

**Testimony of Andrew A. Pallito
US Senate Judiciary Committee
Wednesday, July 21, 2010
Vermont Reentry Practices**

**VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
REENTRY PRACTICES**

Mr. Chair and Fellow Members, thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Committee today regarding the issue of offender reentry and for the opportunity to showcase some of the innovative work that we are doing in Vermont.

My name is Andrew Pallito and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections (DOC). Our work in engaging communities as partners in offender reentry has been brought on by an explosive growth in the use of incarceration. In 1990, Vermont had one third of the number of people incarcerated that it has in 2010, representing an increase of a staggering 160%. To manage this growth over the past twenty years, the State has built several new correctional facilities and today, houses roughly one third of our incarcerated offenders in out of state, private contracted prison facilities.

This unprecedented increase has placed an enormous burden on the State's General Fund. The Department of Corrections' annual percentage growth continues to take a larger and larger share of the State's available resources and has outstripped our ability as Vermonters to sustain many other vital programs.

Ironically, this growth has occurred during a period when the census data for Vermont shows a general population growth of only 10%. (The general population of Vermont was 562,758 in 1990 and grew to 621,760 in 2010).

There is good news, however, in that the annual rate of growth recently has slowed. This, I believe has been accomplished by a number of new strategies which affect the number of offenders coming into the system, such as diversion programs, and the manner in which offenders are being released.

Over the past few years, my department has been engaging and educating communities throughout the state about the importance of solid release planning for all offenders, including those with very violent histories. What differentiates Vermont's response to reentry from traditional approaches across the country is the philosophical foundation of restorative justice principles and community involvement. By providing returning offenders with high measures of support and accountability, fostering meaningful, participatory community connections, and leveraging the informal social influence exercised by families and neighbors, we effectively compliment best correctional practices for a more successful reentry process for offenders.

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The support and accountability derived from these relationships increases offender investment and opportunity. We have seen this with our work with Circles of Support and Accountability, also known as a COSA. A COSA is a group of five or so individuals, who are trained in the need areas of a particular offender, and who in turn hold an offender accountable while assisting and supporting them with the reentry process. COSAs are coordinated by local municipal Community Justice Centers. Vermont has twelve such Community Justice Centers located throughout the state.

Increased citizen participation has resulted in diminishing public resistance towards offender reentry and marginalization of returning offenders. This dramatically improves an offenders potential for success and can achieve a significant reduction in recidivism.

Complimenting the COSA process is the Offender Responsibility Plan, known as the ORP. The ORP is our Case Management System for coordinating, delivering, and tracking the range of treatment and work readiness development services specific to the offender's strengths and needs. It constructs a customized map of stakeholder relationships and available services. The document evolves over time to reflect the offender's progress, including pre-release services such as vocational assessment, housing readiness, benefits eligibility, transition planning and post-release supervision and services, behavioral assessments and therapy, substance abuse treatment, employment, parenting and other family obligations.

The ORP is a *restorative process* that encourages the returning offender to accept responsibility for the harm his or her crime caused. It is a fluid case plan developed by the Department of Correction's facility and field casework staff in collaboration with the offender and all other appropriate parties.

Over the past few years, we have formed critical new partnerships with offender-serving agencies throughout Vermont. This includes the Department of Labor's Vocational Rehabilitation Division, the Social Security Administration, the Veteran's Association, the Judiciary and the Agency Of Human Services' Housing and Economic Benefits Divisions, Office of Child Support and Department of Health. Through Memorandums of Understanding with these agencies, we have enlisted their on-going support in pro-active reentry planning, resulting in valuable utilities such as reentry employment specialists, housing search and retention specialists, electronic benefit cards and personal identification provisions prior to release.

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Through these initiatives, we have fundamentally changed the reentry service delivery system in Vermont. The ORP case management structure is in place, as is state law and policy to support Restorative Reentry. We have incorporated the leveraging of stakeholder relationships on both an interagency and interpersonal level into our case planning and reentry practices. A NIJ study of Vermont's Reparative Probation Program (which uses the restorative justice principles) has demonstrated that restorative approaches for offenders achieve significantly positive reductions in recidivism (over 23%). The same principles underlie our reentry practices.

Many of the individuals who have reentered with the assistance of a community-based support cite the critical role these services have played in allowing them to get their footing and stay out of prison. Targeted reentry services such as employment and housing assistance have also stemmed directly from our Community Justice Center reentry programs, resulting in a significant number of successful and stable placements across the state. The organizational culture of our own Department has also grown to recognize and appreciate how our work is enhanced through direct citizen involvement in the reentry process. We have *begun* to change the conversation about returning offenders in local communities from "how can we keep them out of our town?" to "how can we make them a part of this community so they won't do harm again and prevent them from entering the corrections system?"

During these difficult fiscal times, the Vermont Legislature has recognized the importance of this work and recently has appropriated funding for these community-based strategies. This funding is not enough to complete this work, however.

Challenges we continue to face are lack of federal funding to support ongoing efforts and compliment the State funding already appropriated, community resistance, public policy issues relative to sex offenders, and the standard barriers to successful reentry (housing and employment chief among them). In addition, we have not been resourced to conduct an empirical, longitudinal study of our reentry programs. So while we have significant anecdotal information from program participants, staff and volunteers to suggest its effectiveness, we do not have the comprehensive data that would support this experience.

Submitted along with my testimony is documentation on two cases of higher level offenders who have been successfully reintegrated into the community using the COSA process. In addition, submitted is an agenda from a community meeting establishing a COSA for a particular offender and an article written in a local Vermont newspaper describing our COSA process.

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In closing, I want to again thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address this Committee. I want to further thank you for the partnership that we have enjoyed through past grant opportunities which have allowed us to build a foundation for this innovative work.

Attachments:

- A.** Circles of Support and Accountability – Case Study #1
- B.** Circles of Support and Accountability – Case Study #2
- C.** Actual Agenda from an Offender’s Reentry Meeting
- D.** Circles of Support and Accountability Article in the Times Argus Newspaper, December 24, 2007
- E.** Program Abstract from the Vermont Department of Corrections 2010 Second Chance Act Grant Application
- F.** Vermont Reentry Practices – Additional Talking Points
- G.** Offender Reentry Plan Template