



**The Doe Fund, Inc.**

232 East 84th Street  
New York, NY 10028  
T 212.628.5207  
F 212.249.5589  
[www.doe.org](http://www.doe.org)



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*Testimony of George T. McDonald before the House CJS Subcommittee*  
**March 11, 2009**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me the privilege of appearing before you today. This hearing could not be better timed: the Pew Center on the States reported just last week that one in 31 American adults are either in prison or on supervised release from incarceration. Corrections spending is literally blowing a hole in government budgets at every level, and your commitment to being a part of the solution to this crisis is both crucial and commendable.

As Founder and President of The Doe Fund, the New York based non-profit that operates the *Ready, Willing & Able* paid transitional work program, I have had the privilege of watching thousands of men break lifelong patterns of crime, substance abuse and dependency to become productive, law-abiding, tax-paying citizens – as well as fathers to their children and role models in their communities. And every one of them has done so by grasping the work opportunities we provide.

In the early 1980's, when I first started working with people our society had given up on – homeless, drug-addicted offenders – I heard from their mouths that what they really wanted was a *hand up*, not a handout. They wanted the opportunity to go to work, to lift themselves out of poverty, to end destructive cycles, and to rejoin mainstream society. When I handed them a sandwich they thanked me, but

asked for something more – “a room and a job to pay for it...a room and a job to pay for it.” I heard that refrain over and over again.

The *Ready, Willing & Able* program became the response to that refrain. It was the first program of its kind to go beyond immediate emergency needs and to believe in the ability and potential of even the most downtrodden among us to seize an opportunity and succeed.

I recruited the first *Ready, Willing & Able* program participants from the floor of Grand Central Terminal, where they had landed after cycling in and out of prisons and homeless shelters. Together we entered into a contract in which they promised to give up drugs and go to work and I, in return, promised that *Ready, Willing & Able* would be there to give them an immediate job, support them and open doors for them.

From that first handful of men and our first facility in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, we have grown to serve 1,000 people a day in New York and Philadelphia. Our participants come to us, no longer off the floor of Grand Central Terminal, but straight from our prisons. They represent the largest and costliest crisis – both financially and in wasted human lives – our society has ever faced: criminal recidivism.

Mr. Chairman, you know the statistics as well as anyone. 700,000 individuals are released from incarceration in this country every year; two-thirds are rearrested within three years. The bulk of these rearrests – 44% – happen within that critical first year post-release. Academicians agree that the chief factor influencing their

recidivism is the ability to find quality employment: 9 out of every 10 releasees are unemployed when they face rearrest.

It is therefore no surprise that by providing immediate, paid transitional work, *Ready, Willing & Able's* approach has had extraordinary success in helping this population exit the revolving door of incarceration. We pride ourselves on our extensive data collection and results analysis, which has enabled us to see just how successful we have been: **less than 5% of our criminal justice program graduates are re-arrested within that first post-release year.**

As part of our renowned and highly visible street cleaning project, we put the “men in blue” (as we call them because of their signature bright blue uniforms) to work cleaning 160 miles of city streets every day. They begin work immediately upon entering our program earning above the minimum wage and developing the work ethic and dignity that comes from an honest day's work.

The sweeping, bagging of garbage, graffiti removal, snow shoveling and other street sanitation services they perform have improved the quality of life in the cities where we operate and made our participants beloved and sought after additions to every neighborhood. Because they do this hard and humble work with diligence and good cheer, they have won the support of more than 45,000 individuals who not only send contributions, but notes explaining how they have come to rely on the “men in blue” and – believe it or not – feel safer because of their presence.

While in our program, the “men in blue” live in safe, drug-free shared apartments, are paid above minimum wage to work on one of our street cleaning crews, receive

comprehensive social, educational, and drug counseling services and report to a Parole Officer assigned specifically to participants in *RWA*. They are also drug tested randomly twice per week. Immediately, they become productive, law-abiding members of the community and an example of what is possible when meaningful opportunity is provided and seized. After 9 months, they begin looking for full-time private sector jobs and prepare to exchange their blue uniforms for hard hats; suits and ties; pest control, doorman and security uniforms; and even chef's hats.

In 2006, building on our nearly two decades of success in working with formerly incarcerated individuals – and thanks in large part to the support of this Subcommittee – we adapted *RWA* to serve newly released prisoners who would otherwise become homeless upon leaving incarceration. Today, our original 70-bed Bedford-Stuyvesant facility – as well as 45 beds in another facility – are wholly dedicated to serving this population, representing the nation's most comprehensive residential, work-based model serving new parolees. We seize on the critical moment when an inmate is about to return home and is looking to make a positive change in his life. Recruitment begins inside the prison, before he is even released, and literally offers him a chance to walk out of the prison gate and onto one of our vans that will transport him to his new transitional home.

Three years ago, I was asked by Chauncey Parker, then Director of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, to assemble a committee to formulate recommendations that would enhance employment opportunities for job seekers with criminal records. I had the honor of working, for over a year, with brilliant and dedicated experts to create *The Independent Committee on Reentry and Employment's Report and Recommendations to New York State on Enhancing*

*Employment Opportunities for Formerly Incarcerated People.* I am proud of the recommendations we put forth in this report and could include findings and statistics from it in this testimony, but instead, I would like to share the stories of some of our program graduates with you.

Anthony Malpica came to *Ready, Willing & Able* with over 50 convictions for Breaking and Entering. During his three decade long addiction to heroin he had known two homes: a prison cell and a cardboard box in an abandoned lot in Spanish Harlem that he called cardboard co-op city. Upon his last release, he heard about *RWA* at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. Putting on our blue uniform and sweeping the streets of New York was Anthony's first legitimate job at the age of 45. When it came time for him to look for permanent employment, he applied for a job as – of all things – a locksmith apprentice. As he says, “he had broken many locks to rob, but he had never imagined himself fixing them.” Today, Anthony has been drug-free for 10 years. He is married and lives in his own home. He is no longer a locksmith apprentice, but a certified, bonded locksmith.

Jose Carrero was 19 when he was sentenced under New York's Rockefeller Drug laws. He was 39 when he came out. While inside, he stabbed another inmate and spent a total of 5 years in solitary confinement. There, “in the box” as inmates call it, he had an awakening and decided to change his life. Upon release, he came to our program, put on a blue uniform and pushed a bucket for a year. He remembers that the things that kept him motivated, when he thought about giving up, were the paycheck and the passersby who patted him on the back and thanked him for the job he was doing. He was used to inspiring fear in people, but never smiles or gratitude. The greatest sense of gratitude for his transformation comes from his two children. In the past his son was told, “You're no good. You will be just like

your father.” Today Jose, Jr. sees his father as a role model and appreciates being compared to him.

Jose graduated from our program with a job as a dialysis technician. He likes to say that while he once stabbed people to hurt them, today he does it to save lives. There are thousands of success stories like Anthony’s and Jose’s, and through the help of programs like The Doe Fund’s there can be more. Congress has an opportunity to fund innovative, replicable, and most of all, evidence-based models for prisoner reentry that provide real solutions for communities around the nation to implement.

Indeed, we at The Doe Fund have found the way to replace the revolving door of criminal recidivism with the best front door in America – one that a formerly incarcerated person can walk through with little more than the desire to work hard and rebuild his life and walk back out, a year later, with his sobriety, a full-time job, his own apartment, and a renewed relationship with his children.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.