

Testimony for November 27, 2007

Public Hearing before the Judiciary Committee

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, when the state psychiatric hospitals began to "deinstitutionalize," the rate of failure was high. The community agencies responsible for their care were understaffed and not equipped to handle the high and extensive needs of the patients returning to the community. The answer was to increase community staff, agency resources and create intensive case - management teams, with small case loads. As a result, the success rate of patients in the community improved. I believe the same solution will work effectively with the prison/parole population.

I am a licensed clinical social work, and have worked with the incarcerated population for the past thirteen (13) years. I continue to struggle, with the question of recidivism.....why is it that while incarcerated, this population is able to manage themselves, set goals for themselves and their families, and vow not to return; but then eventually do return? As I sit and listen to story after story, I am amazed at the struggles that these individuals are faced with when they return to the communities they call home. The obstacles that they are faced with upon discharge from prison are immense. These are individuals with limited family supports, limited educational backgrounds, impaired coping and problem solving skills and yet, they are expected to navigate the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Housing Authority, the Department of Transportation, the Board of Parole or Probation, the Department of Children and Families and Vocational services. And society is shocked at the high rate of failure/recidivism? How could it be any different?

Over the years, I have been witness to not only the growth of the population in numbers exponentially, but also the change of the level of functioning of the individuals we incarcerate. These are individuals that were frequently abused, physically, emotionally and sexually. They may have been failed by family, DCF, education, and society. Why is it, that we all have empathy for the child we see on the news that was beaten, abused and neglected; but when we see them later in life, using drugs and unable to manage their life we no longer have empathy and only want to lock them up in the jails/prisons that we continue to build?

So what is the solution? I **strongly** believe that building additional prisons at exorbitant costs to taxpayers, is **not** the answer. As we did in the 1990's for DMHAS, we need to adequately fund, staff and provide resources to the departments that are given the daunting task of caring for these individuals. Use the funds not for incarceration but in the communities to promote healthy lifestyles, healthy families and healthy rehabilitation. Not only will this decrease the recidivism rate, perhaps it will decrease the number of first incarcerations for the next generation.

Parole and Probation officers need to have small/manageable caseloads that can be provided with intensive monitoring. Hire professionals and train staff in areas of addiction, mental health and rehabilitation. Involve the housing authority to be accountable for providing safe, adequate and affordable housing. Involve the vocational services to be accountable for providing decent paying jobs for individuals with felonies on their record. Involve the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to be accountable for providing needed treatment, programming and counseling.

Although, I understand the shock, horror and share in the great sadness of the tragedy of the Cheshire home invasion, I don't believe that society can simply "give-up" on and abandon the individuals that we currently incarcerate. Yes, there is absolutely a small number of individuals that are dangerous and should not be allowed in our communities. However, the majority of these incarcerated individuals are guilty of crimes against themselves and their families. With appropriate levels of monitoring, support, counseling, education and assistance from the communities, these individuals have the potential to be successful. Although the media bombards us on a daily basis, of all the evil in this world in which we live, a great number of our fellow human beings are **not** truly evil. Instead of being shunned by the community, they need to be incorporated into the communities. They need "life-coaches" and the agencies expected to monitor and treat them needs to have the appropriate resources to be their "life-coach." Whether we like it or not, we share this earth with these individuals and must embrace them as we did when they were small and helpless, many of them still are!

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