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Title:

Organization or Agency:

Topic: Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

Testimony:

Dear Members of the Correction Advisory Committee,

Title: Programs : A New Beginning Delayed

As far back as I can remember, I have fought for every incremental advancement on my road to recovery. It has now been nearly ten years since I first signed up for Tier 2 programming. The typical response has always been the same: you have too much time. These words became painfully familiar. I hated how I felt every time I heard them. I hated the constant rejection. It felt like I was fighting against a system designed to keep me stagnant rather than help me grow. At some point, I realized the Prison system had quietly written me off.

Unguided and depressed, my first years in prison were destructive. It was only by the grace of God that other incarcerated men befriended me and illuminated the difficult path ahead. They became the mentors I could not find through the system. Without them, I honestly do not know where I would be today.

That experience shaped one belief I continue to hold: every incarcerated person should have meaningful access to quality programming in a timely manner, regardless of how much time remains on their sentence. Programs are not simply another activity on a prison schedule. They can be a new beginning.

They help people make sense of their lives. They teach healthy coping skills. They challenge destructive thinking. They replace hopelessness with purpose. They create community in a place where isolation is often overwhelming. They improve communication, accountability, and emotional regulation. In doing so, they also contribute to a safer facility for staff and incarcerated people alike.

Research has consistently found that participation in educational, vocational, cognitive behavioral, and rehabilitative programming is associated with lower rates of misconduct while incarcerated and lower rates of returning to prison after release. Programs do not simply prepare people for reentry. They also improve institutional safety by giving people productive ways to spend their time, healthier ways to manage conflict, and reasons to invest in positive change. Yet many of us serving lengthy sentences wait years, sometimes close to a decade for opportunities that others receive much sooner.

I understand why correctional systems often prioritize people who are approaching release. Preparing someone to return to society is an important responsibility. But rehabilitation should not begin only when someone is nearing the end of a sentence. Character is not built in the final years before release. It is built over time through repeated opportunities to learn, practice, fail, grow, and try again. When someone is told year after year that they have too much time, the message they hear is something very different: your rehabilitation can wait. Hope cannot.

Prison is not easy. It tries to break you. But even in this dark and discouraging place, little flickers of light can sometimes be seen in the distance. Many of us gather enough courage to walk towards that comforting light.

As we move forward, every part of the path is covered with jagged rocks, cutting through our hopes and dreams. Many people give up and turn back. But for those who continue, we eventually came upon a

beautiful house. Warm light shines through the windows. We hear laughter. We hear fellowship. We hear healing taking place inside. Joy fills our hearts. We eagerly knock on the door. No one answers. The door is locked. Then we realize we are not allowed into this safe place.

Our hearts break a little, but hope still flickers. So we turn around and walk back to where we started, telling ourselves that maybe next year someone will finally open the door. That is what waiting years for programming feels like.

Even when someone is fortunate enough to enter a program, many programs struggle because they lack continuity. Staff frequently change positions, and every transition interrupts momentum. These are not criticisms of individual staff members. They are observations about a system that makes consistency difficult.

Running effective rehabilitative programs requires experience, trust, and training. Relationships matter. Facilitators need time to understand the population they serve and develop credibility with participants. When those relationships are constantly interrupted, the overall effectiveness of programming suffers.

One of the most meaningful experiences I have had was participating in the Alternative to Violence Project (AVP). I still remember the conversations we shared after each session. We discussed the lessons, challenged one another, and talked honestly about how we could apply what we had learned moving forward. The program allowed me to connect with people I may never have spoken to otherwise. It reminded me that change often begins through honest conversation and shared accountability. Opportunities like that should not be rare.

One practical solution would be expanding peer--led programming by allowing qualified incarcerated individuals to become trained facilitators, for all programs, under appropriate staff supervision. Many Prisons across the country have successfully used peer mentors because they increase access while maintaining program quality. People who have completed programs successfully can often reach others in ways that professionals alone cannot.

Expanding peer facilitation could significantly reduce waiting lists, increase participation, strengthen positive prison culture, and give incarcerated individuals meaningful leadership opportunities. Every additional class offered is another opportunity to prevent violence, reduce substance abuse, and create safer housing units.

Many correctional officers already understand this reality. They know that when incarcerated people have constructive activities, disciplinary problems often decrease. Idleness breeds frustration. Purpose encourages responsibility. Giving people meaningful opportunities to improve themselves is not simply good for everyone who works and lives inside them.

The world struggles with addiction, violence, trauma, and mental illness, and prisons reflect many of those same struggles. We live in small cells with little privacy and very little control over the opportunities available to us. Research consistently shows that people benefit from purpose, structure, education, and meaningful human connection. Those needs do not disappear because someone is incarcerated. If anything, they become even more important. I am not asking for special treatment. I am asking for equal opportunity.

A person's sentence length should not determine whether they have meaningful access to rehabilitation. Long sentences should never become a reason to postpone personal growth. If anything, those serving lengthy sentences have more years in which positive programming can improve institutional culture, mentor others, reduce violence, and contribute to safer facilities.

I respectfully ask this Committee to examine how programming opportunities are allocated throughout our correctional system. Please consider whether lengthy waiting periods, particularly for people serving long sentences, unintentionally undermine the very goals rehabilitation is meant to achieve. Explore ways to expand programming, invest in experienced facilitators, strengthen continuity, and develop additional peer--led opportunities that allow more people to participate without years of delay.

Rehabilitation should not depend on how close someone is to the gate. It should begin the day someone decides they want to change.

Respectfully,
A hopeful Incarcerated Person