

Statement of

The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin

United States Senator
Maryland
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OPENING STATEMENT OF
SENATOR BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
SENATE JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME AND DRUGS
"THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE: REDUCING RECIDIVISM AT THE LOCAL LEVEL"
November 5, 2009

The Subcommittee will come to order. Let me thank Chairman Specter for allowing me to chair today's hearing. He is a long time champion on these issues and truly understands how important re-entry services and programs are for increasing public safety.

The United States has the highest reported incarceration rate in the world. It is about five times the world's average. Federal and state prisons have grown by nearly 240% between 1980 and 2001. There are 2.3 million people behind bars and 95% of them will return to our communities. Yet the most recent national study on recidivism rates among state prisoners reflects that more than two-thirds are rearrested within three years of release. Something has to be done to reduce the high level of recidivism.

The goal of the justice system is to reduce crime and improve public safety. If recidivism rates remain at these levels we have failed the overall goal and intent of our criminal justice system. These statistics reflect a dark reality - our criminal justice system is failing to prepare inmates for life after lockup. If we want to increase public safety, successful reintegration of offenders into the community is necessary. If we fail to provide the necessary services, individuals will continue to move up and remain in system.

While reentry programs and services are being discussed at the national, state and local levels, much of the attention has focused on prisoners and not local level inmates. Unfortunately, reentry services at the local jail level have not received the same attention during larger policy discussions. Reentry services at the local level should be an integral part of our overall national strategy to increase public safety and reduce recidivism. They can operate as our first line of defense in protecting communities by immediately assessing an inmate when they first enter the criminal justice system.

Today's hearing will focus on local jails and the important role they have in reducing recidivism. Each year local jails process 12 million admissions and releases. That translates into about 34,000 people a day moving in and out of our criminal system. This can also translate into 34,000 opportunities to assess an inmate, link an inmate with community services, and provide an inmate with mental or physical health consultations. These 34,000 opportunities a day can be

used effectively to increase public safety, minimize future criminal activity, and operate as the first line of defense against recidivism.

Successful reintegration into society is often difficult for inmates because most lack the necessary skills to prosper after incarceration. For example, the majority of the jail population is made up of young minority males. About half of which have had another family member incarcerated, and more than two-thirds of which have a substance abuse problem. 60% lack a high school diploma. Many also suffer from mental illness and physical health problems. Without programs available to inmates prior to release and after release, individuals are being returned to the community the same as when they left.

Jails are unique because they are the entry and exit point for inmates. With effective programs and community programs in place, jails can facilitate successful re-entry programs that have shown to reduce the rates of recidivism.

In my own state of Maryland, the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation operates a pre-release and reentry center that not only provides services to local inmates within one year of release, but also assists with the rehabilitation of federal and state prisoners six months prior to their release date, who will return to the Montgomery County community. The program helps inmates find jobs, housing, and provides social services based on individual needs, thus giving them the opportunity to return to the community as productive members of society. In Suffolk County, Massachusetts, the Boston Reentry Initiative has successfully reduced recidivism rates. The Allegheny County State Forensic Program in Pennsylvania, which provides mental health services and support for individuals released from jail and those detained in local jails, has seen reductions in recidivism. There are many other local jurisdictions running successful re-entry programs, which tells me, it is possible, it does work, and we should support the expansion of local reentry programs throughout the country. We must also remove the scarlet letter attached to local re-entry facilities within our communities. Facilities located within the community allow for local employers, doctors, community based service providers, and family members or mentors to work with the inmate prior to release as well as after release. Having successful links with the community in which the inmate will return is essential in reducing recidivism and increasing public safety.

Local jails have an opportunity. They have an opportunity to stop inmates from coming back into the system or moving up in the system. We should make sure resources reach our local jails. The hearing today is intended to shed light on the important role our local jails have in the criminal justice system and to find out additional ways the federal government can partner in increasing reentry programs throughout the nation. I look forward to the testimony from all our witnesses.