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Tracy Munford
(212) 614-5538 (office)
(646) 483-6804 (cell)

Advocates and the Formerly Incarcerated Call Upon State Legislators to Amend Laws That Are Barriers to Reentry

More than 150 advocates of reentry, including some who are formerly incarcerated, will travel to the State Capitol to meet with legislators as part of the New York City Reentry Roundtable Advocacy Day in Albany on Tuesday, May 12. The advocates are scheduled to meet with staff of the Senate and Assembly leadership, and State legislators to discuss legislative priorities that are key to the formerly incarcerated reentering the community, after prison.

This is the third year the New York City Reentry Roundtable has sponsored Reentry Advocacy Day. Last year's combined campaign for the formerly incarcerated resulted, in part in the defeat of the Rockefeller Drug Laws; passing of the **Medicaid Suspension Bill**, which reinstates Medicaid benefits to the incarcerated upon their release; the **Family Connections Bill**, which eliminated excess fees associated with collect calls from inmates to their families; the **Montgomery Act**, which eliminated the automatic disqualification of individuals with criminal records applying for licenses to barber or practice cosmetology; and the **Volker Act**, which helps reduce barriers to successful reentry by supporting efforts of the formerly incarcerated to secure a job.

"Last year we made significant progress by advancing a legislative agenda that puts the formerly incarcerated in a position to have a better life," said David R. Jones, president and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS). "Advocacy Day is an excellent platform for those who are most affected by the barriers of reentry to meet with legislators and for their voices to be heard."

There are 63,000 inmates in New York State prisons and last year 27,000 people came home from prison in New York, many of them returning to the communities they left; with a high concentration returning to South Bronx, Central Brooklyn, and Harlem neighborhoods.

The 2009 Reentry Advocacy Day committee developed a number of proposals to be discussed in Albany, that address unfair obstacles faced by the formerly incarcerated in the areas of **employment and restoration of rights; voting rights, higher education, sentencing and family connections.**

The goal is to amend laws that create unnecessary barriers, such as, 1) **extend the right to vote to individuals on parole;** and 2) **support the Restoration of Rights Act to create one**

comprehensive Certificate of Restoration that would overcome automatic barriers to voting, employment, licensing, and public housing for those with criminal convictions; seal criminal records under limited circumstances and strengthen employment discrimination protections.

Also, the amended bills would address 3) ***judicial discretion in defining incarceration as “willful unemployment” when setting or modifying child support obligations of incarcerated non-custodial parents;*** 4) ***SHU Bill, which bans the use of solitary confinement for people with psychiatric disabilities in prison;*** 5) ***Merit Time which would release eligibility to survivors of domestic violence whose convictions were related to their experiences of domestic violence;*** 6) ***Home Districts of Prisoners, which would address the US census policy of counting prisoners where they are incarcerated;*** and 7) ***Sealing Criminal Records for non-violent, non-sexual misdemeanor convictions, after five years, with a petition.***

Gabriel Torres-Rivera, director of the CSS New York City Reentry Roundtable said, “For four years, the Roundtable has been a forum for discussion and solutions for the formerly incarcerated and advocates. The majority of the formerly incarcerated have never had an opportunity to express their frustrations and challenges in a supportive environment with people who understand the barriers they are facing, nor have any of them had the opportunity to talk face-to-face with a legislator about their concerns,” Torres-Rivera added, “That is why the Roundtable and Advocacy Day are essential in the lives of the formerly incarcerated and the advocates who are here to support and encourage them to have a better life than the one they left behind.”

For 160 years, the Community Service Society of New York has been the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers and continues to advocate for the economic security of the working poor in the nation’s largest city.