ACA's annual awards, including the Lucy Webb Hayes Award and the Walter Dunbar award, before the attendees were led out of the ballroom by a Fife and Drum Corps to continue the 149<sup>th</sup> Congress of Correction.

— ALEXANDER CARRIGAN

