

Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Testimony for Moratorium Bill H. 1723
May 8, 2007
Community Impact of Prisons and Jails

Introduction

I am speaking as a private citizen in favor of House No. 1723 (An Act Relative To Incarceration and Its Impact on Public Safety). I have been working in the field of human services in some capacity for nearly a decade and currently work as a clinical social worker in Springfield with children, adults, and families all of whom are low-income. In addition, a close friend of mine is currently incarcerated at MCI Framingham.

Given all of these experiences, both personal, as well through hearing almost daily the stories of others impacted by incarceration and its aftermath, I can say with certainty that the answers to the problems that plague our communities will not be found by building additional prisons or jails. Solutions to problems of poverty, racism, classism, and, yes, crime, can only be solved through an approach that instead invests our state's precious financial resources into drug treatment on demand, affordable housing, and living wage jobs for everyone (including, and perhaps most importantly for those with criminal records).

Position

I live and work in Springfield. The neighborhoods in which I both live and work are considered some of the most dangerous and "crime-ridden" neighborhoods in the city. Every day I listen to people talk about having been incarcerated or having friends or family who are currently or previously incarcerated. For years I have listened to people talk about the devastation to families and communities caused by incarceration. Family providers are lost, children lose their parents, parents lose their children. I hear far less about the trouble of crime than I do about the family and community problems caused by our current system of mass incarceration.

Most of the "crimes" committed by these individuals are either crimes of economic survival in a community greatly lacking in affordable housing and living wage jobs or minor drug-related (mostly possession) crimes in a community with an inexcusable dearth of drug treatment facilities. In fact, I have met person after person who has sat on affordable housing lists for five years or more before being offered a Section 8 voucher or a spot in subsidized housing. I have met at least as many people who have searched for years for employment but have been unable to find a job because of a criminal record (often obtained for adult charges prior to turning 18). I ask you, what are these individuals supposed to do to house and feed themselves and their families? In terms of drug treatment, a van travels from Springfield to Worcester and back nearly every day in order to bring Western Massachusetts residents to drug treatment because so few beds are available in our region. Is this really an acceptable condition?

As I have stated above, I have also recently experienced the incarceration of a close friend. Her name is Rachel and she is 20-years-old. She is incarcerated at MCI-Framingham and is serving a sentenced of 2-3 years. While this may not seem like a lot to someone with some distance from the situation, I can tell you that 2-3 years feels like an eternity to her and to those on the outside

who support her. I can also tell you that, while I'm sure that she will take advantage of every program that she is offered, these programs will do little to help her to combat the hopelessness, fear, and negative pressures that permeate the prison environment. She, like others, will have to fight each and every day to, despite all the positive programs, come out of prison no worse off than when she began her sentence. If so many people are released from incarceration worse off than when they begin their sentences than our prison system can no longer maintain the stance that it is providing rehabilitation (or "Corrections" as its name would imply). As a clinical social worker I would suggest that, rehabilitation is best accomplished outside of a prison or jail with community and family support and without the daily fears, degradations, and traumatic experiences of a prison or jail environment.

Conclusion

What we need instead of the construction of additional prisons and jails is alternatives to incarceration that include adequate voluntary drug treatment programs, job programs that allow for everyone who wants and is able to work (criminal record or not) and be paid a living wage, and affordable housing available to all. If the goal is to truly make our communities safer, these programs are both more cost-effective and just more effective in general. It is imperative that we look carefully at the economic and social advantages of redirecting funds to the above programs as an alternative to building new prisons and jails.

Kimberly Milberg, MSW, LCSW
19 Ames St.
Springfield, MA 01104
(413) 427-0720