

Testimony of Careen Jennings, York Volunteer

November 27, 2007

Public Hearing: Judiciary Committee

RE: Criminal Justice Proposals 1-15

Chairman Lawler, Chairman McDonald, Members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am Careen Jennings, resident of Lebanon, retired teacher and three-year volunteer with the writing group at York Correctional Institution. I know the women in this group not by their crimes but for their courage to confront their past. Their past does not have to be their future.

We all need to be safe, and it's horribly clear that some criminals should never be released. But for the majority of inmates, more punishment isn't making us safer. Longer sentences breed more anger and dysfunction. We must rehabilitate, and the system has been doing a terrible job at rehabilitation. In an informal survey during a recent writing class at York, we recalled only one woman out of maybe 100 who has reoffended after participating in the group. Is there a lesson here?

Rehabilitation stops recidivism and makes us all safer.

Point 1: Education is a vital part of rehabilitation, both for self-understanding and for job entry. The imprisoned women I work with need and want post high school education. There is GED preparation, but there is almost nothing available at the community college level. Education reduces recidivism. Education reduces tax dollars needed for prisons.

Point 2: The women I know want to earn sentence reduction by staying discipline-free and working hard at the jobs given them in prison. They are doing both despite there being no incentive because "Good Time" was legislatively ended in October, 1994. It's time to reverse the 1994 legislation that ended credit for "Good Time."

Point 3: Near the end of their sentences a work-furlough program will give offenders a head start on both a resume and restitution. Properly administered, this program will have no losers.

These rehabilitative programs used to exist. They worked. But they were ended as society moved toward more punishment. Punishment doesn't teach offenders to become responsible, job-holding citizens. The women I know have been punished much of their lives.

These proposals have plenty of sticks but not even the most woebegone of carrots. Offenders need help and hope. It is a moral imperative that we save those who have learned from their mistakes, who have gained strength from the crucible of prison, and who will use whatever years remain to them to live cleanly and productively. The best way for both liberals and conservatives to be safe is to help offenders emerge from prison as better people than they went in. They want this, too. For all our sakes, we must rehabilitate.