

Testimony of Darlene Hooley
Joint Committee on Public Safety
3/22/2013

Co-Chair Prozanski. Co-Chairs Winters, Olson, Garret and Members of the Committee. For the record, I am Congresswoman Darlene Hooley. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about juveniles, public safety reform and the criminal justice system.

We know you are addressing complex issues in a politically charged environment and we appreciate the thoughtfulness with which you are addressing all the issues. Thank you for your public service and for your work.

As an elected official I worked for public safety by setting broad public policy at the state and national level, just as you are doing. I was especially involved in policies to address the meth epidemic in our state and nation. As a County Commissioner I implemented policies for offenders in jails, along with community corrections, alcohol and drug programs, mental health services, victim's services, and all aspects of the intersection of the criminal justice system and the social services system. Through my work, I have come to agree with the proposition that we should lock up people who are dangerous, but that there often are better ways to hold people accountable when their crimes are largely caused by mental illness or addiction.

There has been a lot of testimony before your committee about numbers. One such number is the number of prison beds needed. Another number is the prison bed forecast. Another number is the dollars needed for prisons in the state budget. Another number is the dollar amount for the budget of the Department of Corrections. Then there is the number for the budget of community corrections and other components of the criminal justice system, not to mention health care, schools and other priorities of our citizens. Finally, there is a lot of discussion about mandatory sentencing and the numbers of months an offender must serve. We understand that you must discuss these numbers, that you must balance the budget, but that is not why we are here today.

We are here to talk about the individuals behind the numbers. We are here to talk about youth who are convicted under Measure 11, who are then sentenced to the Department of Corrections. Once sentenced, because of their age, they then are placed in the physical custody of the Oregon Youth Authority until the age of 25, at which time they are sent to prison. Some of these youth committed very serious crimes and all of our hearts and sympathies go out to their victims.

It is not an excuse for their actions, but when we delve into the lives of these youth, we learn that many of them were abused or neglected themselves, and many of them got involved in drugs or alcohol at young ages. Upon coming to the Oregon Youth Authority, it might be the first time they have physical safety, structure, counseling, treatment and accountability for their actions.

For some of these individuals, for those who decide they want to change their lives, they also have Dick Withnell to support them take a new path.

I want to tell you about Dick Withnell. He is a successful businessman, devoted husband and family man. He could be spending his retirement days on the golf course or vacationing on exotic beaches. Not to say there is anything wrong with either of those options!

Instead of that, Dick is a community leader and is working tirelessly to advance public safety reforms. He is also a man of action. Once he learned about the importance of early childhood brain development, he became a leader in the Marion County Commission on Children and Families and led the effort in Salem to recruit 150 foster families to care for children who had been abused or neglected. He now serves on the Early Learning Council.

Dick has also been mentoring a group of young men at MacLaren, young men who have dramatically changed, grown up and are looking forward in their lives. These youth are taking advantage of every opportunity to advance their lives, but under the law it doesn't matter what they do to change, upon reaching the age of 25, they must go to prison. It doesn't matter if they have 5 months left on their sentence or 15 years. The system offers no hope for these individuals. These young men have

changed their lives despite the harsh reality that our system gives them no incentive to do so. We are concerned that once these young men are transferred to prison, they will need to change again to survive in that environment. This makes no sense. The current system is broken and it is also very expensive for the taxpayer

Dick will tell you his own story about how he became involved in the lives of these young men and his work with them.

His testimony is important because of his firsthand experience and relationships to these individual young men. It is also important because he was the only public member on the Commission on Public Safety. He does not work for any branch of government and he is not tied to any interest group. Through his work on the Commission and because of his relationship with the individuals he mentors at MacLaren, he has become a tireless advocate for reform.