

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'm here to support access to housing for those returning from prison, which I see as a necessary component of successful reentry, thereby reducing recidivism.

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. My conviction also requires me to register as a Violent Offender which is proving an additional a barrier for housing.

I received a 5 year DOC commit followed by 10 years of probation. It was during my 9 months in treatment at NEXUS that I first began to have hope I could do something different and change my life.

But when I hit pre-release I found it hard to maintain that hope because of the difficulties I had establishing myself back into my community. All the time and money invested in my recovery could have very easily have been a total waste.

But I was lucky. With the emotional support of my wife and kids, I spent a year looking for work and trying to get enrolled in school before everything started falling into place. I left pre-release, went home to my wife, and started working on the new me.

It is very likely that I would not be standing here right now if I didn't have a stable place to live, a home, waiting. Where I'm living isn't much, it is a run-down trailer in the worst trailer park in town, but it is my home. If I were struggling, and alone, it would-be dangerous because I am surrounded by illicit drug use and criminal behavior. If I weren't fortunate enough to have a wife who is also in recovery, and developed some strong social networks through the UM School of Social Work, my neighborhood would be a huge relapse trigger. I want to move somewhere better someday, but as a violent offender and felon most of the property management companies will not rent to me, and my options are very limited.

As I complete my education, I work as an advocate for others returning from prison as part of the Missoula Interfaith Collaborative's Homeless Advocate Network. I see reentry playing out very differently for the people I work with who have felony records. I can help them understand how to find a job, but what I struggle with is that there is no access to affordable housing. Something which I feel is a basic human right and the foundation to becoming a successful productive citizen as persons reentering society attempt to build their social capital. I worked with one gentleman last winter who would rather sleep under the bridge than go to the shelter because his old "using buddies" were there and he was trying to stay clean. I worked with a family who was bouncing between their van, and hotels after the father returned home and they had to move due to his record. I see guys like me give up, return to old maladaptive and eventually criminal behaviors, violate their probation, and become another recidivism statistic.

I urge the Committee to expand incentive programs for property owners and employers to increase their willingness to work with former inmates. It would have a positive impact on success rates, while simultaneously reducing homelessness for both individuals and families.