

COLSON TASK FORCE ON FEDERAL CORRECTIONS

Testimony

Submitted by

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Chairman Watts, Vice-Chairman Mollohan, and Members of the Task Force I want to thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns and recommendations for DC inmates in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. My name is Tara Libert and I am the Co-founder and Executive Director of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, a nonprofit based in Washington DC that serves youth at the DC Jail, in federal Bureau of Prison facilities throughout the US and in the DC community when they return home.

Since 2002, for the past 13 years we have provided over 900 young men charged with felony offenses and placed in the adult criminal justice system starting at the ages of 16 or 17, with literacy and job readiness training. At any one time we have close to 250 young men between the ages of 18 and 29 incarcerated in 46 federal prisons across 24 states.

Our mission statement outlines our comprehensive programming: Free Minds uses books, creative writing, and peer support to awaken DC youth incarcerated as adults to their own potential. Through creative expression, job readiness training, and violence prevention outreach, these young poets achieve their education and career goals, and become powerful voices for change in the community. The vision of Free Minds is that every young inmate receives the necessary tools, inspiration, and community support to pursue education and follow a positive new path in life.

I'll share a brief history of Free Minds. Free Minds Co-founder Kelli Taylor and I did not intend to become nonprofit leaders. Rather we were very fulfilled in our careers as television news producers but a young man on death row in Texas changed the trajectory of our lives and opened our eyes to the harsh realities for youth placed in adult prisons. The idea for Free Minds began with an unsolicited letter from a stranger. In 1996, Co-Founder Kelli Taylor was working as a journalist when she received a letter from Glen McGinnis, a young inmate on Texas' death row. At that time, Glen had been incarcerated for more than five years for a crime committed when he was 17 years old. In response to this contact, Kelli produced a television documentary about Glen and other juveniles on death row in America. After the program aired, she continued to correspond with Glen over the next four years and ultimately participated in his remarkable journey of personal and educational growth. Books sent to him in prison provided the perfect common ground where two individuals from very different

backgrounds could meet and their lives could be positively transformed. While Glen's formal education ended at the age of 11, reading and writing opened up a whole new world of knowledge and possibility to him during his incarceration. Glen's execution in 2000 was a catalyst for action. In 2002, Kelli and I founded Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop and committed ourselves to introducing at-risk teens at the DC Jail to the life-changing power of reading and writing.

Free Minds began as a bi-weekly program for teenage boys, 16 and 17 years old held in the DC Jail. As members were released or transferred to federal prison after turning 18, recognized that maintaining contact throughout incarceration and beyond was vital to helping these youths positively redirect their lives. Over the years, Free Minds has expanded its services to include a twice-weekly Book Club Program; a Continuing Support Program which provides new books and written correspondence to members after transfer to federal prison; and a Reentry Support Program designed to help them achieve their educational and career goals through job training, reentry services, and placements with potential employers. In Reentry Support, members also serve as Poet Ambassadors, the leaders of our Violence Prevention Community Outreach program called "On The Same Page" in which they bring poetry and life stories to local schools, community groups, juvenile detention facilities and workplaces. The root causes of youth incarceration are discussed. We also hold monthly "Write Nights" where volunteers from the DC area gather to read and provide feedback on the poems are members send from federal prison. We then mail the poems with the written feedback to our members. It is a strong motivator for our poets to continue to write and it sends a powerful message that they are not forgotten and helps tears down walls that prevent our young men from fully integrating into society upon their reentry.

Our innovative program model works. Factors in our success include: our sustained long term relationship with members and providing a network of peer support; a positive brotherhood our members can rely on when they come home. I believe this needs to be a part of any effective Reentry program as new positive friends and new support systems must be in place to replace the old relationships which contributed to the path to prison. Our recidivism rate of 26% is far lower than national averages for youth in the adult system.

When our members leave the DC Jail at the age of 18 and enter the Federal Bureau of Prisons we continue to correspond with them through letters and postcards as well as ship those books via Amazon. The majority of our members had never read a book cover to cover before or written a poem but 75% describe themselves as active readers and 90% of them as writers once they enter the BOP. We receive hundreds of letters each year detailing our members' experiences in federal facilities. This places us at a unique vantage point and gives us a perspective on the BOP that I would like to share in this testimony. The recommendations that I am making are drawn from these letters. Since I am not at the facilities I cannot directly verify the events but I share these concerns to alert the Task Force to look into the following issues and my recommendations for each of one.

1. **ISSUE:** The use of solitary confinement for youth under 25 and the subsequent long term mental health damage and increase in violence.

RECOMMENDATION: Ban the use of solitary for youth under 25 similar to New York state's recent ban. (Bryanne Hamill member New York Board of Corrections quoted in the New York Times " The evidence showed that solitary confinement will not improve their future behavior but will reliably convert anger and frustration today into rage and violence tomorrow) and create special facility for youth ages 18-25 with developmentally appropriate programming.

We regularly receive letters as well as reports from our members who have returned home telling us that they have spent months and even years in the SHU or Special Housing Unit and we see firsthand the mental deterioration that occurs due to this prolonged social isolation. We recognize that this is often used as a disciplinary measure but recommend more treatment staff, correctional officers and programming to address the root causes of violence not exacerbate it. The impact on a young person's brain which is not fully developed until 25 years old is devastating. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Anxiety disorders are extremely common. It is especially grievous for our members who are placed in solitary for their own protection. They are double victims. When the only answer to the fear you have for your own life is social isolation we as a society are not providing enough resources and innovative solutions to the prison system. I have found Post Incarceration Syndrome where former inmates suffer PTSD in addition to other serious symptoms to be very real with a majority of our members suffering from it. There is a desperate need for more mental health treatment that is culturally competent. I suggest a concentrated recruitment effort to hire men and women of color as mental health therapists who have had direct experience growing up in poor, violent neighborhoods and understand the pressures and challenges the young inmates face. It is difficult enough for a young man to break through the stigma of therapy and express his feelings in the first place. It is vital they feel comfortable with a trusted professional who understands the environment they have been exposed and with whom they can confide.

2. **ISSUE:** Ineffective program at USP Lewisburg

RECOMMENDATION: Close USP Lewisburg facility and find alternative programs to rehabilitate inmates who have been placed there.

The letters we have received from members sent to USP Lewisburg serving from 18-24 months of straight solitary detail an ineffective, damaging program that needs to be terminated as soon as possible. We have not received a report from any Free Minds member who has benefitted from the program in any way. If the goal is for inmates who demonstrate an inability to get along in general population to learn positive behavior skills how can a program that shuts them

off from any chance to practice healthy social skills be effective? Millions of dollars of taxpayers' money are being wasted on a poor quality program that is a black eye on the BOP.

3. ISSUE: Access to GED programs and lack of work programs.

RECOMMENDATION: Hire more GED teachers and utilize volunteer GED teachers if not enough funding. Implement work opportunities in every facility.

My staff and I are astounded that any of our members would leave federal prison without having received their GED or at least be well on their way to obtaining it. This should be a top priority among all of the possible programming. We hear many complaints that there are waiting lists for GED classes from our members that have longer sentences who say priority is given to inmates scheduled to be released in six months. We also hear complaints from members who have shorter sentences and report that the GED classes are filled with men who have long or life sentences and there is no room for them. Either way we know firsthand that there are many dedicated professionals who want to volunteer and work with inmates. They reach out and contact us every day asking how they can help. If the funding is not available to hire additional GED teachers we recommend utilizing volunteers. Universities that are in close proximity to federal facilities are an excellent resource and can be called upon to provide academic instruction. We recently visited Scranton University which is near USP Canaan. Their teaching staff offered to bring students to assist with tutoring or classroom instruction. We know there are other Universities that would also be very eager to participate.

The issue of the lack of work opportunities is also a major concern for us. We recognize that due to disciplinary incidents some of our members are not able to receive the benefit of a job but we have seen that real work experience while inside is crucial to making the transition to a job on the outside. It is already a major obstacle to have a felony on your record and to combine that with lack of work experience makes it extremely difficult for Returning Citizens to obtain employment. The lack of work opportunities is especially evident at USP Coleman.

4. ISSUE: Oversight for all BOP inmates

RECOMMENDATION: Implement a fully independent outside oversight body for the Bureau of Prisons.

Free Minds members have shared with us incidents where correctional staff at facilities throughout the BOP system have used excessive force, employed racist language and have described a general culture that is dismissive of inmates' dignity. One example was after a member requested mental health treatment saying he was suicidal a Correctional officer told him that all inmates are manipulative and only say they are suicidal to get attention. It is clear there needs

to be a culture change among staff in some facilities and an oversight body could investigate and determine steps to take. Many state prison systems such as Illinois and New York have very effective independent, oversight bodies that investigate incidents and monitor operations. We recommend that the Federal Corrections system bring on an independent oversight body similar to what other government agencies employ as soon as possible. The American Correctional Association should be only one avenue of assessing facilities. The fact that facilities pay them to provide this accreditation suggests there is an incentive to have the facility pass all compliance requirements. I don't know of any facility that has not passed and received ACA accreditation in the country. There needs to be an independent body that is not possibly compromised by fees.

Finally I know I have recounted many problem areas and I want to also take the time to recognize a facility where we only seem to get excellent reports. Our members who are at FCI Fairton regularly write with excited updates on the amount and quality of the programming there. We'd like to commend FCI Fairton for their dedicated staff and innovative programming. They are clearly engaging the inmates and providing essential work readiness and educational opportunities and we hope other facilities follow in their path. If it is possible there we believe the same standards of quality can be implemented throughout the federal corrections system even with higher security facilities.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to share firsthand accounts from youth in the federal corrections facilities and to offer our recommendations. We at Free Minds are extremely pleased that the Colson Task Force has been created and we look forward to your report and recommendations at the end of 2015.