



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

REDUCING RECIDIVISM AND REMOVING IMPEDIMENTS TO EX-OFFENDER EMPLOYMENT

Room 412 East
State Capitol

August 31, 2016 (Revised October 12, 2016)
10:00 a.m. – 4:05 p.m.

[The following is a summary of the August 31, 2016 meeting of the Study Committee on Reducing Recidivism and Removing Impediments to Ex-Offender Employment. The file copy of this summary has appended to it a copy of each document prepared for or submitted to the committee during the meeting. A digital recording of the meeting is available on our Web site at <http://www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lc>.]

Call to Order and Roll Call

Chair Hutton called the committee to order. The roll was called and a quorum was determined to be present.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: Sen. Alberta Darling, Chair; Rep. Rob Hutton, Vice-Chair; Reps. Jill Billings, Evan Goyke, and John Nygren; Sen. Lena Taylor; and Public Members Edward Bailey, David Borowski, Jerome Dillard, Sadique Isahaku, Eric Johnson, Mary Prosser, Lisa Stark, and Kelli Thompson.

COMMITTEE MEMBER EXCUSED: Public Members Earl Buford and Amy Schabel.

COUNCIL STAFF PRESENT: Michael Queensland and Melissa Schmidt, Senior Staff Attorneys.

APPEARANCES: Terri Strodthoff, Executive Director, Alma Center, Inc.; Floyd Rowell, II, Wisdom Walk Facilities and Peer Mentor; Alma Center, Inc.; Deborah Mejchar, Chaplain, Fox Lake Correctional Institute; Matthew Raap; Jacob Maclin, Woodshop Specialist, Milwaukee Working; Eric Isbister, CEO, GenMet Corp.; Nick Ringger, CEO, Milwaukee Working; and Rich Uselman, Site Manager, Nu-Pak.

Approval of the July 13, 2016 Minutes of the Study Committee

Representative Goyke moved, seconded by Mr. Dillard, that the minutes from the committee's July 13, 2016 meeting be approved. The motion was approved by unanimous consent.

Presentations by Invited Speakers

Dr. Terri Strodthoff, Executive Director, and Floyd Rowell, II, Wisdom Walk Facilities and Peer Mentor, Alma Center, Inc.

Dr. Strodthoff and Mr. Rowell discussed the link between trauma and criminality. Mr. Rowell told his life's story to the committee, including traumatic events that occurred in his childhood, his path to incarceration in the Wisconsin state prison system, and how "healing informed care" that he received at the Alma Center has changed his life.

Dr. Strodthoff discussed how evidence-based practices have changed re-entry efforts at the Department of Corrections (DOC). She also described how the healing informed care model utilized by the Alma Center looks at dealing with adverse childhood experiences as opposed to treatment that strictly targets changing behavior. She explained that traumatic experiences shape a person's world view, change the behaviors a person develops to survive a poor environment, and effect brain development - all of which can effect a person's criminogenic needs. Dr. Strodthoff described that the Alma Center's approach to reduce a person's criminogenic needs is to help the person deal with the trauma, something that she believes can occur at any time. Lastly, Dr. Strodthoff advocated for greater use of a healing informed care approach to reducing recidivism as opposed to cognitive behavioral treatment that does not adequately treat underlying trauma.

Deborah Mejchar, Chaplain, Fox Lake Correctional Institute; Matthew Raap; and Jacob Maclin, Woodshop Specialist, Milwaukee Working

Chaplain Mejchar, Mr. Raap, and Mr. Maclin made up a panel of ex-offenders that have found success since their release from prison. They described their paths through the criminal justice system and experiences since being released from prison.

Chaplain Mejchar, noted that the opportunity for parole gave her something meaningful to work towards and a sense of hope. She asked the committee to reevaluate DOC's fraternization policy to facilitate more connections between volunteer mentors and inmates. She also advocated for increasing the amount that an inmate may be paid for attending school to match wages that an inmate might receive for performing other work in an institution.

Mr. Raap explained that he was revoked from his term of extended supervision and sent back to prison for a failed drug test. He questioned whether sending a person on extended supervision that has not committed a new crime back to prison is a wise use of state resources. Mr. Raap also advocated for working with inmates earlier than six months prior to

release from prison. According to Mr. Raap, providing inmates access to more positive influences and helping people deal with drug addiction would reduce the recidivism rate and help ex-offenders maintain employment after release from prison.

Mr. Maclin described the difficulties that some inmates face in communicating with DOC employees due to cultural differences. He also stated that financial barriers, such as child support, make it difficult for ex-offenders to be successful after release from prison. In addition, Mr. Maclin advocated for better coordination of services provided to recently incarcerated individuals. Specifically, Mr. Maclin explained that coordination of job placement services could be improved.

Eric Isbister, CEO, GenMet Corp.; Nick Ringger, CEO, Milwaukee Working; and Rich Uselman, Site Manager, Nu-Pak

Mr. Isbister, Mr. Ringger, and Mr. Uselman made up a panel of employers that have employed ex-offenders.

Mr. Isbister provided the committee a brief overview of his company and his experience employing ex-offenders. Mr. Isbister noted that teamwork, ability to work in an unstructured environment, transportation, and soft skills are critical factors in whether any employee will be successful. Mr. Isbister also stated that employees using illegal drugs cannot be successful in many fields, including manufacturing. Mr. Isbister asked that the committee consider options to make ex-offenders more job ready as opposed to providing businesses tax credits for employing ex-offenders.

Mr. Ringger described the work of Community Warehouse, a faith-based non-profit that employs “background challenged individuals.” Mr. Ringger explained that obtaining a driver’s license is a significant impediment to success for many ex-offenders. According to Mr. Ringger, providing a support network is one of the best ways to ensure successful employment of ex-offenders. In addition, Mr. Ringger stated that providing incentives to inmates to reinforce positive behavior, providing a certificate upon completion of DOC programming, providing job coaching at private businesses, and providing assistance to open a bank account before release from prison are ways to increase the likelihood of success for ex-offenders.

Mr. Uselman briefly described Nu-Pak’s hiring practices. According to Mr. Uselman, a criminal background is not important, but what is important are soft skills and good work attendance. Mr. Uselman stated that developing good work habits, obtaining work history and a reference, and dealing with drug addiction are ways that will make any person, including ex-offenders, more employable.

Chair Darling identified the following takeaways from the presentations by Mr. Isbister, Mr. Ringger, and Mr. Uselman:

- Training and education provided to inmates should match the needs of the workplace, as identified by the employer presenters.

- DOC should begin its work with an inmate on a reentry plan earlier than six months prior to the inmate's release.
- Employers need to spread the word about positive experiences hiring ex-offenders.
- Providing recently released ex-offenders a life coach is an idea that deserves exploration.

Presentation by Senator Lena Taylor on the 2009 Special Committee on Justice Reinvestment Oversight and its Relationship to the Study Committee on Reducing Recidivism and Removing Impediments to Ex-Offender Employment

Senator Taylor described her experience chairing the 2009 Special Committee on Justice Reinvestment Oversight. Senator Taylor explained that under the direction of this committee, the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Justice Center) made policy recommendations that would reduce the recidivism rate and decrease the state prison population. The following policy brief summarizes the Justice Center's recommendations: https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Wisconsin_Analyses_and_Policy_Options.pdf.

Senator Taylor also shared that while some of the recommendations made by the Justice Center have been implemented in Wisconsin, other recommendations have not been implemented. Senator Taylor advocated for using the work of the Justice Center as a starting point for the Study Committee. Senator Taylor also requested that the Study Committee utilize assistance from the Justice Center to analyze proposals to reduce the recidivism rate. Senator Taylor stated that a few issues of particular note to the 2009 committee include: limiting the length of extended supervision and incarceration upon revocation of extended supervision; providing mental health treatment to people recently released from prison; and coordinating community services.

In response to Senator Taylor's presentation, a number of committee members shared their thoughts. Mr. Borowski questioned whether it is adequate to supply recently released ex-offenders that have a need for medication with a two week supply. Ms. Stark identified the importance of data in driving the recommendations of the 2009 committee and requested that the Study Committee be provided with more data. Mr. Dillard asked that information about the success of justice reinvestment in other states be provided to the committee. Representative Goyke requested a comparison between the recommendations of the 2009 committee and legislative action that has occurred since those recommendations were made.

Discussion of Agenda for the October 19, 2016 Meeting

Chair Darling asked Michael Queensland, Senior Staff Attorney, to provide the committee a brief description of the progression that study committee meetings generally follow. Mr. Queensland explained that the goal of the Study Committee is to recommend legislation within its scope to the Joint Legislative Council that can be introduced at the

beginning of the 2017 Legislative Session and that in order to meet that goal, Chair Darling and Vice-Chair Hutton plan on using the following schedule:

- **October Study Committee meeting** (third to last meeting). The October meeting will be the last time that the Study Committee's primary focus will be on investigation and generation of legislative options.
- **November Study Committee meeting** (second to last meeting). In November, the primary focus of the Study Committee will be to discuss options for legislation that the Study Committee has developed at prior meetings. The goal will be to select options that the Study Committee would like to see in bill draft form for further discussion and voting at the final committee meeting.
- **December Study Committee meeting** (final meeting). In December, the primary focus of the Study Committee will be to vote whether to recommend for introduction draft pieces of legislation.

Next, Vice-Chair Hutton started a committee discussion about making plans for the upcoming committee meeting in October, with the goal of identifying primary committee objectives that can be the focus of exploration and will ultimately lead to legislation recommended for introduction by the Study Committee. Several committee members expressed their opinion on what the focus of the committee should be in October.

1. Mr. Bailey emphasized the importance of trying to reduce recidivism that manifests itself in violent crime.
2. Representative Billings recommended looking at programs that are working well and concentrating on specific proposals that have been put forth by committee members, such as the proposals described in Representative Goyke's letter to the committee and the ideas shared in Ms. Thompson's letter to the committee (see Attachments 2 and 3 to Memo No. 4).
3. Mr. Dillard requested that the committee spend more time hearing from ex-offenders.
4. Representative Goyke asked that the committee focus on specific ideas. He asked the committee to look at the bills he introduced at the end of the 2015 Legislative Session (see Attachment 2 to Memo No. 4) and work that the 2009 committee did in conjunction with the Justice Center.
5. Mr. Isahaku would like the committee to concentrate on education and training.
6. Mr. Johnson asked that the committee look at earned time credit systems and review the process for revoking extended supervision.

7. Ms. Prosser's interests are in reviewing the impact of financial obligations on ex-offenders, expanding opportunities for expungement, and reviewing sentencing systems that reward positive behavior.
8. Ms. Stark asked that the committee target the following: making changes to sentencing law; preparing people in prison for release to the community; providing assistance to recently released ex-offenders; and examining the impact of financial obligations on ex-offenders.
9. Senator Taylor advocated for building off of the work that the Justice Center did in Wisconsin in 2009 and creating subcommittees to finish the committee's work on time.
10. Ms. Thompson asked the committee to consider spending time on reducing the burden of collateral consequences of conviction on ex-offenders and helping ex-offenders develop life skills important to employers.
11. Chair Darling identified education and training, early assessments of offender needs, and DOC practices of revoking extended supervision for rule violations as important areas to be studied.

After Senator Taylor raised the idea to create subcommittees, Vice-Chair Hutton asked committee members for suggested topics to inform the decision of whether to create subcommittees. The ideas produced include:

1. Placing limits on extended supervision (Mr. Bailey).
2. Evidence-based programming (Representative Billings).
3. Prison admissions without new convictions (Mr. Dillard).
4. Education and training (Chair Darling and Mr. Isahaku).
5. Earned release (Mr. Johnson).
6. Sentencing reform (Ms. Prosser and Ms. Stark).
7. Providing employee readiness prior to release from prison (Vice-Chair Hutton).
8. Collaborative efforts (Senator Taylor).
9. Collateral consequences (Ms. Thompson).

Other Business

There was no other business before the committee.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 4:05 p.m.

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