

**Testimony by**

**Courtney Stewart**

**Chairman**

**The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, Inc.**

**And The Mayor's Commission on Reentry and Returning Citizens Affairs**

**COLSON TASK FORCE ON FEDERAL CORRECTIONS**

**CHAIR J.C. WATTS JR. AND VICE CHAIR ALAN B. MOLLOHAN**

**PUBLIC MEETING**

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2015**

**8:30 AM - 12:30 PM**

**US CAPITOL**

**ROOM HC-5, CAPITOL CENTER**

**WASHINGTON, DC 20515**

Good Morning,

Committee Chairs, Staff, other members and my fellow colleagues. My name is Courtney Stewart, I am the Chairman of The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens and The Mayor's Commission on Reentry and Returning Citizens Affairs I'm here today to provide testimony and recommendations for this task force. Since the closing of Lorton Reformatory prisoners sentenced for DC code violations are sent all over the country to serve their sentences, many of whom return worse off than when they were sent to prison. Many have health issues, lack of education, lack of training, limited support systems.

In a study of more than 20,000 adults entering five local jails, researchers documented serious mental illnesses in 14.5 percent of the men and 31 percent of the women, which taken together, comprises 16.9 percent of those studied — rates in excess of three to six times those found in the general population.<sup>1</sup> A large, three-state recidivism study found that less than half of released prisoners had secured a job upon their return to the community.<sup>2</sup> According to a qualitative study by the Vera Institute of Justice, people released from prison and jail to parole who entered homeless shelters were seven times more likely to abscond during the first month after release than those who had some form of housing.<sup>3</sup>

The 1997 Revitalization Act has not been successful, in fact the only thing that has improved since 2001 is the infrastructure and the bank accounts of many in DC, but the criminal justice system in the District of Columbia has gotten worse. Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) in my humble opinion needs more oversight,

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1 Hammett, T., C. Roberts, & S. Kennedy. "Health-Related Issues in Prisoner Reentry." *Crime & Delinquency* 47, no. 3 (2001): 390-409

2 ggen, C. & J. Staff, "Work as a Turning Point for Criminal Offenders," in J.L. Krienert & M.S. Fleisher (eds.), *Crime & Employment: Critical Issues in Crime Reduction for Corrections*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004.

3 Metraux & Culhane; David Michaels et al., "Homelessness and indicators of mental illness among inmates in New York City's correctional system." *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 43 (2002): 150-55.

very few of their dollars if any goes towards reentry beds or housing for returning citizens. More of their budget needs to be focused on successfully getting reentrants full-time employment and stable housing and not just collaborations and partnerships. DC Code offenders are not being released after serving their sentences, all because the DC Parole Commission wants to stay relevant. We have to re-evaluate local crimes/offenses being served in a federal prison, it is unlawful and unjust. Families have been burdened with travel expenses, legal fees, phone charges, no contact at all with loved ones, kids are not able to receive continued care from their parents and the prisoner experience is psychological and mental setbacks. We have the largest Halfway House in the country it's called Hope Village or Hopeless Village. This is a 363 bed facility in the poorest neighborhood in the city, it's understaffed, underfunded, and residents are undervalued and treated like trash or animals. For many of these residents, employment is a condition of their release but the rules and regulations of this facility do not support sustainable employment or stable housing. Therefore many of these returning citizens end up being violated and sent back to prison for non-compliance, with little oversight or due process. These are the collateral consequences, which is a serious public safety issue since most of these individuals face many barriers such as employment and housing discrimination. More than 10 percent of those entering prisons and jails are homeless in the months before their incarceration. For those with mental illness, the rates are even higher — about 20 percent. Released prisoners with a history of shelter use were almost five times as likely to have a post-release shelter stay.<sup>4</sup> This is a specific population with special

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<sup>4</sup> Metraux, S. & D.P. Culhane. "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration Following Prison Release: Assessing the Risk." *Criminology & Public Policy* 3, no. 2 (2004): 201-22.

needs and a very small window to address these needs or they most likely will re-commit a crime which leads to a high rate of recidivism. The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, along with other community volunteers and Community Base Organizations could address the specific needs of these individuals as well as help them to develop a support system that would ultimately prepare them to thrive in reintegrating back to the city. A “Pilot Project” that speak to those needs directly and promotes a holistic approach and spiritual and personal development. This Pilot would be a replica of other models that are working in other parts of the country, best practices for successful reintegration. I recommend to this task force that we consider “set asides” jobs specifically for people who have a criminal background but otherwise are skilled and prepared for employment, we should enforce anti-discrimination laws that support these kind of jobs as well as partner with the DC Chamber of Commerce and the rest of the business community to help create a pipeline to jobs. Because many of us know the truth and the truth is that a large percent of these employers are not hiring returning citizens. We also have to look at the barriers to self-employment or entrepreneurship like eliminating/waiver of fees associated with occupational licenses with Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs so that many of these individuals can resume a business or start one to provide for themselves and their families. Another consideration would be alternatives to prison for our non-violent offenders this could be set up through a community and government diversion program that would include other stakeholders in the public and private sector. We should consider ending the city’s Central Training Facility contract with Corrections Corporations of America a for-profit organization that has had a twenty year reign and the contract with Hope Village. Why can’t we consider non-profit corrections or a public

private partnership that will include the government, volunteers and community service providers that promote rehabilitation, reform and restorative justice. This would save the city millions of dollars and improve effectiveness.

Respectfully,

Courtney Stewart

Chairman

The Reentry Network for Returning Citizens/

Commission on Reentry and Returning Citizens Affairs