

Sarah Flynn
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TESTIMONY GIVEN BEFORE THE VT LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT
COMMITTEE, July 22, 2014.

Chairperson Emmons and members of the Oversight Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Sarah Flynn. I am a resident of Burlington, retired college registrar, counselor, and clergyperson. I am here today representing the Vermont Interfaith Action committee on Prison Reform. Recently, we hosted a public hearing on concerns about the Re-entry of ex-offenders to the community, and invited as our guests, Mr. Doug Racine, secretary of VT Human Services, Mr. Chris Barton, an administrator with the VT Dept of Corrections, and Sen. Dianne Snelling, a member of this Committee.

At this public forum we shared the results of our research on this topic. We had spent almost a year educating ourselves about the work of the Dept. of Corrections and the nonprofit agencies working with ex offenders. We also interviewed four persons who had previously been incarcerated in Vermont. I believe a summary of this research has been made available to you prior to today's meeting. At this point I would like to state on behalf of the Committee our gratitude to those participants who responded to our requests for interviews and shared with us important information about how the DOC functions and the problems and successes in working with the prison population. We were impressed with their professionalism, their commitment to this work and their candor in sharing problem areas that needed to be addressed.

It is the process of VIA to collect information on an area of concern and then narrow the scope of investigation to zero in on a few key issues

that can be immediately addressed within existing resources by existing agencies. There are, of course, larger problems to be attended to, but as a grassroots organization of religious communities we are mindful of our limitations and respectful of the governmental and nonprofit agencies whose responsibility it is to manage these problems on behalf of the people of Vermont. Our concerns arise out of the local communities where the religious communities are located, and one of those concerns has to do with the numbers of people involved with the criminal justice system living on the street and their successful re-integration into the communities where we live.

From our research and conversations we learned that a key transition point for incarcerated persons is at the point of their release. A reoccurring comment we heard from ex offenders was the lack of a coordinated plan for re-entry with instances of people arriving on the street without appropriate clothing, medications, information regarding transportation, or housing or social services and no money or means of obtaining help. We also learned that the Dept. of Corrections was in the process of implementing a Re-entry Checklist. Obtaining a copy of this, we noted its comprehensive nature and determined that it should be utilized with all incarcerated persons being released. Furthermore, given that ex offenders are often moved immediately prior to release, the work done to prepare a person for a given location, may not be relevant for the actual situation where the person is released. Hence, the need for a website accessible to ex offenders and their families that includes necessary information for wherever the person is released.

Another concrete problem facing incarcerated persons upon release is the need for an identity card that can be used to by the person without having their status as ex offenders being disclosed. Presently, an

identity card issued by the Dept of Corrections carries this source information on its face. The checklist, the website and the identity card are three immediate changes which we request be made in order to assist the re-entry of persons making the transition back to community life. In our opinion case workers and parole and probation officers should be working as a team prior to and after release in a seamless coordinated way to insure a successful transition so that the risk of technical status violations can be avoided.

Our second area of concern grew out of our learning of the excellent work being done by several successful programs working with ex offenders. Dismas House, Mercy Connections, the Community High School of Vermont, the Circles of Support and Accountability all report much lower rates of recidivism as a result of the support they provide for ex offenders. In our opinion such individual attention to the needs of ex offenders is necessary to a successful recovery. The needs assessment called for in new legislation is a start in the right direction, only it should go beyond addiction and mental illness. The lack of a support community, of access to affordable housing, the lack of adequate education and marketable job skills also contribute to recidivism in addition to the very real problems of addiction and mental illness. We therefore ask the Dept. of Corrections for a comprehensive needs assessment and programs which address these deficits during incarceration and after release.

Our final request was to build an ongoing relationship with the Dept of Corrections, the Secretary of Human Relations, and the Legislative Oversight Committee to further dialog on these concerns. To that end Senator Snelling has already responded by inviting VIA to this meeting to share the results of our work in this area with the Committee.

In order that you may know the responses we received to our three questions, I am including a portion of a report prepared by a member of our Committee for our VIA evaluation of the meeting:

“Our invited guests were asked three questions relating to these concerns and had time to respond. Their responses included:

- We got a “yes, yes, yes” to the three questions from Secretary Racine, and then later on a follow-up saying that he would support all of these ideas with a caution that resources are always an issue. He does support identification that does not say “Department of Corrections.”
- Senator Diane Snelling chose not to use the yes-no format, but did say that she will work with VIA and approves of the research that has been done and also pointed out that she has been a champion of substance abuse and mental health services for many years, both inside and outside the corrections system. She challenges us to meet with her sooner than six months.
- Chris Barton said it was helpful to have his boss, Doug Racine, say yes, so he told us, in fact, that the re-entry checklist will be fully implemented July 1, that he does support more access to CoSA and outreach programs and will follow up with VIA. He also said, that starting in July, all twenty Justice Centers will start re-entry services.” (Notes taken by Deacon Stan Baker).

In conclusion, we found that our concerns and questions were well received and positive assurances were given. We look forward to a continuing relationship in hope of improving the outcomes for those citizens returning from prisons to the communities we serve.

Next, we asked Mr. Stuart Recicar, Burlington coordinator of COSA, to share with you the excellent work of this program so that you might have a concrete example of the kind of programming we believe to be

successful in helping incarcerated persons make the difficult transition from prison to community life.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the work of VIA.

Rev. Sarah J. Flynn
Member, VIA Prison Reform Committee