



The Peace Alliance

Written Testimony for the Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections

The Peace Alliance is a grassroots education and advocacy organization working to transform the way individuals, communities, and nations respond to conflict and violence. We have about 60,000 grassroots members across the US, in every State and Congressional District. Our testimony is largely focused on means to reduce the population in prisons through community level evidence based prevention and intervention strategies. These strategies have been repeatedly proven effective at preventing crime and, as an extension, reducing the population in both state and federal institutions.

It is unnecessary to detail here the scope of the problem as it now exists. Other organizations can do a far better job than we can of providing you with a thorough report on the statistical immensities of the problem we face. Instead, we would like to share with you the Peace Alliance's vision for what kinds of approaches we can use to both make our system more successful and humane for those already in it, and to address the root causes of the crime and violence that tear apart our society.

We would have you focus on moving away from overly punitive policies and towards healing-oriented criminal and juvenile justice approaches. Restorative justice, diversion/alternative incarceration programs, and prisoner rehabilitation and reentry programs are among the most promising solutions. We need to change our approach to violence and crime from counterproductive punitive approaches and towards restorative approaches that rehabilitate those who do wrong to help them become strong members of their community.

Early Intervention: By engaging with at risk youth early and providing them with the support needed to be successful— through mentoring programs, at home family supports, afterschool programs, and many other interventions— we can build them into strong, productive citizens before they fall into cycles of violence, incarceration, and despair.

Restorative Justice: We seek approaches to justice that provide an effective process and container for the possibility of understanding between offenders and victims as well as the wider community. It provides the conditions, guided by victims, for the possibility of healing, forgiveness and restoration. The nature of a restorative process that is guided by victims' needs allows for offenders to come to terms with the human cost of their actions and attempt to right the wrong together with all stakeholders--and in doing so often is freeing to victims and a key aspect of their own ability to move forward. In laying the foundations for empathy, restorative justice can and has radically changed lives, prevented crime and recidivism, and rebuilt communities. Working programs in the US have shown astounding success in reducing recidivism and saving time, judicial expense, and preventing incarceration and its associated cost.

Prisoner rehabilitation and reentry support: When incarceration is necessary, it is critical that offenders are treated with essential human dignity and given the best chance possible to return to their communities as full citizens, with job and life skills and equal opportunities for employment. Prisons must be places that provide support and education to prisoners so that they are able to support themselves through productive employment upon release, and returning citizens must have access to supportive programming upon release to ease their transition and to prevent recidivism.

Diversification Approaches: With pre-charge, pre-trial, and pre-sentencing diversions into support programs, low risk offenders can be moved into programs that help address their behavior without saddling them with a conviction, or sending them to a prison where they are driven further into a harmful lifestyle. Diverting youth into evidence based programming as a means to prevent charges or to mitigate sentences gives the judicial system an option to resolve problematic behavior without imposing the financial and human costs of incarceration.

Juvenile Justice: The Juvenile Justice system must take into account the differences in brain development between youth and adults, and treat youth differently. The juvenile justice system needs to provide support in the community whenever possible, reserving incarceration, which is far more harmful to youth than adults, for only the most extreme cases. Approaches that work on adults often do not work on youth, many of whose brains have not yet developed the capacity to react to punishment in the way that adults would. Incarceration frequently traumatizes youth, dramatically increasing their odds of recidivating.

Legislative Proposals:

The Youth PROMISE Act: The Youth PROMISE (Prison Reduction through Opportunity, Mentoring, Support and Education) Act is the primary legislative focus of the Peace Alliance. The Youth PROMISE Act aims to reduce violence in communities that have a high concentration of youth at risk of school disengagement, social disconnection, and/or delinquent behavior by leveraging federal funds at the community level. The Youth PROMISE Act would enable inclusive groups of local stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, law enforcement, judges, elected officials, mental health leaders, faith leaders, and others to determine the needs of their own communities and to address those needs with a suite of accountable, evidence based programs. While most other grant

programs are focused on the applications and funding of individual programs, the Youth PROMISE Act requires local stakeholders to collaboratively assess the needs of their community and design a comprehensive approach, and then funds the comprehensive plan rather than individual programs. This approach ensures that federal money is utilized in a way that fills gaps in a specific community and compliments existing programs. Not all communities have the same root problems or the same existing programmatic resources. To address root causes of violence and crime efficiently, communities must be able to work together and all have input. Local processes ensure coordination and buy in on the part of the stakeholders, and allow more effective leverage of federal resources.

These empirically based prevention and intervention strategies, consisting of programs such as restorative practices, family strengthening programs, academic and school supports, positive youth development, and other evidence-based interventions, are proven to reduce incarceration, recidivism, and to improve life outcomes for youth. The Youth PROMISE Act creates a model for preventing violence and improving life outcomes that is locally controlled, accountable, and cost saving.

REDEEM Act: The REDEEM (Record Expungement Designed to Enhance Employment) Act would make sealing and expungement simpler for people returning from incarceration, and would remove legal obstacles preventing them from accessing the social support structures critical to helping them reintegrate into society. A criminal record is very frequently a barrier to quality employment and educational opportunities, and in many cases expressly prohibits access to government programs that are important to a successful transition out of prison. All too frequently, those returning from prison return to old patterns of destructive behavior because they are barred from better opportunities. To prevent recidivism and help those we imprison become productive citizens, we must give them access to means of supporting themselves.

Second Chance Reauthorization Act: The Second Chance Act was first passed in 2007, and has used evidence based reentry programs to help those returning from incarceration reintegrate into the community. It has reduced recidivism and saved tremendous amounts of money.

Smarter Sentencing Act: The Smarter Sentencing Act would reduce a variety of mandatory minimums to reduce unjustifiable disparities in sentencing and to reduce sentences for low risk offenders.

Conclusion:

In this short timeline and in this short space, we cannot provide you with a more comprehensive solution to what is a tremendously large and complex problem. But we do ask you to consider these general approaches. A system of justice that is based around addressing root causes of violence and helping those who have done wrong reintegrate into society is not only more humane; it is more effective and less expensive. Violence fills many of our communities and incarceration tears them apart. We can and must break these destructive cycles and focus on healing our communities. Approaches that treat people as human beings in need of support rather than as animals to be locked away have proven to be effective, just, and necessary.



Bob Baskin, President, Peace Alliance.