

**TESTIMONY OF  
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**BEFORE  
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, JUSTICE, SCIENCE**

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Good day Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee in support of Fiscal Year 2012 Department of Justice funding for the Second Chance Act.

My name is Diane Williams and I serve as the President and CEO of Safer Foundation. We are a not-for-profit organization based in Chicago. We work to improve public safety and the lives of our clients, as well as their families and communities, by supporting the efforts of people with criminal records to become productive, law-abiding and employed members of the community. Safer provides a full spectrum of services, including education, employment and retention-focused case-management. Safer is one of the nation's largest community-based providers of employment services for a clientele comprised exclusively of people with criminal records. While my testimony will offer information on the achievements of the Safer Foundation and the Illinois Department of Corrections, it is important to note that by funding the Second Chance Act and thereby initiatives such as the Council of State Governments' National Reentry Resource Center you are both reducing short-term and long-term costs to the American people and reducing the number of U.S. citizens who become victims.

For that we thank you.

We are also grateful for this Committee's interest in the "Justice Reinvestment" process which takes a data-driven approach to reducing recidivism and corrections spending without compromising public safety. This approach serves as a strong blueprint for policymakers tasked with determining how best to funnel spending towards the strategies and interventions that have been proven to work. Over a dozen states are now working with CSG's Justice Center to development and implement policies designed to manage their corrections system effectively through improved accountability and streamlined resources, while rebuilding the destabilized communities that have disproportionately impacted by incarceration. It is essential that as funding is being allocated, we continue to reinvest in high-risk communities and support community-based organizations that can help implement holistic strategies and best practices.

Over the past decade, Safer has seen the demand for its services grow as a result of the alarming increase in the number of individuals involved in the criminal justice system. In 2000, Safer provided services to 4,300 people with criminal records. By 2010, this number had increased to 10,000 and continues to increase dramatically. This rate of growth highlights the need for communities to adopt planned and coordinated support systems for people returning from prison.

In order to meet the need, and with the judicious assistance of Congress and the Departments of Justice and Labor, Safer has designed and implemented a number of successful, research-based programs. All of our services are aimed at providing the critical support that leads to self-sufficiency, measured by increased employment placement and retention rates, and decreased recidivism.

A few notable models are:

**Prison to Community:** Safer has helped shape the Sheridan Initiative, which is Illinois' model prison to community initiative. Sheridan, an 1100 bed prison, is geared towards providing in-

custody substance abuse treatment for drug offenders. Safer provides job readiness training throughout the prison stay and job placement and retention support for two years post-release throughout Illinois. Research on the first three years of Sheridan shows that those completing the Sheridan program had the lowest conviction rate among parolees in state history, a 23% reduction in arrests among the general parolee population, and a 40% reduction in repeat incarceration (May 2008). We also participated in the creation of the Prison to Community model developed by the Department of Justice's National Institute of Corrections which has generated significant improvements in state systems where implemented.

**Community Corrections:** Safer administers two minimum-security male residential transition centers on behalf of the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), both located in North Lawndale on the near west side of Chicago. This is a community greatly impacted by the corrections system as 70% of the men residing in North Lawndale have a criminal record. Between the two Adult Transition Centers (ATC), Safer provides 24-hour housing, treatment, education, and job readiness/placement and retention services for 530 incarcerated men at any given time. Through these centers, Safer is able to help those incarcerated in IDOC gradually reenter their communities, while achieving benchmarks around educational advancement and job attainment.

**Youth Empowerment Program:** Safer designed its own approach to basic skills and GED completion years ago with an initiative called the Youth Empowerment Program. Through this eight-week model, youth who have criminal records are both students and teachers. Safer shaped the model to accept participants at any grade level and the results have been consistently strong. In 2010, over 300 individuals attained their GEDs and approximately 400 additional individuals increased their literacy proficiency by an average of two grade levels.

Through these and other similar programs, the Safer Foundation has successfully assisted an estimated 2,700 individuals with criminal records find consistent employment in the past year. These individuals worked with Safer's career-services personnel to find and maintain unsubsidized employment and stay out of prison. These successes demonstrate the strong link between employment and recidivism reduction, and I urge the Subcommittee to continue encouraging collaboration between the Departments of Justice and Labor. Such initiatives have community-wide implications and broad impact.

In 2004, a "Statewide Community Safety & Reentry Working Group" was launched in Illinois in response to the highest recidivism rates in state history (54.6 %) and the fact that over 80% of people released from Illinois prisons return to just 10 areas. The idea was that by focusing resources on the 10 key areas; the team would reach 84% of the state's entire reentering adult parole population and ultimately establish these regions as sentinels for statewide reform. Those 10 high impact regions included: Cook/Chicago, Collar County Region (with an emphasis on Aurora), St. Clair/Madison, Winnebago, Champaign/Vermilion, Macon, Peoria, Sangamon, Rock Island and Jefferson.

Reentry impacts not only those being released from prison, but also their families and entire communities. In 2010, across the State of Illinois, over 32,000 individuals were released from prison and returned home. Of that number, 51% returned to Chicago. Of those that came home

to Chicago, 34% returned to just six of Chicago's 77 communities. This reality is especially troubling, given that these communities are disproportionately home to low-income minority families, high rates of crime, and have few of the needed social services or support.

The average person on parole has been previously incarcerated at least once and continues to face significant barriers to a safe and successful reentry. These barriers include substance abuse problems, mental health issues, low education levels and poor job-preparation skills. All of which prevent him or her from garnering employment that pays a living wage. As a result, the majority of formerly incarcerated persons commit new crimes or violate the conditions of their release, resulting in a return to prison. As mentioned earlier, five years ago the State of Illinois was facing its highest recidivism rates in history (55%). Through some of the reentry initiatives that have been put in place, that number has come down to 51.3% but we still have more work to do – especially in the wake of the prison population surge that has occurred since the discontinuance of the Meritorious Good Time (MGT) Push program.

Communities, particularly families, need tools and resources to help their loved ones succeed. Though the decisions that lead to success or failure fall most heavily on the returning individual, these individuals must be empowered to make the right decisions through clear pathways to success. The spectrum of services must also be coordinated, or at least easily accessible to those that need them ~ they are currently disconnected and unable to meet the demand.

The critical funding authorized by the Second Chance Act and appropriated by this Committee provides assistance to states, local governments and community-based organizations concerned with prisoner reentry. It enables the field to begin to address some of the systemic barriers to breaking the cycle of incarceration – barriers such as employment, housing and substance abuse. On behalf of our clients, the Safer Foundation sincerely thanks the Committee for its past leadership and the \$100 million that was appropriated for Fiscal Year 2010. We strongly support the President's request for \$100 million in Fiscal Year 2012 and trust Congress will provide the most robust funding level possible for Fiscal Year 2011. Recognizing the current fiscal environment and the pressures of an increasingly large budget deficit, we remind you and your colleagues of the average cost of a year of incarceration. The cost of reentry is far offset by the savings achieved as a result of recidivism reduction.

In closing, I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to testify today and commend Chairman Wolf and Ranking Member Fattah for their efforts on behalf of the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals as they return to our communities. I would also ask that you remind your colleagues that as budget crunches force tough decisions it is imperative that we not create short-term reductions that generate long-term disasters. Alternatives to incarceration can be more effective and less costly. Let's not incarcerate more people than we have to.