

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Thomas R. Carper
*“Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons: First-Hand Accounts of Challenges Facing the
Federal Prison System”*

August 4, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank Senator Booker for encouraging us to hold this important hearing. I also want to thank all of you for coming as witnesses.

My day job before I came to the U.S Senate was being Governor of Delaware for eight years, where I was very actively involved with the National Governor’s Association. In Delaware, we don’t have sheriffs’ jails, county or city jails. We have a state correctional system for adults and a separate one for juveniles. In my second term as Governor, retired General Barry McCaffrey came to Delaware. At the time, he was the nation’s drug czar. He wanted to come and visit a program in the city of Wilmington at the Gander Hill Prison. The program had done a good job of reducing recidivism by about half, or from about 75 percent to 40 percent. He wanted to find out how we, in Delaware, were able to reduce recidivism, and brought with him an ABC camera crew.

I’ll never forget, because he actually went into the prison and looked at the program to see how it worked. General McCaffrey and I met with about 50 inmates in a room smaller than this hearing room. I’d been to many of the inmates’ high schools, their middle schools, their grade schools, their churches, their ball games. I said to the men, before we got started, most of them 19, 20, 21, 22 years old: ‘How did you guys end up getting here?’ ‘What happened in your lives or didn’t happen in your lives that led you here?’

About five or six men spoke up before we took our tour and they all told stories that were very similar. They said,

‘I was born when my mom was young. I never knew my dad. When I ended up in kindergarten, other kids could actually read, they knew their letters, they knew their numbers. I couldn’t. I got in the first grade and I started falling behind. In the second grade, third grade, fourth grade, just falling further behind. About the fourth grade, I realized that if I just acted up in class the teacher would stop calling on me. Eventually, I’d be put out in the hall by about the fifth or sixth grade. Finally, when I was in the seventh grade or eighth grade, I was suspended from school. For a while, I liked that because I was no longer embarrassed by how little I knew. When I was in ninth grade, I got expelled and I found myself on the outside. In the world, everyone wants to be popular. If you’re a good athlete, you can be popular in school. If you’re smart, you can be popular in school. If you’re good with girls, you can be popular in school. I was none of those. I was on the outside and I wanted to feel good about myself and the only way I could feel good about myself was to take drugs or to consume alcohol. When I did that, I felt good about myself. I didn’t have the ability to pay for those things so I ended up in a life of crime and I ended up in this prison.’

Every one of them told the same story.

The Commissioner of Correction during my second term as Governor of Delaware, Stan Taylor, used to say, *'95 to 98 percent of people incarcerated in our state are going to end up being released and come back into our society. We can send them back out into our society as better people and better parents, or better criminals. It's our choice and it's the choice of the inmates themselves.'*

This Committee and I are focused on root causes. If we take young men and young women, not-so-young men and not-so-young women, and actually do something about their addictions while they're incarcerated, that's helpful. If we do something about the lack of education, that's helpful. If we do something about their lack of work skills and the ability to get up in the morning and have a job to go to, that's helpful. All of the above is helpful.

States are laboratories of democracies and we can learn a lot from them, and we can learn a lot from one another. Today, we're learning from you and we look forward to this very much. Again, Senator Booker, I want to thank you for suggesting that we be here and let's have a good hearing. Thank you.