

## **Strengthening Minds While Strengthening New York's Economy**

Governments are cutting needed services; public employees are being laid off. Economists say things are getting better, but hiring is lagging. And in the midst of the worst economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s, New York State is spending over \$60,000 on average per year to house each inmate it incarcerates in state prison. According to the Vera Institute of Justice, the total cost to the state of its prisons comes close to \$3.6 billion.

New York State releases about 25,000 inmates each year. Sadly, more than 50 percent are back inside three years later, putting New York among the states with the worst recidivism rates in the nation. The major reason so many return is that they were released with no real way to earn a legal living on the outside. Some are functionally illiterate; many have little education. Some pursued vocational programming that gave them outdated skills for jobs that no longer exist in any number or trained them for licenses that were unavailable to them because of their conviction history. All were released with, and will always carry, the stigma of a criminal conviction.

If we have to spend billions on our prisons, let us at least send inmates out with a chance to succeed. Let us provide them with the means to get a decent education.

As it stands, penny-wise and pound-foolish laws deny prisoners any real hope of making it in today's society. President Clinton's 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act dismantled higher education in prison by eliminating inmate eligibility for federal Pell Grants. The very next year, Governor Pataki and his supporters passed legislation completely cutting inmates' eligibility for TAP grants that supported college programs in state prisons. With no money to fund them, more than 300 college programs packed up and left almost overnight.

Studies show that education is crucial to not only finding work, but avoiding recidivism. For this reason, state prison inmates should be encouraged to acquire education credits while inside and given the means to do it. In fact, there should be incentives for taking education classes. Those who do should be given a time off their sentence for acquiring a GED or a college degree.

Forward-thinking New York legislators have introduced legislation year after year that would restore TAP Grant eligibility and mandate provision of GED classes to prisoners. But these bills have yet to gather steam. For real movement, we must look to New Jersey, where two years ago the legislature passed a number of bills aimed at combating recidivism. Included was the Education and Rehabilitation Act, which requires the state's Department of Corrections to ensure that incarcerated individuals attain a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education proficiency level. In other words, people getting out of New Jersey state prisons will have a high school diploma or a GED to help them get jobs. The legislation also mandates review of vocational programs in prisons in order to meet the demands of employers on the outside.

These are the sorts of programs that New York State should be emulating, and in fact the governor has just introduced the Work for Success initiative, which aims to develop a comprehensive, statewide approach to increasing job readiness and improving employment outcomes for people leaving prison. The group will look at building capacity in our communities to address unique needs of people returning from prison,

improving existing prison vocational programming, and developing systems to match people leaving prison with employment programs best suited to serve them.

We support this mission and sincerely hope this long-overdue effort works. If it does, it will help strengthen the communities of color in New York City which are home to more than half of released prisoners. When people returning from prison can find jobs in the community, this helps economically, of course. But it can also strengthen the quality of life in other ways. Consider that the principal victims of crimes committed by so many of the formerly incarcerated are the very old and the very young in their own communities, and that 87 percent of people who violate parole were unemployed at the time.

Once released, now saddled with a prison record, these New Yorkers' chances of a decent job are minimal. They will carry the felony conviction with them every time they apply for employment. Discriminating against people with conviction histories is illegal, but employers violate this law with impunity, sometimes even going so far as to advertize that "no felons need apply." In this day and age, when background checking is done by an estimated 80 to 90 percent of large employers, people with conviction histories barely stand a chance. By incarcerating far too many people and branding them with an indelible scarlet letter upon release, we continue to create an underclass of formerly incarcerated who cannot find work. The results too often are an exacerbation of poverty for the community and a return to prison for the individual.

The high rates of incarceration are simply not sustainable from a cost standpoint, in addition to not deterring crime and further destabilizing low-income communities. Yet the legislature continues to balk at providing inmates with the chance for an education, instead warehousing them for the duration of their sentence. This is shortsighted thinking and a wasted opportunity. Providing education for inmates helps keep them from returning to prison – it is not being "soft on crime." It is a smart – and cost-effective - policy.

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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