

STATEMENT

BY

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Executive Director,
East of the River
Clergy-Police-Community Partnership**

BEFORE THE

**United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on the District of Columbia**

March 3, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear today to represent the partnership between the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency and the District of Columbia faith community. I am Rev. Donald Isaac, Executive Director of the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership and Associate Pastor of Southeast Tabernacle Church. I am also the Chairman of the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership Advisory Council, and it is in that capacity that I come before you today.

Over the past few years, government has begun to notice the extent to which faith institutions contribute to community stability, family strength, and public safety. The Executive Order establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Programs states that “[f]aith-based and other community organizations are indispensable in meeting the needs of poor Americans and distressed neighborhoods.”¹ As a minister in the District of Columbia, I see the truth of that statement every day. I have dedicated my ministry to reversing the trend of escalating crime and violence among our city’s young people. Therefore, I was very interested when CSOSA issued their call in 2001, asking

¹ White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Executive Order: Establishment of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives,” January 29, 2001.

the city's clergy to establish a faith/community partnership that uses the power and resources of faith institutions to help offenders under community supervision.

From the beginning, several aspects of CSOSA's approach to faith/community partnership were encouraging. First, CSOSA respects the autonomy and authority of faith institutions. Second, they acknowledge that our resources are limited, and that a partnership is a two-way street. They are willing to give something to get something—CSOSA put in place and funded a structure to support offenders' access to faith community programs and services. And third, they value and respect all creeds and denominations. CSOSA supports the efforts of our Advisory Council to remain truly representative of the city's congregations. Our Advisory Council currently has 19 members drawn from the city's diverse Christian and Muslim congregations.

The Faith/Community Partnership chose mentoring as its first initiative because it allows individual volunteers and returning offenders to connect in an immediate, personal way. Relationships are the core of mentoring, but successful mentoring involves much more than conversation. It involves empathy and support. Mentors must be able to understand the obstacles and temptations their mentees face, the obligations of community supervision, and the opportunities they need to find. CSOSA has developed and delivered mentor training that touches on most of these issues, but no classroom experience can prepare an individual for how hard the work is.

The initial 100 matches between mentors and mentees have yielded some wonderful examples of that support. Shirley Hall was released from prison in October 2002 at the age of 39. When she joined us, she had a long history of drug use and incarceration; in fact, she was referred to us after having her parole revoked for drug use. She told us that she needed the support of other women to stay out. We placed her with Upper Room Baptist Church. Rev. Catherine Bago, the associate pastor, has worked for many years with substance abuse and runs a well-regarded aftercare program. Shirley received a lot of support from the women's groups at Upper Room, as well as from Rev. Bago personally. She has been drug-free since her release and is pursuing a long-term

career as a commercial driver. She has managed to stay clean even though she has faced a lot of stress—both her parents have been ill, and she started a job that didn't work out. She might have relapsed. But she didn't. She stayed strong, and she credits that success in part to the support she received from Upper Room.

Ms. Hall's case provides a good example not just of the personal support mentoring provides but of faith-based support services as well. Ms. Hall's parole has a special condition requiring substance abuse aftercare; attendance at Rev. Bago's program enabled her to satisfy that condition in a way that reinforced her connection to the faith community. Upper Room's program lasts as long as Ms. Hall wants to attend it. Ms. Hall will have access to a supportive women's group long after her parole is ended.

The District of Columbia's faith institutions provide a wide range of support services, including job training and placement, family counseling, food and clothing banks, and transitional housing. We at East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership (ERCPCP) are very proud of our recently developed housing facility, which was dedicated as part of this year's Reentry Week activities. ERCPCP is also pleased to be selected as a pilot site for the Ready4Work program administered through the Department of Labor. This program will enable us to greatly expand our job readiness and placement activities over the next three years. Another lead institution in the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership, New Commandment Baptist Church, has received funds from the Department of Justice to expand its programs. Our involvement with CSOSA has prepared us for the challenge of administering broader initiatives, and in turn, the offenders under CSOSA supervision will benefit from an increased range of support programs.

The CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership has grown from a dozen ministers at a conference table to a citywide initiative involving hundreds of individuals. We are beginning to attract the additional resources needed to expand the services that are essential to success. We have expanded mentoring to reach out to prison inmates before

they return home. Because those early weeks are so critical, we want to make sure the inmate knows where to find us as soon as he gets off the bus.

All this adds up to a promising start. CSOSA is committed to working with us, and we are committed to providing permanent fellowship and support to any offender who wants it. We are in this for the long haul, and we hope that the resources will be available for us to make even more of our inspirations into realities. CSOSA reached out to us because they recognized the limitations of law enforcement. Community supervision lasts only a short time, while the faith community can be a source of permanent inspiration. Community supervision is a consequence of past behavior, but faith institutions can influence the course of future behavior. Community supervision is about external accountability, but faith is about internal change. As in any good marriage, the two partners in this enterprise complement each other.

I look forward to continuing our work with CSOSA, and I thank you again for this opportunity to tell you about it. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.