

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons:
First-Hand Accounts of Challenges Facing the Federal Prison System”
August 4, 2015

As submitted for the record:

Good morning and welcome.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for joining us this morning for this important hearing on the Federal Bureau of Prisons. I especially want to thank Jerome Dillard for traveling from Madison, Wisconsin to testify this morning.

In 1980, the Federal Bureau of Prisons spent \$330 million to incarcerate 25,000 people. Today, the federal government incarcerates close to 210,000 people at a cost of \$6.912 billion.

Incarceration for drug offenses is often cited as the primary cause for the dramatic rise in incarceration rates over the last 35 years. The data bears out that 50 percent of all current federal inmates have been incarcerated for drug offenses. While states and localities have experienced a great deal of success experimenting with drug courts and other alternatives to prison, the federal government has remained relatively rigid, with long prison sentences remaining the standard for many offenses.

Lengthy sentences for drug crimes have resulted in an aging federal inmate population. Nearly half of all federal prisoners are over the age of 40, and nearly half have sentences greater than ten years. This results in higher health care costs. Last year the Bureau spent \$1 billion just treating the medical needs of federal inmates. Today, we will hear from the Department of Justice Inspector General about how the Bureau plans to handle our aging inmate population.

Last month I had the privilege of meeting with a small group of formerly incarcerated men in Madison, Wisconsin. What I learned was that these men want to turn their lives around and stay out of prison. They are willing to work hard and become productive members of society. There are many challenges that people face leaving the prison system, and my hope is to raise public awareness about these challenges.

Today, we are going to hear from Piper Kerman, author of the memoir *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women’s Prison*, about her experience with the federal prison system. Ms. Kerman’s first-hand account of her experience with the federal prisons will provide the committee with insight into how we can improve the system.

We’re also going to hear testimony from Jerome Dillard, who spends every day working with men and women coming out of prison and has a deep understanding of the enormous challenges that they face. Mr. Dillard can also speak to personal responsibility. He spent time in a federal prison and can give us his first-hand account of the challenges he faced – and still faces today.

As the chief oversight committee of the United States Senate, this hearing represents an important first step in describing the complex problems of incarceration in the United States.

I hope by accurately defining this problem we can begin to take steps to solve it.