

REMARKS FOR MAYOR RICHARD M. DALEY
ABA Commission on Effective Criminal Sanctions National Conference
Tuesday, May 1, 2007

Acknowledgments:

I'd like to welcome you to Chicago and thank you for choosing our city for your national conference.

And I also want to thank you for taking such a strong interest in one of the most serious problems of our society, prisoner re-entry.

In 1970, when I was beginning my political career as a delegate to the Illinois Constitutional Convention, there were about 7,300 inmates in Illinois prisons.

Today there are more than 44,000.

The population of our state has increased 12 percent since 1970, while the prison population has increased 500 percent.

And Illinois is not out of the ordinary. According to the Justice Department, one out of every 136 Americans is in prison or in jail.

Some people consider this good news – and in a certain sense, it is. Police are arresting more lawbreakers and prison sentences are longer. And this is one reason why the crime rate has been dropping in Chicago for 15 consecutive years.

But, as we all know, there's another side to this story. When you send someone off to prison, you haven't really solved a problem; you've just put it off for a few years.

Over 95 percent of inmates will eventually be released from prison. Here in Chicago, that means approximately 20,000 ex-offenders show up on the streets of my city each year.

Most of them are poorly educated and have few, if any, job skills. So we probably shouldn't be surprised that half of them are re-arrested within three years.

Society is then forced to bear the financial and human cost of their crimes, as well as the cost of their apprehension, conviction and imprisonment.

We simply have to break that cycle if we expect our crime rate to continue to fall. And that means we have to help ex-offenders rebuild their lives, connect with their families, find meaningful employment and become productive members of society.

If we don't, they'll return to the business they know best: crime.

In 2003, I became the first mayor in the country to create a position to deal exclusively with prisoner re-entry. The following year, I appointed the Mayoral Policy Caucus on Prisoner Re-Entry and asked them to study the issues thoroughly and come up with recommendations.

The Caucus issued a report calling for a number of changes, including:

Improved access to health care, including substance abuse and mental health treatment;

More family-friendly policies in the corrections system, especially mentoring programs for the children of incarcerated parents;

Stronger supports in the community, including local resource centers that make it easier for former prisoners to obtain needed services;

And expanded education and job opportunities, including transitional jobs to help them get the experience they need to find long-term work;

Since 2002, the City of Chicago has increased its annual funding of programs for ex-offenders from \$253,000 to \$2.6 million, some of which is coming from the proceeds of our lease of the Chicago Skyway to private enterprise.

This money has gone toward a number of worthwhile programs.

A city program called TIF Works, which helps companies defray the cost of training their employees, has been modified to give special consideration to employers who train or hire people with criminal backgrounds.

Our community policing program has worked with a neighborhood church and hospital to offer health screenings, counseling, computer classes and job training to ex-offenders.

We've held classes for parole agents to tell them about services for parolees at the five Chicago Workforce Centers.

We have a transitional jobs program that puts ex-offenders to work providing basic city services such as small engine repair, grounds maintenance and snow and ice removal.

The Department of Environment is working to train ex-offenders to produce and distribute rain barrels, recycle and repair computers, build community gardens and weatherize homes.

We're also investing in programs run by not-for-profit organizations.

They include:

- training in auto repair and computer skills;
- businesses that help ex-offenders develop good work habits and job skills by working as beekeepers and manufacturers of personal care products;
- a center where ex-offenders are trained in food service, light manufacturing and building maintenance – and can also earn a high school diploma;
- and a program to help them find work in the hospitality and warehousing industries.

These are excellent programs, but as our Policy Caucus pointed out, ex-offenders often need more than just job-training. They also need housing and social services, such as substance abuse treatment. And they don't always know which agencies offer the help they need.

So the City has joined with the State of Illinois in funding service centers that offer one-stop access to supportive services for ex-offenders.

The City also is also working with the Illinois Department of Corrections to develop a re-entry package, containing information on ex-offender programs, a CTA map and a ticket for two CTA rides. It will be given to individuals as they leave prison.

We're also working with the Chicago Bar Foundation and the Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic to explore options for making legal resources available to eligible ex-offenders who want to expunge or seal their criminal records – which is sometimes necessary if they expect to get a job.

This option is available to certain ex-offenders under Illinois law, but it's a complicated procedure that requires dealing with a number of agencies, including the police, the State's Attorney and the Circuit Court Clerk. Very few ex-offenders have the resources to hire an attorney to navigate through this process.

I believe it's important for the City to set a good example when it comes to prisoner re-entry. So the City of Chicago changed its personnel policy to give former prisoners a fair shot – though not a leg up – at landing a job with the City.

Under this policy, the City weighs the relationship between the crime that was committed and the job being sought.

The City balances the nature and severity of the crime with other factors, such as the passage of time and evidence of rehabilitation.

Put more simply, this change means that City hiring will be fairer and more common-sense.

It means that former prisoners will have a chance to make their case and maybe land a City job.

We'll look closely at their criminal backgrounds, but they won't be automatically disqualified because they've done prison time.

Implementing this new policy won't be easy, but it's the right thing to do. We cannot ask private employers to consider hiring former prisoners unless the City practices what it preaches.

Finally, I hope you'll join me in urging Congress to pass legislation that increases federal funding to help ex-offenders find housing and employment; helps children whose parents are incarcerated; and improves coordination among the federal, state and local governments in matters involving ex-offenders.

Similar legislation was introduced in the last Congress with the support of members of both parties. This legislation is scheduled for a vote on the House floor soon. It deserves a second chance, just like the people it's designed to help.

I want to make it clear that we're not looking for sympathy for ex-offenders. They've committed serious crimes, and they deserved their punishment.

But I think most Americans would agree they also deserve a second chance -- an opportunity to turn their lives around and begin contributing to society.

As far as I'm concerned, we really have no other choice.

Thank you, again, for devoting your time and energy to this issue. And have a very productive conference.

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