



Response from John Wetzel, Founder and Board Chair of the Keystone Restituere Justice Center, to Question from Senator Klobuchar

Senate Hearing on “The Nation’s Correctional Staffing Crisis”

Submitted on March 20, 2024

Question from Senator Klobuchar: Are there ways Congress can help improve the way infrastructure projects are administered to ensure that resources are helping those in the field innovate and improve?

Response:

Opportunities such as innovative grants and other forms of funding, demonstration and pilot projects, or traditional budgetary line-items could encourage the use of cross-systems collaboration and innovation. Funding, to be sure, is certainly important because correctional officers need to be paid a competitive wage, and our facilities and the technology within those facilities cannot be antiquated. But better funding without any other assistance is insufficient.

Cross-systems collaboration and innovation can help us achieve an infusion of intellectual capacity that the field so desperately needs. For example, we can incentivize academia intellectual investment. Our public colleges could create tracks for students interested in working in the corrections field. They could also integrate aspects of their research departments into the corrections field to help ensure the collection and analysis of data, which ultimately would help the field utilize best practices and rely on current and timely data. The National Institute of Justice has embedded researchers in practitioner and community-based entities. This is a strong model. Moreover, students at the universities could participate in data collection and analysis as well, thus helping educate them about the correctional field, in addition to quantitative analysis. Additionally, our medical institutions could provide guidance on advancing both physical and mental wellness among correctional staff.

Technology sector intellectual investment can occur as well. Technology institutions could help correctional departments stay abreast of technological advances, thus ensuring modernized technology correctional systems.

And, finally, non-profits that engage in leadership projects could also help correctional leaders learn about management and leadership, skills that can only make the workforce more content and satisfied.

These are only possible examples of collaboration ideas, but Congress could consider providing grant opportunities to states and local government to improve the well-being of correctional systems and employees by incentivizing these kinds of cross-system collaboration.