

FRENCH HILL TESTIMONY: Fiscal Year 2021 Members Day

House Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and related Agencies

- Chairman Serrano and Ranking Member Aderholt:
- Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.

HBCUs and Recidivism

- Today, in America, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, we spend an average of \$36,000 a year per inmate on a prison population that dwarfs that of the rest of the world.
- Each year, more than 600,000 people leave our prisons, but three-quarters of them recidivate within five years.
- The costs to society of not acting on this issue are not limited to what taxpayers get: higher recidivism rates, higher prison budgets, more beds to build, more dangerous streets, and fewer badly needed workers in the labor force.
- The cost of unrehabilitated offenders to communities, neighborhoods, and families – unemployed and unemployable fathers, families continuing to struggle in the grip of addiction, children stuck in a despairing cycle of generational poverty, consequences of a return to crime – is too high.
- How do we hold offenders accountable for their actions without denying them a return as contributing members of society?

- In Arkansas, Arkansas Baptist College and Shorter College have partnered with the Arkansas Department of Community Correction to provide an entrepreneurship program for prison inmates during the last six months of their sentence.
- The program serves as a transition phase for inmates to gain academic and spiritual development and encourages them to continue in their education at the schools after their release.
- Last year, I introduced legislation that would establish a pilot program at the U.S. Department of Justice to provide grants to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) to implement educational programs for eligible offenders and help them successfully transition back into their communities.
- The average cost of attending an HBCU is around \$16,000 per year.
- We spend upwards of \$80 billion every year on warehousing inmates, when we could be saving valuable taxpayer funds.
- I believe that we must look at this as not only a matter of financial cost, but also as one of human cost.
- That is why I urge your Committee to include the following language in its bill report to support the efforts of our HBCUs to address this critical need.

- *The Committee supports the U.S. Department of Justice's coordination and collaboration with Historically Black Colleges and Universities to provide educational programs for recently released and soon to be released criminal offenders to assist them in obtaining skills that will help them successfully transition back into their communities and reduce recidivism rates.*
- Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Mental Health

- I would also like to discuss mental health and support for the Mentally Ill Offender Act.
- Today, in America, a behavioral health epidemic has manifested in increased drug usage, rising suicide rates, and a nationwide life expectancy that fell for two years in a row before seeing a slight increase in the recently reported data for 2018.
- Too many times, Americans suffering from mental illness turn to self-medication using alcohol, prescription painkillers, and illegal substances.
- On average, opioid use kills 130 Americans a day.
- A slight increase in life expectancy indicates that we may be on the right track, but we need to continue the progress we have made to address this epidemic

through comprehensive strategies and work to ensure that our state and local governments are equipped to care for non-violent offenders with mental health and substance abuse disorders.

- I hope that you will give full and fair consideration to funding the Mentally Ill Offender Act, which provides grants to these overburdened state and local governments to support mental health courts, training to staff, and mental health and substance abuse treatment services with the purpose of better addressing the needs of non-violent offenders.
- By supporting these entities in addressing the substance abuse and mental health issues of non-violent offenders, we can lower the impact of the opioid epidemic and decrease recidivism.
- I appreciate your consideration of this request and thank you for the opportunity to testify to the committee today.