

Removing Reentry Barriers for the Formerly Incarcerated

Last week, more than 130 advocates from New York City and around the state travelled up to Albany to meet with key legislators and staff to promote legislation that would remove barriers to reentry into society for the formerly incarcerated. There are about 60,000 people in New York's state prisons; some 25,000 are released each year, many of them unprepared to succeed in the outside world.

A captain of one of the five teams travelling to the state capital was a man who spent 30 years in prison. Now he works for The Fortune Society – which supports successful reentry from prison and promotes alternatives to incarceration - and he lobbies for those who are still awaiting their release.

Meetings were held with 49 legislators, including Brooklyn Senator Velmanette Montgomery, who has proposed a Juvenile Justice Reform Agenda which would benefit youth caught up in a dysfunctional system, and Jeff Aubry, chair of the Assembly Committee on Correction.

Albany Advocacy Day

This was the fourth annual Albany Advocacy Day, an outgrowth of the New York Reentry Roundtable, established in 2005 by the Community Service Society (CSS). The Roundtable, headed by Gabriel Torres-Rivera, CSS Director of Reentry Initiatives, grew out of recognition that New Yorkers who return to their families and communities after incarceration face numerous statutory and practical barriers to reentry.

To begin, employment discrimination, intentional or not, and the stigma associated with having a conviction history, create a real disadvantage to qualified job-seekers. One of the key goals of the Roundtable is to change laws that create unfair and unnecessary barriers to employment for people with conviction histories. Not surprisingly, the majority of people who are re-arrested on new charges or parole violations are unemployed at the time of their re-arrest.

This especially impacts people of color who are arrested and convicted at rates disproportionate to their representation in society. More than 70 percent of inmates in New York's state prisons are Latino and African American. In addition, people who could and should have been working who are returned to prison are a financial drain on scarce state resources.

Roundtable Agenda

The Roundtable legislative agenda sets forth a number of bills which are important and which we at CSS urge legislators to pass.

(1) We support removing the blanket prohibition on individuals with criminal records working in establishments with liquor licenses. Restaurants, arenas, hotels, and convention centers provide thousands of entry-level jobs. Formerly incarcerated individuals should not be indiscriminately excluded from these jobs. Employers in these industries should be allowed to consider applicants for all jobs on a case-by-case basis, and to make individualized determinations about risk and hiring.

(2) We support legislation extending voting rights to people on parole. Denying citizens the right to vote is bad for our democracy. A strong and healthy democracy must include the voices of all of its citizens. People on parole, many of who are working and paying taxes, should have the right to vote.

(3) We support legislation that would ensure that people in prison are counted in their home communities. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, one out of every three people who moved to upstate New York in the 1990s actually "moved" into a newly constructed prison. Counting people in prison in districts where they do not benefit from services and cannot vote undermines democracy. Counting prisoners as "residents" of upstate locations unfairly skews legislative districts. The result – in New York – is the dissolution of political power for communities of color.

(4) We also support extension of Merit Time release eligibility to domestic violence survivors incarcerated for committing violent crimes. The link between domestic violence and women's pathways to prison is undisputed: 75 percent of incarcerated women have suffered severe physical violence by an intimate partner. Many incarcerated survivors were convicted of violent crimes that arose directly from abuse they experienced. Incarcerated survivors have been punished twice – first when society failed to protect them and then again when they were sent to prison.

There are other Roundtable legislative initiatives that Advocacy Day participants discussed in Albany. All of them are consistent with recommendations of the New York State Bar Association, the Independent Committee on Reentry & Employment, and the Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform's *Blueprint for Criminal Justice Reform*.

Earlier Successes

In 2008, three pieces of legislation that were supported by the Roundtable were passed into law. Last year, the state reformed Rockefeller-era drug sentencing laws, changes that were supported by the Roundtable. The formerly incarcerated will benefit from these changes. And all New Yorkers will benefit from a lower crime rate, more people gainfully employed, and the saving of millions in costs for incarceration and recidivism.

To learn more about the Reentry Roundtable or to attend the monthly meetings, contact Gabriel Torres-Rivera at 212-614-5306, or at grivera@cssny.org.

Paid Sick Leave Bill

On Tuesday, a hearing was held by the City Council’s Committee on Civil Service and Labor to discuss Int. 97, a bill to extend mandated paid sick leave to all workers in New York City. Between 1.65 million and 1.85 million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. The latest CSS survey of New Yorkers, “The Unheard Third,” revealed that only about 40 percent of low-income workers receive paid sick leave on the job. National findings indicate that workers without paid sick leave often go to work sick. For many low-wage workers who must put their personal health at risk or fear the loss of their job, staying at home is not an option.

The Council should pass the paid sick leave bill and Mayor Bloomberg should sign it into law. No one who works in New York City should be forced to choose between his job or his health.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: www.cssny.org.

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