

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies

Jennie Amison's Testimony

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Focus: Prisoner Reentry

My name is Jennie Amison and I have been a resident of Virginia for 59 years. I now reside in Harrisonburg, Virginia where I am the Executive Director of a 60-bed reentry program for non-violent offenders with substance abuse issues. We provide residential services for 48 men and 12 women. Gemeinschaft Home is a transitional therapeutic community program that contracts with the Virginia Department of Corrections. We are nationally and internationally recognized and our work was showcased in Tokyo Japan. Japanese officials came over in 2007 to study our program and implement it in Japan. We are also a Delancey Street replication. I provide technical assistance with the Department of Justice under the Center for Community Safety at Winston Salem State University. I am currently working with Pawtucket Rhode Island's Weed and Seed Reentry initiative as well as St. Louis and Philadelphia to show them how to replicate Gemeinschaft Home's program.

Gemeinschaft Home works closely with James Madison University and Peggy Plass who is the head of their Criminal Justice program to provide research evaluation for our program. Attached to this you can see a complete copy of the research evaluation on Gemeinschaft Home. A few highlights of the study include that: Gemeinschaft offenders were significantly less likely to have been rearrested, significantly less likely to have been reconvicted, and significantly less likely to have been recommitted than were the controls group. Gemeinschaft offenders who were rearrested became reinvolved with the criminal justice system an average of more than 150 days later than did controls. When they were rearrested, there is evidence that the offenses of the Gemeinschaft population were less severe. Gemeinschaft offenders who were rearrested were relatively more likely to have been charged with ordinance offenses than were controls, and less likely to have received a felony charge.

The reason for me entering into this work is because for ten years I worked in a Virginia correctional facility that housed 1080 men that provided them with therapeutic community treatment. For years, I saw these men leave and 3 to 6 months later return to prison. The resonating theme of all the men that returned was; I can't find employment, housing, healthcare, I can't pay child support or my restitution and fines and I can't find appropriate social networks. The majority of these men had no skills for employment and most lacked their GED.

When you send an individual back to the streets with only \$25 and a bus ticket, what are the expectations for them to succeed or to become productive members of the community? When you talk about public safety, we are considered a model program because we are a continuum of care. The residents have the therapeutic community treatment while in prison and continue this treatment at our residential facility. They enter our program and we provide full wrap around services for their transition. We use a holistic approach when we deal with the mental, physical, social, spiritual, vocational and family of each resident.

Our program provides individual counseling, group counseling, financial management, employment services, health care services, parenting skills, GED training, healthy relationship building skills through our mentoring program. Our program is highly structured and the community of residents is the agent of change. The men have learned to be their brothers' keeper and accept responsibility for their actions. We provide community service projects for the men and partner with colleges, universities, and other non-profit organizations in the community to assist our program. Having a person simulate a natural environment and giving them the necessary tools to become active and productive members of the community is when real learning occurs.

As you may know, 700,000 offenders are going to be released from prison this year and in Virginia alone, we have almost 11,000 offenders coming out each year. Whether we like it or not, they are coming back to our communities. When we talk about public safety, what is safe about letting an addict back into his/her neighborhood with \$25, no housing, and no skills with the same people, places and things. We are setting them up to fail in our communities and to repeat crime. We are making prison a revolving door without giving these people the necessary tools to succeed.

In Virginia alone, 63% of males incarcerated are African American and 52% do not have a high school diploma; 49% are non-violent offenders (Pew Center on the States). We can provide residential housing in communities for non-violent offenders, which will decrease the cost of incarceration and have them in a program where they are receiving the adequate skills they need to be successful, productive tax-paying members of society. Correctional spending increased from nearly \$9 billion to \$60 billion during the past 20 years, but prisoners are less prepared for reentry than in the past (The Third Way Culture Program Report). According to the Boston Review, the cost of national Reentry efforts would be about \$7 billion each year, roughly one-tenth of total current spending on corrections. The benefits of addressing this issue from the Reentry aspect far outweigh the cost of continued incarceration, both socially and economically.

We have helped our prison population grow by not providing adequate services to those who are incarcerated. Reentry planning should start when the men enter the prison gate. Need assessments should be done to see what plan is needed for the offender. A case manager should be working towards these resources upon the offenders' entry into our community.

Many states are feeling the need to address the issues of returning ex-offenders back into their communities. Many communities and faith-based organizations want to help but do not have the resources or the training. The Second Chance Act money and Public Safety money can be spent more wisely by paying now with adequate services to assist these offenders.

Reentry is not about the ex-offender it is about public safety and building community capacity. It is about improving communities through making ex-offenders contributing members. Reentry is about healthy and wholesome communities.

References

- "Reentry," Bruce Western: Boston Review, July/August 2008.
- The Pew Center on the States, One in 100: Prison Behind Bars in America 2008

- The Third Way Culture Program, The Impending Crime Wave: Four Dangerous New Trends and How to Stop Them.