

Government Affairs

Senate Holds Hearing on Safe and Effective Community Reentry

The Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing before the August recess entitled, *The Second Chance Act: Strengthening Safe and Effective Community Reentry*. Acknowledging the emphasis many jurisdictions are placing on reentry strategies because of rising prison populations, tightened budgets and high recidivism rates, the hearing addressed how state and local governments can more successfully reintegrate released inmates into society.

In summarizing the purposes of the Second Chance Act, Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT) said the program funds collaboration between state and local corrections agencies, non-profits, educational institutions, service providers, and families to ensure that offenders released into society have the resources and support they need to become contributing members of the community.

At the hearing, witnesses testified on the Act's benefits and how it can be strengthened when the Act comes up for reauthorization next year. Among the suggestions of witnesses were: implementation of restorative justice principles, pre-release reentry planning, extensive program evaluation, early education, and addressing how unpaid child support payments may have a deterrent effect on post-release employment.

Andrew Pallito, commissioner of the Vermont Department of Corrections, testifying on the effects of restorative justice principles said, "By providing returning offenders with high measures of support and accountability, fostering meaningful, participatory community connections, and leveraging the informal social influence exercised by families and neighbors, we effectively complement best correctional practices for a more successful reentry process for offenders." Pallito testified that such practices led to a 23 percent reduction in recidivism in Vermont according to a National Institute of Justice study of Vermont's Reparative Probation Program. The restorative principles Pallito outlined also include pre-release planning which includes services that determine, "...vocational assessment, housing readiness, benefits eligibility, transition planning and post-release supervision and services, behavioral assessments and therapy, substance abuse treatment, employment, parenting and other family obligations."

David Muhlhausen, senior policy analyst at the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation, emphasized the importance of evaluation to accurately measure the success of programs. Muhlhausen testified that, "the principle reason for the existence of reentry programs, obviously, is to prevent recidivism. Scientifically rigorous impact evaluations are necessary to determine whether these programs actually produce their intended effects. Clearly, there is little merit in the continuation of programs that fail to ameliorate their targeted social problems."

Chairman Leahy summed up the overall importance of The Second Chance

Act by saying, “As a former prosecutor, I believe strongly in securing tough and appropriate prison sentences for people who break our laws. But it is also important that we do everything we can to ensure that when these people get out of prison, they enter our communities as productive members of society, so we can start to reverse the dangerous cycles of recidivism and violence. The Second Chance Act helps break this cycle.”

To listen to a webcast of the hearing and read the written testimony of the witnesses at the hearing, click [here](#).

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