

Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Ratcliffe, and members of this esteemed committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify about the challenges and opportunities faced by so many of our nation's returning citizens.

My name is Conan Harris, I grew up in Boston Massachusetts and am the Founder and Principal of Conan Harris & Associates LLC Consultant, a firm that works with non- and for-profit businesses and organizations around executive coaching, strategic planning and capacity-building to advance the common good. I have worked extensively to support the transformation of formerly incarcerated individuals across the city of Boston and Commonwealth and know that much of our efforts to provide people with successful reentry back home begins when people are still incarcerated.

Preparing yourself internally before your release date is often the one factor that an incarcerated person can control. When incarcerated men and women prepare themselves to be released back in to society, they are eager to get out and make positive contributions; to their families, workforce, and communities. Once released back into society, a variety of social and economic barriers can stand in the way of a returning citizen's ability to control where they sleep, work, and heal. Returning citizens need support navigating their communities in order to find a safe and stable environment to sleep, a decent job with livable wages, and access to affordable, quality health care. These necessities are crucial for returning citizens not to get out of prison or jail, but to stay out.

In 2017, with the support of Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh and in partnership with my colleagues, I oversaw the development and grand-opening of the first- ever Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens. The office focuses on connecting returning citizens to resources throughout the city and serves as a one-stop-shop to help men and women coming home from incarceration with navigating activities many of us take for granted such as getting an identification card, finding employment, enrolling in substance abuse treatment programs, and getting therapy. The program has tackled many challenges but one of the most pressing continues to be access to housing. Like many cities and states throughout the country, there are many cranes in the air and new housing being built, but the political will to build safe and transitional housing for returning citizens has yet to be made a priority.

For me, this is personal. In reflecting on my own life as a formerly incarcerated man who spent 10yrs in prison for drug trafficking, my transition home as a returning citizen started while I was still incarcerated. During that time, I received my GED and took correspondence courses at local community colleges before gaining enough credits to enroll in the Boston University college program inside the institution. Also at this time, I spent time self-educating by reading books like the Autobiography of Malcolm X which strengthened me. Older men who were serving life became my mentors and encouraged the greatness in me versus the worse part of my being. When I returned home, my family afforded me a safe environment to sleep and allowed me the space to settle myself mentally and emotionally. Through the support of family and many others, I was able to find employment doing sanitation work in a 9-week program. This job was a lifeline and paid 17 dollars an hour, which allowed me to pay rent for my room and volunteer as a motivational speaker to young people in teen centers, high schools and

colleges This work quickly became my passion and by my 5th week home I had found a more stable job working primarily with youth. Throughout my experiences I have worked for a 1.2 billion-dollar foundation, consulted on multiple projects throughout the country, and became the Deputy Director for the Mayor's Office of Public Safety and the Executive Director for the Boston chapter of President Obama's initiative My Brother's Keeper.

There are times when people learn my history of being formerly incarcerated, and often ask what is it that makes me different? I simply reply and let them know that I am not different. I am an ordinary person who has had extraordinary support! The fact that everyone does not have access to these supports and opportunities to have a safe environment to sleep, find employment, and get the mental health needed when they return home has fueled my work and continues to do so today.

I believe Congress should continue to make progress expanding Pell grant eligibility and removing restrictions that make it difficult for incarcerated men and women to get an education and gain the skills they need to thrive when they go home. It is crucial that states be given the resources they need to build transitional housing for formerly incarcerated men and women and support them in their efforts to feel safe and find a stable home. I would also add that building out a bipartisan advisory board of formerly incarcerated men and women would be important to ensure that Congress is developing policy that is informed by those who it will impact most and doing what it can to end recidivism and the intergenerational cycle of mass incarceration.

Lastly, while I was building out the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens, I put together an advisory group of formerly incarcerated men and women, and they informed me that they do not want any handouts, what they want is opportunity.

Thank you!

Conan Harris