

20B

Testimony for the New York State Joint Committee on the Budget
Human Services Subcommittee
February 4, 2015

Hello, my name is Maura Kelley, Director of Mental Health Peer Connection for WNY Independent Living, Inc. MHPC has a commitment to the successful community integration of consumers with serious and persistent mental illness. While we serve the needs of many populations today, I want to focus on the needs of people who are coming out of State prisons here in New York.

State prisons are the most often used restrictive placement for individuals with mental illness. A primary mission of MHPC is not only to return these individuals to the community but provide services that will prevent them from re-offending and returning to prison. Unlike other restrictive placements such as psychiatric centers the total cost for warehousing prisoners when compared to community services is unknown. We can estimate however, by preventing people from re-offending we can save as high as \$25,000 per person, per year.

At our agency, our outreach to ex-offenders spreads throughout the community including homeless shelters, food pantries and the streets of Western New York. We often come across men and women who have been released from prison and are trying to reintegrate into the community. This transition is not easily obtained for these individuals, and as an end result they re-offend and end up in prison, yet again. Barriers include: not being able to find affordable or safe housing in local neighborhoods and having difficulty obtaining employment because of their criminal

community at large. Ex-offenders have to wait 45 days to receive social services benefits and many have no identification or an address.

Additional assistance is needed to encourage employers to hire these individuals based on their rehabilitation and initial release from State custody, as opposed to their criminal record.

Programs are also needed to help ex-offenders with reestablishing relationships and in particular strengthening parenting roles within their families. Without safe housing and steady employment these individuals are not able to regain custody of their children which is a large incentive to re-adjust into the community. Since these conditions of release are not addressed, recidivism stays high and as a result the prison population continues to rise. In addition, the lack of supports also accounts for higher costs for foster care and juvenile justice due to the lack of strong and consistent parenting skills.

It is true that desperate people do desperate things. It is important for the State to continue its commitment to eliminating barriers to such basic needs for those ex-offenders being released, in order for them to have a fighting chance to become good community members again.

It is imperative to understand that these issues exist regionally *and* state wide. MHPC recommends the following steps be taken to improve the integration and independence of the ex-offender population.

1. Safe affordable housing with help from Peer Mentors who can assist these individuals with the transition to community living.

2. Employment incentives and programs that assist these individuals in developing and maintaining employment.
3. Initial assistance from Social Services is needed. This process should be started before prisoner release.