

Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Testimony for Moratorium Bill H. 1723
May 8, 2007

Investing in Workforce Development Instead of Prisons

Introduction

I am speaking as a private citizen in favor of House No. 1723 (Relative to the construction of new correctional facilities and providing for an investigation of incarceration and its impact on public safety). I have been working as a grants manager in the field of workforce development for the past 10 years. Through that work I have become acutely aware of the barriers to employment that face people with criminal conviction records.

I feel very strongly that the funds poured into the construction of prisons and jails could be far better spent on the development of job training resources and other forms of workforce development that would keep people out of prisons in the first place, or help those who have been incarcerated to get into the workforce and stay there.

Position

However a person defines recidivism, we know the statistics are alarming. About 2/3 of those people who have been incarcerated and released, find themselves returning to prison within 3 years. The keys to reducing recidivism are well established—substance abuse services, stable housing, and employment. I will limit my remarks to the employment arena because of my background in that area, but all three working in tandem are essential, and could greatly benefit from a reallocation of dollars from prison expansion. A reduction in recidivism will result in a significant reduction in overcrowding.

The Crime and Justice Institute recently prepared a report sponsored by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety: “Employment of Ex-Offenders: Employer Perspectives.” The report offered recommendations for better integrating former prisoners into the workforce. One of the strongest recommendations was a call for transitional job opportunities for people as soon as they are released from prison. It is well known that people leaving prison need immediate attachment to the work force. They need income to survive. However, many lack work history and job skills. A transitional jobs program is a service that links job seekers to short term wage paying jobs. While the person is on the job they also receive supportive services such as case management and “soft skills” training.

Relative to prison construction, transitional jobs programs are cheap, but they do require funding for services—case management, job development, skills training, and crew supervision in some instances. By way of comparison, the average cost of maintaining a person in prison in Mass. is \$43,000 per year. The cost of providing services for a person in a transitional jobs program ranges from \$5000 to \$10,000.

Conclusion

To develop an effective continuum of workforce development services for former prisoners, others types of programs are needed as well—GED and job skills training for people while in they are in prison, skills training for people after they complete the transitional jobs phase, and educational opportunities for people to advance in their careers once employed. All of these programs cost money, but they are an investment in people and an investment in public safety. Everyone benefits from spending on human capital. The only beneficiaries of prison capital are the developers, the financiers, the custodial staff of prisons, and all of the subcontractors who feed off the system. The public is not well served by prison construction and expansion.

Nancy W. Ahmadifar, Ph.D.
Boston, MA

Attachment: Crime and Justice Institute: "Employment of Ex-Offenders: Employer Perspectives," Final Report, Executive Summary, October 31, 2006

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Index of written testimony in support of a moratorium on prison/jail construction and expansion.

Washington State Institute for Public Policy: “Evidence-based public policy options to reduce future prison construction, criminal justice costs, and crime rates.” October 2006

Re-Entry Policy Council Newsletter: “Connecticut Implements Justice Reinvestment Strategy to Manage Prison Growth and Generate Savings.” 11/29/2006.

New York Times: “Prisons Push California to seek new approach.” 12/11/2006

Critical Resistance: “What other states are doing.” 2004.

Washing Post: “Despite fewer lockups, NYC has seen big drop in crime.” 11/23/2006.

Vera Institute of Justice: “Rethinking incarceration: new directions.” 3/2007.

www.cjpc.org: review of Vera Institute report: Rethinking incarceration: new directions.

www.prisonpolicy.org: Chapter 4: Moratorium on prison/jail construction. 1970’s.

Alternet.org: America has become incarceration nation. 12/22/2006.

Boston Globe: “Sharp rise in number of inmates projected; Prison study faults get-tough policies.” 02/15/2007 (an article on the Pew Charitable Trusts. “Public safety, public spending: forecasting America’s prison population 2007-2011.” Available at www.pewtrusts.com/ideas/index.cfm?issue51)

list@ellabakercenter.org: Two new bills. Lieber (d-San Jose) introduced a bill to close all of the state’s youth prisons (AB 1655). 02/2007