

Statement of

# The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator  
Vermont  
June 8, 2006

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Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Corrections Subcommittee Hearing  
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I thank Senator Coburn and Senator Durbin for bringing attention to the vital issue of prison conditions with this hearing, and I thank Attorney General Katzenbach, Judge Gibbons, and the rest of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons for their hard work and their thoughtful and important recommendations for improving America's prisons.

This country sends more and more people to prison every year. There are right now more than 2 million people in jail or prison, and there are more than 13 million people who spend some time in jail or prison each year. Most of these people will at some point return to our communities. What kind of experience inmates have in prison, how we prepare them to rejoin society, and how we integrate them into the broader community when they get out are issues that profoundly affect the communities in which we live. As a former prosecutor, I believe strongly in securing tough and appropriate prison sentences for people who break our laws. But it is also important that we do everything we can to ensure that, when these people get out of prison, they enter our communities as productive members of society, so we can start to reverse the dangerous cycles of recidivism and violence.

The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons has today proposed a set of recommendations to make the country's prisons operate more effectively for the good of the country's prison employees, the prisoners who will be reentering society, and the cities and towns they will be rejoining. They have proposed specific strategies to reduce violence in prisons, to provide better health care for prisoners in order to protect both prisoners and the public at large, to improve the culture and training of prison employees, and perhaps most relevant to us, to increase oversight of prisons and require transparency and accountability. We on the Senate Judiciary Committee take our oversight responsibilities seriously, and I know we will give appropriate consideration to these thoughtful recommendations. I am also sure that the State of Vermont, which has often been at the forefront on correctional issues, will be very interested in these recommendations as well.

Improving prison conditions, as the Commission aims to do, goes hand in hand with working to integrate prisoners effectively into the community when they leave prison. That's the focus of the Second Chance Act, which is before the Senate this year. The Second Chance Act expands and funds grants for collaborations between state and local corrections agencies, nonprofits, educational institutions, service providers, and families to ensure that offenders released into society have the resources and support they need to become constructive members of the community. The bill would require that the programs supported by these grants demonstrate measurable positive results, including a reduction in recidivism. The bill would also set up a task force to determine ways to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of federal programs related to prisoner reentry and would authorize additional programs that would encourage employment of released prisoners, improve substance abuse treatment programs for prisoners, streamline the process of transitioning out of prison, and assist the children of prisoners. The Vermont Department of Corrections is working hard to make improvements in many of these same areas and would welcome assistance from the federal government in continuing to do so.

While this bill would be a significant step toward preventing recidivism, an especially important goal considering the rising numbers of prisoners being released into society, it can be better still. I am working to make the Second Chance Act even more effective for the people of Vermont and the people of the United States.

Specifically, I am working to address concerns expressed by Vermont's victim services agencies and advocates, with whom I have long worked closely - by making sure that victim services agencies have a role administering grants, that victims' needs are specifically addressed, and that provisions aiming to integrate families of offenders include sufficient safeguards to protect vulnerable children. I am also working to make sure that the bill helps less populated areas, like many parts of Vermont, that have a significant need for reentry services, and not just large urban areas. I am hopeful that these reasonable suggestions will be made part of the bill and will result in the Second Chance Act being a strong and effective step toward transforming former offenders into productive members of society. The work of this Commission should bring us closer still to that important goal.

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