

Statement of Jerome Dillard
“Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons: First-Hand Accounts of Challenges
Facing the Federal Prison System”
August 4, 2015

In Opening: I would like to thank this committee and the Senators from my home state of Wisconsin, Ron Johnson and Tammy Baldwin, for the opportunity to come before you with my testimony.

I stand before you as a formerly incarcerated citizen, who has served time in both the federal and state prison systems. My crimes were non-violent offenses mainly driven by drug addiction. While doing time in prison I witnessed a system that was ballooning with predominantly young African-Americans who were serving very long prison sentences 10, 20, 30 years for drug crimes. This was troubling to me, seeing so many of us as young men losing the prime of their lives to the criminal justice system. It was while doing my time and making these observations that I decided to work hard to never return.

The barriers are tremendous for many who are returning to their communities. Accumulating debt while still incarcerated, owed to the child support system, results in restitution and supervision fees which can be overwhelming. Some of the other problems I have identified and have worked to change in my work with current or previously incarcerated individuals are:

Lack of a Peer support network:

For 13 years I have served as the director of Voices Beyond Bars (VBB), a volunteer organization, founded in 2002. VBB is one of a few organizations in my state that provides weekly coaching, support and mentoring to men and women returning to Dane County from Federal and Wisconsin’s state prisons. This support group brings approximately 20-30 formerly incarcerated individuals together each week in a forum allowing for dialogue, support, mentoring, feedback and accountability for individuals at various phases of their reentry. The power of a peer led group provides so many of the essentials needed for successful re-entry. An in-house prison support network of this type would be helpful for the process of rehabilitation. Some of the barriers to creating this sense of community are opposition from prison staff which fosters an “us vs. them” mentality. Cultural competency training would be of value in prison institutions.

Lack of release planning and an employment network:

In my 5-years working at Madison Area Urban Ministry (MUM) as Re-Entry/Resource Specialist I coordinated a program called The Journey Home to address the barriers to successful reentry. I worked with individuals still incarcerated within a Wisconsin state prison to develop their re-entry plans using evidence-based practices, including reviewing behavioral responses for situations that could potentially lead to reoffending. I organized and implemented monthly service/information fairs to provide pre-release and newly released

individuals the opportunity to develop contacts within an established referral network. Among this network were housing, employment, DOT and child support services. These efforts included developing and maintaining relationships with various agencies to establish an ongoing network of offender friendly employers which are greatly lacking in our communities. Making ban the box a nationwide effort would help reduce obstacles to finding employment.

Reducing and incentivizing time served for individuals with drug conviction:

My experience in this field allows me to have working relationships with judges in the Dane County Court system to find alternatives to sentencing in low-risk and first-time offenders. Over the years as a professional I have served on many committees to assist in the recovery and the peer support of individuals returning to the community after incarceration. I was appointed by the Governor (Doyle) for the, Council on Offender Re-Entry Committee. I currently serve on the TAD (Treatment Alternative Diversion) Advisory Committee. This is a committee comprised of State, County, City and Community Leaders working towards offering additional treatment and diversion programs for individuals with substance abuse and mental health issues that have come in contact with the criminal justice system.

Addressing and treating mental health issues:

In my previous work at the Wisconsin Resource Center, a mental health AODA prison, I understand that even with the best programming and planning if underlying mental health issues and traumas are not addressed, successful re-entry may be harder for many of these individuals to realize. Within this institutional network, as Human Services Program Coordinator I played an integral part in bringing together a team of individuals including social workers, psychologists, facility directors, and family member to address the best individualized approach for overcoming the mental health issues that may circumvent successful re-entry. It is here that I rely on personal experience with incarceration, professional work and volunteer experiences, specialized training and a network of individuals committed to this issue. This facility is unique and invaluable because they provide mental health and trauma informed care on an individualized bases. Without these facilities individuals in correctional settings remain with untreated mental health issues.

Housing:

As previous Director of Re-entry and Advocacy Services with the Nehemiah Community Development Corporation, we realized housing to be a tremendous need for men and women returning to the community. Homelessness is rampant among the formerly incarcerated. I'm seeing more young people leaving our institutions homeless, which causes them to couch surf with antisocial peers and relatives. Individuals need a safe place to live to implement the new life plan they create for themselves during incarceration. We created and implemented a housing project for men returning to the community after incarceration, in collaboration with the WI DOC (Community Corrections). This work involved supervising staff in the day to day operations of the house and maintaining an orderly law abiding environment within the

house. While there are only a few of these models in Dane County, we are in great need of more.

Lack of skills training/basic education skills:

In my current position as the Re-Entry Coordinator for Dane County, I work with individuals who are serving sentences within our County facilities under the operations of the Sheriffs Department. In a typical work day I will meet individually with inmates who will be released back to the community within 60 to 90 days. Our meetings allow me to assess the needs of that inmate who is preparing to transition from jail to the community in areas of employment, housing, education, healthcare, transportation, child support, etc. Then based on their needs, a strategic plan is put in place to help address those areas. In addition to meeting individually with inmates, I conduct two weekly Re-Entry Readiness groups. These take place within the facilities. Once a week for 6-8 weeks, we work on re-entry planning and life skills. Being formerly incarcerated has given me credibility and the respect with my group participants. I ask the inmate to prepare for what day one will be like for them after they are released? What will their actions be if the plan doesn't go as expected? What will their plan B and C look like? We come up with what the best approach would be as we talk those things out. I ask them the tough questions, listen to them and work with them on what they will do in those worse case scenarios. We need more ability to access the mind and heart of inmates, to understand what caused them to end up in a jail or prison system, what their traumas are, are there deficiencies in skills and education? How can we work with academia, community and faith based organizations to meet these needs? A collaborative approach is needed across many disciplines to get to the heart of the many issues that result in incarceration.

Allow greater access for advocates working with individuals in prison:

I have had the opportunity to share my own journey of recovery at Correctional and Educational Institutions, Conferences and Community Events. I give a personal account of how peer support directly aided in the success of my recovery with regard to mental health and substance abuse. We often don't think of our formerly incarcerated citizens as assets in the work that's being done to address the issues of mass incarceration. Those who have been impacted are rarely asked to be at the table when we are looking for solutions to mass incarceration. We are sending a message, particularly to our young people – because we lock up so many, that America feels negatively about them. We may be sending a message that we are willing to throw them away, that we are a society that recycles everything except human beings. Many young people who have been tied to the criminal justice system believe that there is no place for them in the workforce/labor market. The truth is they may be right. Many young people in our communities want to work. After not being able to find work, they begin to believe that there is no chance for them. Hopelessness becomes their reality.

In Closing:

In working with our incarcerated/formerly incarcerated citizens for over a decade, I'm beginning to see a shift in how we are confronting mass incarceration. It's an issue that both political parties agree on; America's addiction to mass incarceration is not working. It's costly

and does not restore people. I feel the climate is right and the ground is fertile for real criminal justice reform. The modern War on Drugs – produced an overall prison population that remains unprecedented in world history. At the federal level, the growth in the incarceration rate has been even greater and more sustained than in the states. I am encouraged by some of the initiatives that are taking place at the local level in my county. We are working to address the racial disparities and reducing the numbers of those incarcerated at all levels of the criminal justice system. Addressing these problems will require far more than tinkering with sentencing policy for nonviolent drug offenders or revamping prison programming. To achieve a reasonable level of incarceration, we will need to substantially reduce both the number of people admitted to prison and the length of their sentences.

In making a few suggestions, I would like to say:

- (1) The BOP should continue to solicit feedback from people who are serving time, so that they craft programming that's of relevancy to the prison population.
- (2) The BOP programming should match labor market data about high growth industries, it also needs to be specific to regions
- (3) The BOP needs to advocate to Congress for laws that allow for merit time early release, as an incentive for good behavior / programming.
- (4) That community-based services become more 'Holistic'
- (5) That there be greater continuity of services from pre-release to post-release

Thank you for your time