

Testimony of Assistant Warden of Programs Nicolette S. Duffield,
Sheridan Correctional Center, Illinois Department of Corrections

June 11, 2019

Good afternoon. Thank you to Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and the members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing.

We at Sheridan Correctional Center believe in the importance of Fathers within the family unit. The building up of men to step up and return to society in a positive male role and embrace the importance of being a good Father is paramount. Myself and the staff at Sheridan Correctional Center take this topic seriously and support the men incarcerated as they work to develop the knowledge & skills of navigating the challenges of becoming "DAD" after having been away from their children due to their incarceration and addiction.

Sheridan Correctional Center is the largest National Dedicated Facility to substance abuse treatment. Sheridan provides addiction treatment and re-entry services to approximately 1650 men daily. We work in partnership with WestCare Foundation to provide a modified Therapeutic Community model along with evidence-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Family Reunification and Anger Management services. During Fiscal Year 2018 Sheridan served a total of 3101 clients. During that same period a total of 1452 clients were released from the program. The successful completion rate for these clients was 86.1%. Overall 3-year recidivism rates for individuals released from Illinois Department of Correction (IDOC) programs in FY15 were at 39.9%. A study published in the Journal of Experimental Criminology titled Enhancing prisoner reentry through access to prison-based and post-incarceration aftercare treatment: Experiences from the Illinois Sheridan Correctional Center therapeutic community demonstrated that clients completing WestCare's program at Sheridan Correctional Facility saw a reduction in recidivism of 20% as compared to individuals released from other Illinois Prisons.

We accomplish this low recidivism rate by meeting our clients where they are, treating them with the dignity they deserve, and recognizing the value of the human spirit. Our first priority is to provide the highest quality services possible.

We also believe that we are responsible to the communities in which we live and work. This is why we work hard to focus on helping men and families by offering specialized Fatherhood and Family Training for Men.

One such program is our Fatherhood and Family Reunification program. This is a weekend program that is offered on Saturdays for 10 weeks by WestCare Counselors. We are not funded for this program, so staff from both IDOC and WestCare volunteer to work on Saturday mornings to offer these services. Food and supplies are donated by our volunteer services group or often by the dedicated staff who choose to provide these services and who see the results of programming such as this. Due to space issues and funding considerations, we are currently only able to accommodate 24 families - so we have to choose our participants very carefully.

In Family Reunification, clients and their chosen family members meet twice monthly covering issues such as the disease of addiction, co-dependency, what is a healthy relationship, the role of criminalization, disappointments, expectations, accomplishments, and what the family is willing to do to help maintain their family member's sobriety. The family is also given information on recovery support group options. We see so many changes in the men and also in the family

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members as they meet in these therapeutic sessions. During one of the treatment sessions, a client mother shared a very powerful personal story. Each Saturday as she drove to the facility for the treatment group, she would pass a "House for Sale" that she liked a great deal. As she continued attending the program and passing that particular house she began thinking, "I wonder if I could afford that house on my own". She began looking into the possibility. During the 10th session after receiving her program completion certificate, she elaborated on her story about the house. With tears of joy flowing, she shared that she had been in a long term physically and emotionally abusive relationship before beginning the Family Reunification sessions. While attending she began evaluating herself with the tools she developed in the program. She stated that with each session she became stronger and more self-confident that she could leave that abusive relationship. She ended the story by thanking each member in the program for the support she felt from them. She then told us that she would be moving into the house she passed each time she came to the program sessions and starting a new life. She further related that if it had not been for the Family Reunification program her new life would not have been possible.

Many of the family members have expressed their heartfelt thanks to us on allowing them to participate in these sessions and see first-hand the changes that their loved ones are going through. Additionally, the family is becoming highly educated on how to receive and support a family member who has been incarcerated and who now is living in recovery.

In addition to the Family Reunification Program, Sheridan Correctional Center hosts Congressman Danny Davis' Father's Day program each year. Five years ago, Chief Nikki Robinson (Former Warden at Sheridan) and Congressman Davis worked together to start this program. Warden Gomez and his staff have carried on the legacy. Every year in June around the Father's Day holiday, family members bring children of the men incarcerated at Sheridan to visit, play and have lunch/snacks with their dad. This program is a much more relaxed and open visiting setting than normal visits. It is scheduled over a longer period of time, commonly 9am – 2pm. Regular visits are usually 2 hours and may be reduced to only 1 hour pending certain circumstances.

The men and their children can get up, move around, get food, play games, read, color or just sit and talk in a less structured manner than what is authorized in a normal visit. For the past five years, Chief Robinson , Warden Gomez and I have served alongside other community partners and stakeholders with Congressman Danny K. Davis' **"Visit to Dad": A free Father's Day Bus Trip. We have also tracked the men who have participated in this programming and the results are astonishing.** To date, 133 inmates have participated in the "Visit to Dad" program and only 13 have returned back to prison in the five-year period after their release. That is a recidivism rate of 9.77%. This is a significant reduction compared to the Illinois Department of Correction 39.9% recidivism rate.

I think we can all imagine the loss a family suffers when a father is removed from a home. A teenage boy who had not seen his father in one and a half years broke into tears in as he was finally able to re-unite with his Dad

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To illustrate further, I would like to read an impact letter from an inmate who participated in the Father's Day event, Mr. Ricky Green. This was his first time ever seeing his daughter, Bella. The day of this event happened to be on the day of her first birthday.

“Was an amazing day not only was I able to see my daughter on her birthday. It was the first time I was able to hold her. I would like to thank you guys for making that possible. To be honest it meant the world to me. I also was able to meet people who can help me get a job when I come home. I just lost my last child's mother to gun violence. I've been going through so much, and that one day help brighten my current situation. I could take all day saying how much I lost since being in jail this time. But you guys really help me just for that little moment. By letting me see my child and hold her. And tell her mother how much I'm a changed man, how much she mean to me. Something I couldn't do with the mother of my son who died just a week ago.”

Also, an article in the Prison Education Guide (2014) entitled, Lowering Recidivism through Family Communication, cites a 2004 study by the Urban Institute that supports our findings about strategies for lowering recidivism. The article states, “Our analysis found that [released prisoners] with closer family relationships, stronger family support, and fewer negative dynamics in relationship with intimate partners were more likely to have worked after release and were less likely to have to have used drugs”.

In closing, I would like to state that we believe that it is not only recidivism rates that can be positively affected by programs like this – we believe that our work with fathers and families can break the Intergenerational cycles of addiction, abuse, trauma and criminal justice involvement as well. It is our hope that this work will result in much less crime, much less drug use, and a higher quality of life overall for all of the residents of the State of Illinois. Thank you for your time.