

**Impact of current federal supervision policies and practices and suggestions for reform;**

**1. Allowing formerly incarcerated persons to live, work and befriend each other.**

Felons are not permitted to talk, work or live with each other. Contact is forbidden and considered to be a violation which would likely result in a return to prison. In reality, felons need each other as we are our own network of support without which we would likely be isolated. In fact, it is harmful for formerly incarcerated people to be without the support of each other.

More often than not, the families of formerly incarcerated people have abandoned them. For others, their families cannot provide either financial or emotional support. Either way, being released to the free world is overwhelming and not welcoming when you don't have a support network of those who "get you". It is for this and a host of other reasons, we urge the Task Force to recommend felons be permitted to be a support network for each other.

The "no contact with other felons" policy has impacted me personally. I am someone whose family abandoned me and know I am best understood by formerly incarcerated people. I expected to have family support but was stunned when my mother, whose

24/7 caretaker I had been, told me on my first phone call from prison, “don’t call me again”.

I didn’t know my brother would use my absence from home as an opportunity to insure he had all our family assets under his control. Part of achieving such control was to make sure his family, my sister-in-law, my nephews and niece, and my mother did not talk to me. He did this and left me an orphan with living family who would not help me upon my release. I suffered knowing this reality. I subsequently befriended those incarcerated with me and began reconstructing family with fellow inmates.

It was natural for me to feel at home with women trying to survive prison. We had something in common, a life which could not be explained to an outsider. An outsider could not understand a horrendous experience like prison. Losing freedom and being forced to live in sub human conditions is unique to those who go through it. While I was able to create a network of friends inside, I faced isolation upon release because felons cannot interact with other felons.

Other people who face horrific experiences or tragedies survive primarily because they remain close with and family to others who have gone through their experience. Finding comfort with “like” minded people is crucial as a survival mechanism. With the exception of those incarcerated, no group facing devastating or horrible experiences has ever been ordered to be **legally isolated**. In fact, because formerly incarcerated are expected not to engage their natural support network, it speaks to continued

punishment and a threat to their freedom to survive. They can't make it alone, but are legally expected to do so.

Like prison, my parents went through a horrific experience. They were both teenagers when Hitler put them and their families in labor and concentration camps. My mother and father survived but each lost their entire family of origin and their vast extended family. My mother lost 70 people and my father lost 40 family members. Few who survived had their original family. In place of blood relatives, life long friendships were built during and immediately after the war. These life long friendship lasted seventy years and the survivors remained an extended family.

The primary reason for the life long friendship was because they shared a tragedy. They suffered and understood each other's suffering. They had a bond with each other which was significant; they had all survived the gas chamber. And there were important practical reasons for their friendship, which was to help each other jump start their new lives. Survivors helped each other find housing and jobs. Being in a new country and not speaking the language or understanding the system required a network.

Like the Holocaust survivor, the formerly incarcerated must find housing and jobs. For the formerly incarcerated person being released from prison often means going to a half way house and after that a homeless shelter. Unlike the survivor who has a network of friends, the formerly incarcerated are **legally forbidden** to use their best and most obvious network to help them to get housing or jobs.

Both the Holocaust survivor and the formerly incarcerated have to navigate through an America which is very challenging. For the Holocaust survivor, the English language was a barrier. For the formerly incarcerated, it is the language of technology and all things new they missed while in prison. The challenges of the free world were and are difficult for both, but where the Holocaust survivors had each other the formerly incarcerated are legally isolated.

Formerly incarcerated people need to overcome obstacles of being labeled a convicted felon and having spent time in prison. Upon their release they enter a world which is unrecognizable to them. No re-entry program can take the place of a family and when there is no family, a re-entry program is not enough of a support network.

The free world is an alien environment. When my father was looking for a job in 1948, no one was interested in hiring someone who couldn't speak English and was a new immigrant. He was introduced to jobs through friends he met in concentration camps or sometime during or after the war. If one survivor became a peddler, they all became peddlers. If one survivor entered the building industry, that survivor brought his friends and friends of friends in the business. Many succeeded quickly because their extended network created opportunities for them to succeed. This type of opportunity is not afforded to formerly incarcerated people by law. They are not permitted to interact with each other.

The law must change to allow formerly incarcerated people to use their support network to exist. A network of natural cohorts is necessary to survive and thrive. I grew up with the clear understanding the extended group of Holocaust survivors had less of a struggle because they had each other. We, the formerly incarcerated, do not need to risk being isolated.

Supervised release should not forbid contact with my natural peers. My successful re-integration into the community depends upon me having friends which include formerly and currently incarcerated people. With each other we have a fighting chance, without each other, we remain at risk.





