

LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION
California Parole Policy Hearing
Testimony of Ronald C. Owens
February 27, 2003

When a man or woman is released into society after months and years of living in an intensive structured environment it is a culture shock. Often there has been no preparation or planning for them to go from a structured environment into the free world. The parolee is faced with returning back to a society where he or she failed as a citizen and now is expected to become a functioning member of society. Many people are able to thrive in prison life because of the structure in place such as, housing, clear boundaries, work expectations, meals, curfews and accountability for their actions. It is unreasonable to expect a person who has never been a responsible citizen to now act as a rehabilitated person just because they are released into society.

In order for a parolee to make a successful transition from prison to parole the preparation must begin in prison. Currently the pre-release programs in place are not adequate. Few inmates are exposed nor does it address the parolees needs in the community. Additionally, parole violators who make up a large percentage of the prison population do not receive exposure to most of the prison programs. Potential parolees from a designated county should be exposed to existing services that are available in their county prior to release.

Many parolees are released with a large amount of back child support some that was incurred during their incarceration. Often their driver's license has been suspended by the Department of Motor Vehicles, which prevents them from seeking and maintaining employment. This creates a pre-disposed sense of failure and many parolees feel why should they work when the County will take all of their paycheck. The Division of Family Support Services offers assistance in this area to help lower the payments and they work with DMV to release the Drivers License. Many of the inmates are not aware of these services and the fact they can begin to deal with these issues prior to release.

Parolees need to be employed to give them the feeling of being connected to society. During their incarceration most of these men have been working, are in good physical condition and have become accustomed to adhering to a schedule. We need to connect with the Business Community to educate them on all the advantages of hiring parolees. Many of the parolees would respond positively to an opportunity.

Housing is a big issue for parolees returning into the community. A safe base of operation is necessary for a person to get up and look for work. It allows a parolee to get the proper rest and have a healthy attitude. Upon release most parolees give their mothers' address or another family members address without permission nor the intention of living at the residence. In a lot of cases the parolee is either not welcomed at the residence or the family member has imposed a strict curfew and rules that they do not want to reside at the residence. Additionally, often times there is illegal drug dealing or use by others at the address. Many times this is the same negative base of operations he or she had when they got into the criminal behavior that caused their incarceration. It is conducive to a successful parole not have them return to this same environment.

What is needed for parolees in the cities and counties where they return is suitable transitional housing. The restrictions imposed by the licensing agencies on transitional housing often are too restrictive for them to operate. As a result, we see fewer services for transitional housing. Years ago Parole would provide more housing assistance however due to budgetary restraints there is not much assistance for non-sex offenders.

Cont. Page 2
Little Hoover
R. Owens

It is important for the State to reassess its policy on housing assistance for returning parolees. The cost to process a person through the crime spree, police services, prosecution, defense and eventual incarceration outweighs the up front cost of providing some housing.

It is my understanding that 85% of the people on parole have substance abuse problems. Currently substance abuse education and counseling are voluntary. If a person has a history of violating parole/probation due to substance abuse then his or her parole conditions should require they participate in treatment. This program should be operated similar to the drug courts and Proposition 36.

When a parolee is faced with the daily stresses of life a lack of impulse control often results in a violent reaction. As a certified Domestic Non-Violence and Anger Management Instructor it is crucial that parolees be required to participate in these programs to give them the coping tools to deal with these issues.

When a person is released onto parole their hope should be towards a successful discharge from parole. In years past many parolees discharged after 13 months on parole, what we called an early discharge. Many parolees feel that the parole department is not discharging many people so it dampens the hope of early discharge as an incentive to perform well. A parolee should know what the formula is in order to discharge off parole. There should be reasonable parameters that are written and if adhered to will result in an early discharge for all eligible offenses in the 13th month such as; no drug use, no arrest, maintain employment, school and family support obligations are being met etc. Currently it is subject to the parole agents recommendation. In most cases the Supervisor goes along with the agents recommendation. There is too much subjectivity in this area. This will create more motivation for eligible parolees to refrain from previous behaviors by adhering to the laws

There is a crucial need to use reformed ex-offenders to assist with this population Peer counseling is an effective tool to assist with a parolees reintegration into the community. Seeing themselves in these successful ex-offenders gives them some hope that they too can become productive tax paying citizens. Role modeling is highly effective.

It is necessary that multi-agency collaboration be in place to assist in a successful reentry effort. The collaboration should include Parole, Substance Abuse Treatment Providers, Law Enforcement, City, County and State Agencies, Community Based Organizations, Faith Based Entities, Educational Systems, Family Members, Business Community and Reformed Ex-Offenders. The only way things are going to change is to bring all of the Agencies to the table to share resources and ideas. The logical Agency to lead this collaboration should be the Parole Department.

I would like to thank the Commission for inviting me to participate in these hearings. It is my hope that these discussions will effect some positive change with the way this population is served.