

Law and Justice Interim Committee Hearing

Report: Montana Board of Pardon & Parole

My name is Larry Gaalswyk and I am currently employed by MSU Billings as the Director for the Montana Mentoring Project, a U.S. Bureau of Justice Second Chance Act grant awarded to MSU Billings in 2011. I was hired by MSUB to take over the directorship of the project June 1st of 2013.

In addition to that role I am also the Founder and Executive Director for T.E.A.M. Mentoring a faith-based non-profit whose focus is on ex-prisoner transition from incarceration to the community. In that role I have been bi-vocational for the last 8 years earning my income a number of different ways while leading T.E.A.M. which is a volunteer driven organization.

My experience in working with men and women leaving prison began in 1993 when I was a religious activity volunteer at MSP. I very soon saw the fear and apprehension in men who were about to leave the prison but knew they were at great risk of coming back to prison and had very little to no support upon their release. By 1995 I made my first attempt at assisting a man coming out of prison and quickly learned that my well-intentioned but naive efforts could prove to be a very costly education!

In 1996 I went to work for Prison Fellowship Ministries founded by Chuck Colson and the largest prison volunteer effort. While there I was able to become a part of a development team to develop a program model for churches to follow in efforts to assist men and women coming out of prison. I worked for Prison Fellowship for 4 years and it was during that time the Montana ReEntry Program was started at Montana State Prison Deer Lodge.

In 2000 I faced a decision when Prison Fellowship was downsizing and I faced a transfer or a lay off. I choose to start T.E.A.M. Mentoring, a faith-based non-profit to continue the efforts of the Montana ReEntry Program. Montana ReEntry provides 35 hours of class room instruction on issues a prisoner faces upon release. T.E.A.M.'s community program provides support to approved reentry graduates upon their release which essentially is a volunteer mentoring program. To date T.E.A.M.'s in prison program, Montana ReEntry, has graduated over 1200 men and women and we have supplied mentoring and other community services to over 200 men and women in Montana communities. In addition T.E.A.M. has run a number of transitional houses and at one time also had a social enterprise component providing employment upon release.

In addition I also served as the Program Director at Montana Rescue Mission from 2009 thru 2011 in a collaborative effort with T.E.A.M. Mentoring where MRM served over 560 ex-

prisoners, both state and federal in a year and approximately 12- 15 per year in our most intensive program which included MSP Montana ReEntry graduates.

My input and perspective regarding the Board of Pardon and Parole over these 20 years may not align with many who would like to be heard by this committee. I view the board's responsibilities as very serious and one of the most difficult decision responsibilities in this society comparable only to a sentencing judge. It is easy to second guess any decision in hind sight and also when it impacts you personally or someone that you love. Others find it easy to criticize out of unhealed and embroiled emotions looking for severe consequences upon a perpetrator of harm upon someone they love or did love. These decisions are not only difficult but they are bracketed by laws, sentences, and policies. It is a job that regardless of the decision, someone is probably going to strongly object either from the side of the offender or the side of the victim and family.

My experience in working with the Parole Board has been positive mainly by having developed good working relationships with key board members including at this time Fern Osler Johnson. That effort has been from both the board's side and my own initiative. I have always found the board members willing to talk and discuss what we do and how we do it. I also have been fortunate to receive and implement some sound practices into our efforts from board members. When program requirements were running into conflict with Parole Board requirements it was not that difficult to negotiate an agreed upon compromise. An example of that includes employment requirements when T.E.A.M.'s program that required them to work in our TEAM Works employment initiative and also when I ran the program at Montana Rescue Mission and we required them to be a part of our Mission Work Force for the first couple of months.

My only recommendations would include:

1. Some form of educational track for the families of prisoners and victims and their families prior to their being allowed to participate in a parole hearing. There seems to be a good job done at MSP currently with a parole candidate attending something they call "Parole School" prior to their hearing. This seems to really help them understand the process and thereby prepares them for the outcome and expectations. For parole candidate's families as well as victims and their families, this could be done on line once it was developed and filmed which could be available from the DOC web site. I believe that the loudest objections come from those who do not understand the systems involved and the processes that must be followed. For example, these participants need to understand the differences between Montana Department of Correction, Probation and Parole's role and the Parole Board.

2. For my second recommendation, I am not sure where in the corrections bureaucracy this issue lies as it may be a DOC issue and not a Parole Board issue. The issue is that when a man or woman is granted a parole, there needs to be a solid date given for organizations, families, employers, and landlords to plan around. Not having a definite release date may not create much of a problem for a pre-release but for small organizations, families, employers, and landlords it is impossible at times to work with the ambiguity of not having a definite date leaving the prison. Deadlines are a real part of life for us in business and personal life out here and solid dates need to be applied to the parole of a man or woman coming out of prison.

3. The issue of mandatory paroles may well be a legislative, issue but all involved in the sentencing, corrections, and probation & parole systems need to address the risks to men and women that a full releases presents. A mandatory parole may be too simplistic but my experience tells me that strictly from a humanitarian perspective, every man or woman coming out of incarceration deserves any “easy down” and assistance in a very difficult, misunderstood, and understudied problem of prisoner transition from prison to society. Not only is the ex-prisoner put at risk but also society as a whole.

4. My last recommendation would be that parole board members never, under any circumstance, at a parole board hearing involve themselves in the chastisement of the prisoner or their family. It is a given fact that these incarcerated men and women are very broken, dysfunctional lives and their families of origin, who may be at a hearing passionately appealing for their family member’s parole are usually a big part of the problem. In spite of these obvious facts, and even though I would most likely always agree with the position being taken by the board member, being reprovved or confronted by a parole board member will gain nothing but more ill-will from the community. Spare your emotions and your words and if necessary have the decision read by an unaffected and unemotional third party but avoid all counseling or reproof of any person involved in a hearing.

Respectfully submitted:

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