

Missoula Interfaith Collaborative
Darren Ashby Testimony
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Chairman Sales, Members of the Committee:

My name is Darren Ashby, that's D-A-R-R-E-N A-S-H-B-Y.

I am a 50 year old husband and father of two from Missoula. I am currently working to obtain my license as an Addiction Counselor, and will soon have a Master's from the U of M's School of Social Work. My late blooming educational goals are not so remarkable; what is remarkable is that I've done so following my release from nearly 40 years of addiction, long-term inpatient treatment, and prison.

I spent all of my life as a "functioning" addict. I managed to keep it hidden from most of my family, and my children. Yet I was still an addict, and by the time I was 30 I was using Methamphetamine on a daily basis. In 2008 I was caught, and pled guilty to Operation of a Clandestine Lab, Criminal endangerment, and Possession of Pre-Cursors. Charges which require me to register as a violent offender.

Something I find perplexing is when I first registered as a violent offender, one of the last questions on the form is "was violence used in the commission of this crime", I checked no, signed my name, and was now a registered as a violent offender.

I understand the purpose behind the registry, it is intended to make our communities safer by ensuring that those who are a danger to society are in the public eye.

My question is, does it really do that? Does it really make our communities safer? As a violent offender I had an extremely hard time finding work, and if my wife hadn't already had a trailer rented in one of the most dangerous and poorest neighborhoods in town, I would have had a hard time finding a place to live. There is a very real possibility I would have been homeless without her support and dedication to starting a new life. I work with many individuals and families who are homeless because they or their spouse is a registered offender. In Missoula being a registered offender bars you from the vast majority of rentals, and access to many services. The registry often fails at keeping dangerous people in the public eye, by pushing individuals and their families onto the fringes of our communities and rendering them somewhat invisible.

As I stated, I understand the purpose of the registry. I just think it paints offenders with far too wide of a brush. There are many people who have to register but pose no threat to the community, and yet are basically serving a life sentence because they have to register. For the vast majority of registered offenders, treatment is effective, and re-offense rates are low. Provided they have the opportunity to move on from their old lives.

I am not asking for special treatment for registered offenders, or free housing, or forcing employers to hire us. I am asking for a chance at opportunity. The opportunity to change my life and become a valuable and contributing member of my community.

I have a goal to work with people who are caught in the same trap I was, a compulsion to use a drug to alter their state of mind. I understand that my having to register as a violent offender will sorely hamper me in achieving that goal, yet I will work my hardest to obtain it.

I urge the Committee to expand incentive programs for property owners and employers to increase their willingness to work with registered offenders, and modify the registry to ensure that it finds a closer balance between protecting the community, and ensuring those who are re-entering society have the opportunity to change their lives. Doing so would have a positive impact on re-entry success rates, while simultaneously reducing homelessness for both individuals and families.