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Statement of Testimony  
U.S. House of Representatives: Subcommittee on Crime  
Hearing: Second Chance Act of 2007  
March 20, 2007**

Thank you for offering me this time to speak with you concerning a subject, which has for years been debated from the halls of Congress to barber chairs in every corner of our country. Crime and Punishment and in particular recidivism rates of those inmates who are released from our prisons. I literally do mean "for years" as I was first employed in 1970 as the first Inmate Release Counselor in the State of Oklahoma prison system with a Federal Grant to assist with the reduction of recidivism. I therefore can speak to you today as a person who for the past thirty-seven years has spent as much time in the company of inmates as I have with my own children, of the continued failure of our criminal justice system to protect the safety of our country's citizens.

I don't believe that I need to go into the numbers, which represent that failure. You have heard that testimony from others. The mere fact that this hearing is taking place indicates your awareness of the problem - a problem by the way, which grows worse as the years go by. While crime rates have remained somewhat stable over the past years, our correctional facilities are bursting at the seams and more are being built every year. We can no longer afford to maintain business as usual inside the walls.

As a warden for over twenty-five years, I saw first hand on the faces of inmates about to be released the sincerity in commitment to remain crime free. As a director of programs for a non-profit out patient clinic dealing with ex-offenders who were struggling to remain crime free, I can attest to the fact that they really did not want to return to prison. My Dad would say, "Anyone can stay out of prison that really wants to." We like to think in this country that anyone can be what who want to be. Our country in fact was founded on that principal. Yet, after all of

these years of working in and believing in our system of justice, I have come to the conclusion that wanting something to be so, doesn't always make it so. There are some people who must be helped, who must be nurtured into being what they want to be. With a recidivism rate over fifty percent, it is obvious that help has not been forthcoming.

I can tell you without hesitation that until recently the vast majority of wardens and directors of corrections were deliberately indifferent in terms of the successful reintegration of inmates back into society. We would all say that the programs of academic education, counseling and job readiness opportunities were offered inside our prisons for exactly that purpose. We would say that upon release parole officers were assigned to parolees to assist in reintegration. The inference was of course that the system was doing all that could be done to provide inmates with the tools of success and therefore the failure to remain crime free was due solely to the desire of the ex-offender. I can tell you that parole systems are now for the most part, given the hike in the recidivism rate, geared solely toward the surveillance of parolees and not toward their reintegration back into their communities.

It was in part this philosophy, which gave rise to "Lock'em up and Throw Away the Key" that prisons came to be constructed at a staggering rate all over the country. We couldn't get tough enough on crime. As warden I had one public official who said, "let them carry rocks from one side of the prison yard to the other ten hours per day, feed them dog food and I bet that they won't come back in." The reality (and I believe we all know this now) is that you can't build our way out of the problems we face in our prisons. Being tough on crime is not making those at whom we are angry, hurt; it is providing them an environment in which to change and the tools with which to do so while incarcerated. It is conscientious assistance upon release with becoming tax-paying/crime free citizens. Toughness on crime is effective public policy, which promotes public safety. You see the Second Chance Act is not a rehabilitation tool. It has nothing to do with being soft on crime. It is in fact a bill that promotes public safety as it will assuredly reduce the number of future crime victims.

We now have a model for effective reintegration, which cannot be denied. Intensive pre-release programs in which offenders who have volunteered are housed within the prison on specific living units, participating together in programs led by local volunteers willing to continue the

solid relationships formed during the offenders' incarceration, upon release. The inmates' families are asked to participate in support programs held in the community. Housing and job opportunities are provided through collaborations of faithbased and community organizations. The recidivism rate according to the study conducted by Dr. Byron Johnson was significantly reduced for those inmates who completed the program. The Second Chance Act will send a message to not only those state and federal employees that Congress is serious about making the system work effectively, it will also encourage the development of local collaborations of support upon which rest the foundation recidivism reduction.

Let me conclude my comments by saying at the heart of making the system work effectively and thereby reducing the rate at which ex-offenders are returned to prison, someone must be held accountable for reducing the current rate of recidivism. In other words, if wardens, parole supervisors and directors of corrections were held accountable for the reduction in recidivism rates, the criminal justice system would change over night. By placing that requirement on the annual evaluations of federal and state corrections employees, the methods by which business is conducted inside our prisons and parole offices would dramatically change. No more business as usual. In other words, those individuals who choose to work in corrections and who fail to correct must be held accountable.

Passage of this bill will signal to those inside the criminal justice system and those "outside" of it who are considering becoming partners, that there is hope. Much needed resources would become available to those correctional administrators willing to make changes necessary to overcome the lasting pains of incarceration. The pain of the offender most assuredly will become the community's pain if not healed. Remember the vast majority of those who are in our prisons are simply people at whom we are angry and not of whom we are afraid. We now have a proven effective model with which to work. We can reach these people, these offenders, these neighbors and now it is a matter of holding the system accountable for putting it into practice.