

**SENATE CRIMINAL LAW COMMITTEE | SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY**  
**HEARING – PRISON REFORM**  
**Victor Dickson – President & CEO, Safer Foundation**  
**October 13, 2020**

Thank you for this chance to speak with you today! My name is Victor Dickson, President of Safer Foundation. Over 4 million Illinoisans have criminal records that prevent them from accessing jobs, housing, public benefits and other economic opportunities. The most severe discrimination experienced by black and brown people in our state, with life-long negative consequences, has come from involvement in our criminal justice system! As you consider social justice and equity actions, please keep in mind that the inequities that exist in our state are harshest for people with records.

People with records more frequently experience the socio-economic issues you seek to address. They are more likely to be homeless before and after incarceration, have substance abuse disorders & overdose, experience trauma and mental health issues, have chronic health diseases, experience unemployment, poverty, crime and violence.

The most common measure of success in reentry is recidivism reduction, which means the returning resident did not get rearrested or reconvicted for a crime, including violence. Just listen to every media account of violent crime suspects and you will hear them described as felons or parolees. Reentry programming IS violence reduction and prevention work.

The Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council researched the cost of recidivism and found that to reconvict a single person costs the state over \$118,000. This includes meeting the needs of the victims, but, does not include the cost of reincarcerating the person, at least \$38,000 per year. SPAC also studied and compared the most common interventions that the state funds to prevent reconvictions and found that Community Based Reentry Employment services was the best use of state funds. For every \$1 invested in community-based reentry employment programs the state saves over \$20 in reconviction and incarceration costs. No other intervention produced this cost/benefit result!

We urge you to act based on the facts already collected by the state, that prove the significant positive impact and cost effectiveness of investing in community-based pre & post release reentry services. The expansion of these services, including Adult Transition Centers, has been recommended by every state commission, task force and committee assembled tasked with improving our state's justice system. Many of you have served on these bodies. Now is the time to act on those recommendations. We urge you to focus on the reentry population because criminal justice involvement is the real driver of most socio-economic problems we face.

When the state decided to begin releasing non-violent inmates early due to Covid19, Safer was asked to help those inmates when they returned home. We have assisted over 500 people since March. When people are released from prison after years or decades, they are provided no more than \$50.00 in "gate money" to help with reentry. They often return to poor families that are struggling to survive. Their immediate needs run the gamut; food, clothing, toiletries, baby food & baby clothing, medicine, public benefit applications, drug treatment, linkages to physical health & mental health services, housing and of course employment. Those are the services we provided to inmates released early. The vast majority of more than 25,000+ people released from our prisons each year have the exact same needs. Without our

intervention they will experience severe lack that drives them into poverty, homelessness, drug overdoses, sicknesses and crime.

We recommend 3 things.

First, funding the prison emergency release program making it a permanent service and expanding it statewide.

Second, increasing the funding and number of community-based Adult Transition Centers, so inmates can receive reentry services before their release from prison, which cuts the recidivism rate by half. New Adult Transition Centers will be an economic boost for their communities, creating millions of dollars in construction contracts, construction jobs, hundreds of permanent operational jobs and over \$10M per year in economic stimulus.

Third, fund the scaling up of post release holistic community reentry services statewide for every person released from prison each year.

Funding the scaling up these 3 interventions is the most effective and cost-efficient way to address the socio-economic disparities black and brown communities face, including crime and violence!

Finally, we invite all of you to join us in the 19<sup>th</sup> annual CARRE policy conference on October 28<sup>th</sup>. In this year's conference we will present a study of the prison emergency early release program which will give you a clear look at what people face immediately upon release from prison. We will also present a larger Reentry Report that identifies exactly how many people have records and the impact of the record on their lives. We will also officially launch the first of its kind statewide "Alliance for Reentry & Justice", a coalition of justice reform advocates, led by and populated primarily by people with lived experience in our justice system.

We are confident that after participating in CARRE you will reach the same conclusions we have reached, that focusing our resources on people with records is more than a justice system issue. It is the most effective and efficient way to drive economic advancement, address poverty, homelessness, physical and mental health care disparities, drug overdoses and deaths, crime and violence in Illinois!

Thank you again for this opportunity and we would be happy to address any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Victor Dickson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Victor Dickson  
President & CEO