

Testimony of
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Oversight of Federal Assistance for Prisoner Rehabilitation and Reentry

Statement for the Record

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Safer Foundation

Established in 1972, the Safer Foundation is a non-profit organization based in Chicago that works to reduce recidivism by supporting the efforts of people with criminal records to become productive, law-abiding members of their communities. We provide a full spectrum of services, including education, employment and retention focused case-management. Safer is one of the nation's largest community-based providers of employment services for a clientele comprised exclusively of people with criminal records.

I am pleased the Subcommittee is taking up the issue of federal support for offender reentry. Reentry impacts not only those being released from prison, but also his or her family and his or her entire community. In 2004, across the State of Illinois, over 33,000 individuals left prison and returned home. Nearly 84% of the individuals paroled in Fiscal Year 2005 returned to ten areas. This reality is especially troubling, given that these communities are disproportionately low-income, crime-ridden, home to racial minorities, and lacking in needed social services and supports.

The average person on parole has been previously incarcerated at least once and continues to face significant barriers to a safe and successful reentry, such as substance abuse problems, mental health issues, low education levels and poor job-preparation skills preventing him or her from garnering employment that pays a living wage. As a result, the majority of formerly incarcerated individuals commit a new crime or violate the conditions of their release and return to prison to begin the process all over again, leaving the State of Illinois to confront the highest recidivism rate in its history.

Communities, particularly families, need avenues and resources to assist their loved ones in succeeding. For the success or failure of reentry falls most heavily on the returning individual ~ the decisions that lead to success or failure lie with him/her. To empower individuals, returnees

must have access to the full spectrum of necessary resources and must be relieved legislatively, administratively, and socially of the collateral sanctions that follow people with criminal records throughout their lives. Although they vary from state to state, people with criminal records face a myriad of barriers with regards to employment in particular ~ including blanket hiring exclusions. The spectrum of services must also be coordinated, or at least easily accessible to those that need them ~ currently they tend to be disconnected and unable to meet the demand.

Over the past decade, the Safer Foundation has seen the demand for our services grow. This growth is not the result of a targeted marketing campaign or discounts but rather the alarming increase in the number of those people involved in the criminal justice system. In 2000, we provided employment-related services to 4,300 people with records. By 2006, this number had increased to over 10,000. This rate of growth highlights the need for communities to have planned and coordinated supports for people returning from prison, such as could be offered through the Second Chance Act.

In order to meet the need, the Safer Foundation has leveraged funding sources to implement research-based model programs aimed at providing critical supports that lead to self sufficiency, measured by increased employment placement and retention rates, and decreased recidivism. Some of our notable models are:

Prison to Community: Safer has helped shape the Sheridan Initiative, which is Illinois' model prison to community initiative. Sheridan, a 950 bed prison, is geared towards providing in-custody treatment for drug offenders. Safer provides job readiness during the duration of prison stay and job placement and retention supports for two years post-release throughout Illinois. Results at the end of year two show a 50 % decline in recidivism and a 50% increase in job placement. Our most recent statistics show that 77% of the participants who are active in Safer's services are currently working.

Community Corrections: Safer administers two minimum security male residential transition centers, on behalf of the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), both located in the Lawndale community on the near west side of Chicago. This is a community greatly impacted by the prison system with 70% of the men residing in North Lawndale having a criminal record. Between the two Adult Transition Centers (ATC), Safer provides 24-hour housing, treatment, education, and job readiness/placement and retention for 500 incarcerated men at any given time. Through these centers, Safer is able to help those incarcerated in IDOC gradually reenter their communities, while achieving benchmarks around educational and job attainment.

Transitional Jobs: In January of last year, Safer launched a staffing company (Pivotal Staffing Services, LLC) so that we can serve employers' needs and act as the employer of record. We have hired 756 clients for one major employer since then. The clients that we target for these job opportunities are those with very limited work and educational backgrounds. In the last quarter of 2005, Safer added a Transitional Employment Supports element to these jobs. Since that time, 30 day job retention has increased from 53% to 78%. Start-up funding for Pivotal was supplied through the Small Business Administration and the City of Chicago Mayor's Office of Workforce Development.

Basic Skills: Safer designed its own approach to basic skills and GED attainment several years ago, which we refer to as our Youth Empowerment Program. Through this 8-week model, clients are both students and teachers. We shaped this model to intake participants at any grade level, and the results have been consistently strong. In FY2006, 314 clients attained their GEDs, and 1,500 basic skills clients increased their literacy rates by an average of 2 grade levels. Funding for this initiative is primarily through the Illinois Community College Board.

Ready4Work and the Department of Labor's Prisoner Reentry Initiative: With support from the U.S. Department of Labor, Safer was able to implement the Ready4Work model from January of 2004 to August of 2006. During that time, we worked with 4 community-based partners to serve 430 18 to 34 year olds during their reentry process. Safer provided case management and job placement/retention services, and our community and faith-based partners provided mentoring. 69% of the participants gained employment, and 67% attained 30-day retention. Most significantly, less than 10% of the enrolled participants had recidivated by the end of the initiative.

Safer was also awarded a 3-year Prisoner Reentry Initiative grant in November of 2005. With this DoL funding, we've expanded the number of sites, in the communities of highest reentry, that are implementing the Ready4Work case management, mentoring, and job training/placement model. Early results are similar to those of the original Ready4Work project.

Chicago has benefited from the importance both Ready4Work and the Prisoner Reentry Initiative placed on partnerships. These federal funding sources have enabled Safer to formally partner with 9 community and faith-based organizations and thereby increase their capacity to provide mentoring and wrap-around supports to those returning from prison. Safer has been allowed to do what we do best, specialize in job placement and retention, while also ensuring that the returnees more personal needs were being met at the community level. We believe that this unique partnership has been critical to the significant decline in recidivism for these clients.

In an effort to measure client outcomes, the Safer Foundation commissions an annual three year recidivism study. The lead researcher is Dr. Arthur J. Lurigio, PhD, Associate Dean for Faculty at Loyola University. The Safer recidivism study tracks client recidivism (re-incarceration) for three years, beginning at the point of intake at Safer. Findings are then compared to the IDOC recidivism (re-incarceration) study, which tracks all Illinois prison inmates from the point of release for a three year period.

The 2004 IDOC recidivism study tracked all released inmates in Fiscal Year 2000 (7/1/99 - 6/30/00) and measured their re-incarceration through Fiscal Year 2003, finding 54% of all releases were re-incarcerated within three years. The 2004 Safer study likewise tracked all 4,136 clients who received an intake at one of Safer's locations during Fiscal Year 2000 (7/1/99 - 6/30/00) and studied their re-incarceration, using the same definitions and data as the IDOC study.

The 2004 Safer study found that the three-year recidivism rate for clients who received our employment services and achieved a job start was 21%. In other words, among all Safer clients who received job starts, only 1 in 5 returned to prison within three years of their release from prison. The three-year recidivism rate for clients who achieved 30-day employment retention was

18%, an improvement of 67% as compared to the statewide recidivism rate of those released from prison during the same time period. Among those who went on to achieve 360-day retention, only 8% recidivated in a three-year period.

The findings from the Safer Foundation's recidivism study speak to the importance of hitting at least the 30-day retention. As an organization, we are continuing to develop, implement, and further models of workforce development that support our clients in achieving the employment starts and retention benchmarks that we know will result in their long term success. We also continue to work towards bringing our proven program models to scale, to meet the growing need for reentry support.

No single intervention will solve the reentry problem but the research findings are clear ~ education and employment have the greatest results on recidivism. While in the past public policy decisions have been made out of the concern that supporting people with criminal records sends the wrong message, I am encouraged that as a nation we are beginning to think differently. We recognize that we cannot continue to utilize incarceration as the answer to public safety. To truly impact the growing numbers of people going to prison, education, vocational training, and employment options that allow for a living wage must be priorities. They are critical, but can not be offered in a vacuum. Treatment, housing and case management must be a part of the solution, given the complex and multifaceted issues surrounding former prisoners.

The Safer Foundation recommendations include:

Ensuring that federal assistance is both comprehensive, and directed towards community-based groups that are in a position to provide coordinated services, with a focus on hard outcomes (employment and educational attainment). Program models such as Department of Labor's Prisoner Reentry Initiative allow for coordinated service delivery under the accountability of mature community-based organizations that can ensure results and help facilitate partnerships. Such mature organizations should be supported in their efforts to provide technical assistance and capacity building to smaller community and faith-based organizations. So that their expertise in dealing with the population is distributed, the Department's One Stop providers should be encouraged to work with them as well.

Continuing support for what we know works via the Prisoner Reentry Initiative. PRI, and the combined approach to job placement, mentoring and case management, should be expanded to the cities and counties with the highest concentrations of returning individuals, and services should be located in the areas of highest reentry. PRI could be further strengthened with a transitional jobs component that supports employment opportunities and accompanying wraparound services for those least likely to garner employment and most likely to return to crime.

Encouraging innovative statewide solutions that utilize a justice intermediary to coordinate city, state, and county efforts under a coordinated umbrella. Safer has worked with national and local experts to design one such model, that when fully implemented will result in a significant decline in recidivism as well as adding significant knowledge to the field of reentry. This model combines the efforts of the police, parole, corrections, health and human services, and community based providers in an effort to establish a true reentry mechanism.

Reinstating access to Pell Grants during prison would encourage states to restore prison educational programs. Prison could be better used as a time to rehabilitate and prepare people for the labor market. Prior to 1994, Pell Grants were utilized in prison to fund college degree programs. Studies on the results of in-prison college degree programs show a significant decline in recidivism for each level of degree earned.

Encouraging the Department of Labor and Department-funded state agencies that review labor shortage projections to coordinate with prison systems. Such an effort could be a solution to both regional labor market shortages and high unemployment rates for those returning from prison.

Increase the Work Opportunity Tax Credit from \$2,400 to \$10,000. Currently, many employers do not take advantage of the tax credit because they view the paperwork as onerous. Increasing the tax credit would heighten employers' willingness to take advantage of it.

In closing I would like to share a client story ~ Joshua Hodges is one of our stars. He is almost 21 years old and is currently attending Chicago State University. His goal is to obtain his MBA from DePaul University.

Josh had been living at Aunt Martha's House, a homeless shelter that accepts teens, and working for some time, when something happened that changed his whole life. He got arrested and spent three months in the Cook County Jail. Josh had no previous record and received two years probation.

While he was incarcerated, one of his cellmates told him about the Safer Foundation that helped "ex-offenders" obtain a G.E.D and find employment. When Josh was released, he immediately enrolled in our Harvey Employment and Learning Center.

He embraced the program and the staff with a fury. At the end of the two month GED session, Josh passed the GED test with a score of 2780. Working with our staff, Josh completed his Individual Service Plan, college financial aid forms, enrolled at Chicago State University, and at the end of his first semester he had achieved a GPA of 4.0. Josh has received a scholarship from Safer to help cover his college expenses.

On behalf of Josh, I want to thank you for the invitation to testify today and commend this Subcommittee's efforts to address the needs of former prisoners as they return to their communities.