

**Episcopal Community Services of Maryland / Jericho Reentry Program**

**Written Testimony Submitted to the**

**Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections**

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**The Role of Community Reentry Services Post Incarceration**

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The work of The Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections is right on mark in identifying the burdens faced by today's corrections system. The panel rightly discussed the safety, fiscal, and humanitarian aspects of incarceration. With federal spending at \$7 billion a year, we must be open to evidence-based programs that will ease these financial and social costs. As stated at the inaugural public session on January 27, 2015, the pressures faced by the federal prison system is mirrored at the state and local levels of corrections and public safety. The Task Force is to be commended for exploring all of the opportunities that will contribute to easing the pressures faced by the public safety and corrections profession.

As CCTFFC Member Cynthia Roseberry (Clemency Project) stated, there must be a 'bridge back to the new world.' Without that bridge, the cycle of incarceration will not stop.

This testimony focuses on the "bridge building," and the role of community based reentry services. Episcopal Community Services of Maryland (ECSM) is located in Baltimore City. We are a community and faith-based nonprofit that has worked in reentry since being launched in 2007 through funding from the U.S. Department of Labor Prison Reentry Initiative during the administration of President George W. Bush. The DOL funding was the foundation for our Jericho Reentry Program. As a faith-based initiative, our program was identified as a vital link in the continuum of public and private sector investments that would successfully address the reentry and employment needs of formerly incarcerated adults.

For the purposes of this testimony, "community" reentry refers to that time when people are released from prison. "In a broad context, the reentry population is defined as all persons who

have been convicted of a criminal offense and are returning to society, whether or not they have served executed time on a federal, state, or local level. The type of criminal offense and the type of sentence do not define the Re-entry population. All those convicted of a crime face additional barriers to successful, productive, crime-free citizenship.”<sup>i</sup>

ECSM’s Jericho reentry services have a proven track record of successful community reentry program services. Over the past eight years, our Jericho reentry program has worked with 1,500 ex-offenders and produced significant outcomes in the complex world of community reentry services. In our short, but intense history as a reentry program provider, we have produced an overall recidivism rate of 7% and an employment rate of 72%.

Our Jericho program is what successful reentry services look like in an urban setting beset by deep poverty. Located in a neighborhood that absorbs many post-incarceration people, we have learned what it takes to break the cycle of recidivism. Every year, 9,682 people leave prison and return to Baltimore City. The cost of re-incarceration is \$37,000.<sup>ii</sup> The cost of one year of Jericho’s reentry services is approximately \$6,500 per client.

Investing in effective programming that includes a continuity of support from pre-release to post incarceration is a critical part of navigating community reentry. We attribute our success to evidence-based programming and a deep and sincere understanding of the needs of ex-offenders. Our first federal funding requests were referenced with studies authored by Dr. Nancy La Vigne and her team at the Urban Institute that emphasized wrap-around services, case management and rapid attachment to work. Using this documented evidence, we built a community-based reentry model. After eight years of work, our work still focuses on the individualized needs of our clients. Providing wrap around services, soft skills training, and access to transitional housing,

health services, addictions recovery, education, job training and employment are keys to successful reentry. Even though our funding streams and client base has changed over the years, this model continues to be the basis of our work and our success.

We have learned two key lessons about operating a successful community reentry services. First, community reentry is about recognizing the intense and often competing needs that people face after they are released from correctional institutions. Developing a vigorous “home plan,” can begin during the pre-release stage. Having a community reentry resource helps ex-offenders navigate the multiple and complex range of needs that constitute the realities of life after release from prison. We have worked with state institutions to help facilitate this transition. Ex-offenders must know that help is available. This may seem like a simple statement of fact. The truth is that navigating beyond the prison wall is often complicated and frustrating. Research has shown that the first days of post-release are a crucial time for ex-offenders.<sup>iii</sup> Most people exiting prison return to home communities without the educational or employment resources that are needed for successful transition into engaged citizenship. We have had very positive experiences in collaborating with state corrections to work “behind the fence”. Having the right people in place for ex-offenders to connect with eases the transition process.

In reality, not all clients come directly through corrections system. Our program also offers ‘walk-in’ services for adults who have a history of incarceration and need less complex wrap-around services – perhaps help with building a resume or coaching for a job interview. Other community reentry services require a greater commitment of time and resources. Obtaining a GED or completing a job training program require more time and effort but the pay-offs are significant to reducing recidivism. Our program focused on the individualized needs of our

clients. Each person enters community reentry program with has his or her own specific needs. One of our most important functions is to help ex-offenders develop a self-action plan and access the supportive resources that will actualize their goals and aspirations. From the clients perspective, the bottom line is having confidence and ease in accessing the services that will point people in the right direction.

The second lesson learned is the importance of sustainability and long term investment in community reentry services. While many public and private entities acknowledge this need for service providers, there are relatively few financial sources of support. In our eight years, we have sustained our work through various funding streams of federal, state, and philanthropic support. We have been the grateful funding recipients of the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department and Justice. We have received support from the key Baltimore-based philanthropies that understand the vital importance of reentry and its ties to healthier communities, workforce development, and family reunification. Even as a blessed beneficiary, it has been a tough haul. Funding streams come and go. However, the human service need does not go away when a funding stream is reduced or eliminated. As providers, we must work in a spirit of collaboration. There are too few resources and too many people to serve. Spending approximately \$6,500 a year for reentry services for one person is much better than spending \$38,000 in taxpayer money to incarcerate one person.

Community reentry is a hard sell. It is easier to pitch the value of diversion through investment in children and youth than it is to convince a funder that community reentry services are worthy their support. There is nothing soft or fuzzy about community reentry unless one is willing to

delve deep and understand that keeping an adult out of the prison system may also prevent their child from repeating history.<sup>iv</sup>

This Task Force can serve as a vital platform for advocating funding that diverts crime, assists crime victims, supports correctional employees and improves opportunities for reduced recidivism. Businesses that don't change don't stay in business. Nor should nonprofits like ours. I am here to learn from you .We continually scan the horizon for best practices elsewhere that can inform what we do and help us do it better. We also are looking at lengthening the horizons by which we measure success. Current practice is to look at one-year evidence; we think a three-year gauge offers a more realistic measure of results and are moving that direction. As we evaluate how to move forward we are now thinking about how to offer the right mix of skills and services—basic reading, math, and computer literacy; and job training tied to market demands—that can reach people at risk before we incur the cost of incarcerating them.

At the first public meeting of the Task Force, Chairman J.C. Watts, Jr. stated the time is ripe for reform. We fully agree. All of us – correctional and public safety workers, crime victims, children of incarcerated parents, taxpayers – all of us - are impacted by the collateral fall-out of overreliance on the corrections. By lending a community-based voice to this issue, we hope to work in collaboration with government agencies, the business sector, the faith and nonprofit worlds, and most importantly, with the individuals who will ultimately benefit from the implemented recommendations of the Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> [www.indy.gov/.../RE-ENTRY/Re-entry%20Policy%20Study...y](http://www.indy.gov/.../RE-ENTRY/Re-entry%20Policy%20Study...y).
- <sup>ii</sup> The Right Investment? Corrections Spending in Baltimore City. Justice Policy Institute, February 2015.
- <sup>iii</sup> [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411767\\_successful\\_reentry.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411767_successful_reentry.pdf), p. 24 (reviewed on March 3, 2015).
- <sup>iv</sup> <http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/research/upload/Children-of-Incarcerated-Parents.pdf> (reviewed March 3, 2015).