

**TESTIMONY OF VANESSA MARTIN, DIRECTOR OF REENTRY DIVISION
OFFICE OF DIVERSION AND REENTRY
LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY HEARING ON
“RETURNING CITIZENS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REENTRY”**

FEBRUARY 27, 2020

Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member John Ratcliffe, and members of the subcommittee – thank you for holding this hearing to lift up the experiences that people with justice involvement face as they reintegrate into society and to consider how those of us in government can help to improve their lives and make communities safer. I am honored to be here on behalf of the Office of Diversion and Reentry, a dynamic and innovative office created by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 2015 to develop alternative approaches to dealing with mental health challenges in the criminal justice system and barriers to reentry. I am grateful for this opportunity to highlight our reentry initiatives in LA County, as I believe we have an obligation given the size of our county, economy and, unfortunately, our jail population to be a leader in criminal justice reform.

THE ISSUE

Nationwide, about 700,000 people are released from federal or state prison each year. LA County has one of the largest populations in the country with justice system involvement, **with over 100,000 people returning home from prison or jail, or on probation or parole supervision each year**. People with justice involvement face a number of challenges to successful reentry into their communities, including **poor mental and physical health, lack of housing, and low education and employment**. Nationally, individuals who have been incarcerated have unemployment rates five times higher than those without contact with the justice system. According to the ACLU, up to 75 percent of individuals released from prison/jail are unemployed after a year.¹

In addition, people with justice involvement face a number of legal and regulatory sanctions and restrictions that limit access to activities and services. Those living in Los Angeles, for example, **face 500 distinct restrictions on occupational, professional and business licensing or participation, education, housing, public benefits and property rights**.² One result of these challenges is fairly high rates of recidivism. In California, recent data show that about half of those released from custody are arrested and convicted of a subsequent crime within 3 years of release.³

Given this, it is critical for individuals to be able to access the programs and services they need to successfully reintegrate into their communities and rebuild their lives.

¹ Back to Business: How Hiring Formerly Incarcerated Job Seekers Benefits your Company, ACLU 2017.

² Collateral Consequences Inventory, National Inventory of the Collateral Consequences of Incarceration, 2018.

³ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Recidivism Report for Offenders Released in Fiscal Year 2014-15, January 2020.

THE OPPORTUNITY

We are at a time in which there is bipartisan support for criminal justice reform, given the growing recognition of the human and economic costs of mass incarceration and no credible evidence that it has made our communities safer. According to the Council of State Government's Justice Center, there has been a shift throughout the past decade by state and local leaders to make recidivism reduction a public safety priority. As a result, there have been many recidivism-reduction initiatives funded by the federal government through the Second Chance Act and the Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

In California, there has been significant legislation in recent years to reform the system, and a commitment by the state to **reinvest funds from incarceration into locally run supervision and services with the goal of reducing recidivism**. This makes a lot of common and fiscal sense, seeing as the average annual cost to imprison a person after sentencing is \$35,000 compared to \$4,400 to supervise the person in the community.

The funds for ODR's reentry services, in particular, come from two criminal justice reform legislations – Proposition 47 and Senate Bill 678.

- 1) **Proposition 47**, passed in 2014, recategorized some nonviolent offenses to misdemeanors, rather than felonies. A recent report from Stanford found that it had reduced the state's prison population by 13,000 in 2015, which would save the state about \$150 million. The measure required that these savings be provided to public agencies to provide services via diversion and reentry programs to reduce incarceration.
- 2) **Senate Bill 678** (The Public Safety Performance Incentives Act of 2010) was the first of its kind policy approach in California. It encouraged probation departments to keep individuals under community supervision instead of returning them to state prison. The savings from reduced incarceration would then be split between the state and the counties. In 2011, SB 678 resulted in a statewide savings of approximately \$277.8 million, with half of the savings distributed to the counties to reinvest in local probation department efforts to continue their successful supervision practices. The success of the policy has helped not only impact the state system but also has helped lead the evolution in probation practices and culture.

Prop 47 and SB 678 are currently the only funding sources for ODR's reentry work. They are critical to our ability to create a community-based system of care that is accessible to, and addresses the needs of, the reentry population.

THE MISSION AND SERVICES

The mission of ODR's Reentry Division is to develop and implement programs to serve the needs of people with justice involvement and to create an infrastructure that is sustainable and equitable. We partner with community-based organizations and county agencies to **provide services that are evidence-based, client-centered and informed by the experiences of people with justice involvement**. By providing effective programs that address barriers to reentry, the goals of ODR's reentry work are to

1) reduce recidivism and strengthen community resources, 2) improve physical and behavioral health outcomes, and 3) increase economic well-being and educational attainment.

We offer services that are:

- **Evidence-based:** Ensuring our programs are informed by research on what works to reduce recidivism and improve the health and economic well-being for people who have been involved in the system. We are also committed to measuring outcomes and evaluating the impacts of our programs at every step.
- **Client-centered:** We provide services based on the needs of each individual. We take a holistic approach to serving people focused on healing and providing care that is trauma-informed and delivered through a lens of racial, gender, and economic equity.
- **Informed by people impacted by the system:** We rely on the input and expertise of people with justice involvement to ensure our services are effective. To this end, we have developed opportunities to employ people with lived experience to provide services to others.
- **Collaborative:** The majority of our services are provided by community-based organizations because they know the needs of their clients and are a trusted resource in the community. We aim to hold service providers to high performance standards and to provide them with support and help build their capacity to be able to deliver the best results to the clients we serve.

One of our most important collaborations is with the LA County Probation Department. We work closely with Probation on all programs funded by SB 678, with the **key initiative being LA County's first of its kind community reentry center.**

THE COMMUNITY REENTRY CENTER

DOORS (Developing Opportunities and Offering Reentry Solutions) is a community reentry center designed to provide an array of comprehensive supportive services under one roof **in what is commonly referred to as a "one-stop shop."** It is one of several initiatives spearheaded by LA County's Probation Department, and is housed within their largest probation area office, the Reentry Opportunity Center or ROC, for short. Over 3,000 people on active adult supervision report monthly to the ROC.

The objective is to make the **services accessible, and based in and provided by the community** that has the reputation with the reentry population and best understands how to meet their needs. The environment of the center is welcoming, free of judgement, culturally responsive and cognizant of the trauma resulting from involvement with the justice system, where services are streamlined and readily available.

DOORS is intended, in part, to be informed by New York City's Neighborhood Opportunity Network, also known as *NeON Centers*. Similar to the *NeON Centers*, DOORS includes a network of community-based organizations, county agencies, local businesses and community residents focused on connecting people on probation, their families and members of the surrounding neighborhoods to services and resources. **The goal is to help clients stabilize and succeed upon reentry into the community, thereby facilitating stronger and safer communities.**

DOORS is conveniently and strategically located in the vibrant Exposition Park community, down the block from the University of Southern CA and Natural History Museum and walkable from the LA Metro. It is also in the poorest district in LA County – the 2nd supervisorial district – with 24 percent of its residents living below the poverty line. LA County’s Supervisor for the 2nd District, **Mark Ridley-Thomas, has been a staunch supporter of DOORS**, dedicating staff time and resources into ensuring its success.

The population of focus for DOORS are those on adult felony probation. Most people are referred to DOORS through their Probation Officer, either from those in the building or from other probation area offices. **Since the center opened on July 1, 2019, Probation has referred close to 1,000 people to services.**

DOORS is also open to family members of people on probation as well as members of the community. With this in mind, we are committed to creating a space for community members to experience a positive connection with community-based organizations and county partners while accessing services and engaging with other community members. We are also working hard with groups like the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership (LARRP) to spread the word to the surrounding community.

It is worth reiterating and emphasizing the collaborative effort on the part of ODR, Probation and the community in all phases and every aspect of the DOORS community reentry center. We created and jointly chaired a year-long community advisory committee to provide input on the design of the center. The committee was comprised of leaders from county agencies and community partners. This was a concerted and coordinated effort to **change the mindset of how we help people reintegrate into their communities, with a focus on customer service and rehabilitation.**

Much of the year-long planning process focused on the services that would be offered at the center and the flow of clients in and out of the center, given the location of DOORS within a Probation building that has mandatory security protocols. Starting with a review of the research on what works in reentry, we solicited feedback from the committee, conducted focus groups with people on probation and analyzed Probation’s data on the service needs of their clients to determine that services would include but not be limited to **housing, employment, legal aid, educational support, mental health assessment and substance use counseling.** All of the information collected was consistent. In fact, according to the LA County Probation Department’s 2018 Annual Report, the top five needs of their clients are housing support, employment services, legal assistance, medical services, and education/GED.⁴ The following are a few of the key services offered at DOORS:

Housing/Intensive Case Management/Substance Abuse Screening:

SSG/HOPICS (Special Services for Groups/Homeless Outreach Program Integrated Care System) provides triage and linkage support to housing and homeless services. Additional supportive services include screening and triage/assessment into the Coordinated Entry System (CES) for housing; placement into interim housing through leveraged resources; linkage to permanent housing interventions; housing

⁴ L.A. County Probation Department | 2018 Annual Report.

stabilization plan; linkages to behavioral health and trauma focused services; systems navigation support and case management.

Employment:

Chrysalis works collaboratively with individuals to get on a pathway to self-sufficiency through employment. Services focus on helping individuals, identify, prepare for and maintain employment, which include employment assessment, job readiness training, barrier removal services, transitional employment opportunities, direct assistance applying for jobs including placement, and job retention support.

Legal Support:

Legal Aid Foundation of LA provides legal assistance in the following Substantive Legal Areas of Service: Reentry services such as motions for early termination of probation, sentence reduction, record sealing and record corrections, and other post-conviction/criminal record related work; housing related matters covering evictions, rental disputes, substandard living conditions; and Section 8 vouchers; Immigration matters covering naturalization, U-Visa, T-Visa, and Violence Against Women Act/Immigration and Nationality Act petitions; general law enforcement related matters concerning tickets, citations, outstanding warrants, and expungements; family law matters prioritizing domestic violence restraining orders and consumer law matters covering pay-day loans, foreclosures, bankruptcy, and consumer fraud.

Education:

Five Keys Schools and Programs are designed to connect students with lived experience of incarceration back to their families and their community through providing GED and High School equivalent courses and facilitate a warm handoff to community colleges, trade programs and other educational entities to ensure completion of educational goals. Five Keys prepares students for testing and provide financial support for testing for students in pursuit of their GED or High School diploma.

Family Reunification Services:

A New Way of Life provides family preservation services to individuals and families as they overcome barriers to family reunification. Such services include, case management, systems navigation, linkage to legal support, visitation monitoring and education and advocacy training to assist, inspire and empower clients to advocate for the restoration of their civil rights, including reunification and custody of their children.

Health and Healing Through the Arts Programming:

Somos Los Arte provides groups and leadership workshops targeting those who have history of gang-involvement to introduce the various forms of visual art to redirect their behavior in a positive way. Somos Los Arte also works with other artist specializing in writing, poetry, movement and theater to provide health and healing activities and events. Such workshops will include weekly Pop and Paints (Window to your Soul Activity), The Leadership Development Program, Poetry Slams, Visual Narration and more.

Community Engagement:

Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnerships (LARRP) coordinates outreach and community engagement activities to assist client flow and access to services at the DOORS Community Reentry Center. Engagement activities include, core service introduction and navigation, conducting service needs assessments, coordinating and advertising trainings, workshops and other community events conducted at the center.

In addition to the community-based organizations, services are also offered by the following County agencies:

- ***Department of Mental Health-*** Provides Mental Health Screening, Crisis Intervention, Support Groups and Linkage;
- ***Department of Public Social Services-*** Provides Benefit Establishment and Linkage to Medical and Support; and
- ***Department of Public Health-*** Provides Substance Use Screening, Education and Linkage

OTHER REENTRY INITIATIVES

ODR has also launched several other innovative reentry initiatives, in partnership with community-based organizations, county agencies and correctional partners. I would like to highlight the following:

Reentry Intensive Case Management Services (RICMS)

The Reentry Intensive Case Management Services (RICMS) program is a care coordination and service navigation program operated in partnership with our sister office at the Department of Health Services – Whole Person Care. As is the case with all of our programming, services are provided by community-based organizations that have long-standing reputations with the reentry population. What distinguishes this program from other case management programs is that the case managers, known as **Community Health Workers, are people with lived experience of incarceration or “credible messengers.”** Research has shown that the use of credible messengers is effective in reducing recidivism. **They serve as advocates for their client and have a “whatever it takes approach”** to assisting their clients with their needs, ranging from accompanying them to doctor’s appts to helping them acquire IDs, birth certificates or other documentation to navigating the complex housing, employment and social services systems. RICMS currently has the capacity to serve 2,850 clients through 95 Community Health Workers across 25 contracted community-based organizations and 4 contracted clinics. The program has been relatively easy to bring to scale and, therefore, enables us to provide services countywide, which is often geographically challenging in LA County. It has also had the added benefit of serving as an employment program for people with justice involvement. One of our Community Health Workers whose justice involvement was primarily a result of her drug and alcohol addiction said **“sharing my lived experiences of how I overcame adversity, addiction, and discrimination in my own life is testament that real change in life is not only possible but probable given the right support.”**

SECTOR (Skills and Experience for the Careers of Tomorrow)

The SECTOR program provides **industry-recognized occupational skills training and paid work experience opportunities** to individuals with justice involvement to prepare them for careers in **high-growth sectors that offer family-sustaining wages and pathways for advancement**. Training programs that focus on in-demand skills in high growth sectors like technology have been shown to increase job seekers' earnings by 18 percent within two years.⁵ Paid work experience includes apprenticeships, internships, and transitional jobs, which provide temporary subsidized employment for individuals who lack work experience to establish work history, learn basic workplace skills, and overcome barriers all while earning a paycheck. The SECTOR program also includes intensive case management, wrap-around support, and cognitive behavioral interventions to help individuals at a higher risk of recidivism build problem-solving and communication skills to ensure success in the workplace. In addition, the program is also focused on engaging and working closely with employers to develop trainings and job opportunities.

LA FREE THE VOTE

Civic engagement is an important part of the reentry process, providing a sense of belonging and agency within society. For that reason, ODR is proud to co-lead, along with the Registrar Recorder/County Clerk's office, the LA Free the Vote initiative. This initiative was born of two LA Board of Supervisors' motions in 2018, two years after the California Election Code was amended to clarify that individuals on Post Release Community Supervision were eligible to vote in California, tasking County agencies to collaborate in a taskforce with stakeholders to **civically engage and register to vote justice-involved individuals**. In its first year, the taskforce succeeded in **training 400 Los Angeles County staff who interface with the justice involved population on voter registration** and, building off existing work registering inmates in LA County Jails, taskforce members and partners **registered 1,398 inmates and 562 individuals from the reentry community**. ODR and the taskforce are continuing to build on this effort in 2020, incorporating voter registration into the regular practice of service providers to the reentry population, as well as contracting with community organizers to amplify this initiatives' reach. **LA Free the Vote aims to make LA County a national leader in systematically offering voter education and registration to the justice-involved population and encouraging this population to vote**. Recognizing that the justice involved population sits at the intersection of multiple underserved communities, LA Free the Vote brings an intentional County government focus to proactively outreaching to this population whose voices are important to our civic life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ODR strives for an inclusive community where everyone impacted by the justice system can thrive and fully participate in society. We do this by managing the development and implementation of programs to serve the needs of people with justice involvement, with the goal of creating an infrastructure that is sustainable and equitable.

⁵ Public/Private Ventures, 2010. *Turning in to Local Labor Markets*.

How are we able to do this work?

First, **funding is key**. We are very grateful for the funding we have, but more is needed in order to sustain and expand our programs. The population we could potentially serve is massive, with 118,000 people released from the jails every year and 35,000 people on adult felony probation, not to mention that 1/3 of the people released from CA state prison return to LA County. Funding also needs to be flexible and unrestricted, so we can continue to innovate and create new programs that address the myriad of needs of the reentry population and incorporate the best and most effective services.

Second, **true and authentic collaborations with government and non-government organizations**. We have developed strong relationships with Probation and other corrections partners, county agencies and community-based organizations. As you might imagine, building these relationships has taken some work, given that each organization has its own agenda and priorities; however, we are ultimately aligned in our mission, goals and commitment to serving those who have been treated unjustly by the criminal justice system.

Third, **continued support and leadership from policymakers on criminal justice reform**. For example, California launched the Fair Chance Act to protect people with criminal backgrounds from discrimination in the hiring process. However, many employers are still not aware of the law or how to fully abide by it, or what the benefits are of hiring people with justice involvement.

Finally, we need to have **compassion** and continue to have our programs and policies **informed by the experiences of those who have been involved in, and impacted by, the justice system**. We are a country built on the premise of a second chance, a better life, and we must all bring that compassion into our work every day. The result, as you all know, is good for individuals and their communities. It is also good for government budgets, given the very high cost of incarceration.

I would like to end with story of one of our clients.

In July 2019, a 27 year-old mother of two arrived at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) looking for assistance with her ongoing custody case. She also expressed a need to find stable employment, rental assistance, furthering her education. Since then, she and her case manager have been working diligently to make the best of her situation. In July, her case manager referred her to receive mental health services to deal with the trauma of a previous domestic violence incident which left her seriously injured. She began seeing a therapist/counselor every week around October. Client also enrolled into community college as a full-time student and was enrolled in Biology, Psychology, Political Science, and Communication Studies; all while working as a part-time security guard.

Due to some untimely events in December 2019 and early January 2020, she was left jobless and facing eviction. She and her case manager then prepared an application to have her rent paid, and she was sent employment referrals for security openings in the area. She was able to avoid eviction, and was approved to complete an armed guard training and will be enrolling shortly. She has been very focused and dedicated to bettering herself to provide the best life possible for her and her two children.