



Testimony before Senate Committee on Judiciary

SB 360

Harry Olsen and Ezequiel Ramirez

PHOENIX Rising Transitions and Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good

March 9, 2017

Chair Prozanski and Members of the Committee, for the record my name is Harry Olsen. I am the founder of PHOENIX Rising Transitions and a leader in Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good (MACG) in Portland. I am also a Certified Recovery Peer Mentor. I am here to urge you to support Senate Bill 360. This bill will ease the financial burdens of those coming out of prison and support their aim to make it in the community as successful, law-abiding citizens.

I lead the Mentor Project at PHOENIX Rising Transitions. I have been working with people coming home from prison for over 25 years. Before that, I was in and out of prison for 15 years. The last time I came home – in 1991 – I lived with my mom and two small boys, 8 and 10. She gave me room, board, a bus pass and five dollars a week until I got a job. In those days, that was enough. There were no parole fees. But over the years I have watched as court costs, supervision fees, class costs – and the interest accrued while incarcerated – have swelled. These are often so steep that a person's dreams of carving out a new life in the community seem impossible. And unfortunately, some give up and return to crime and prison. Others are able to persevere, but are in a constant state of anxiety about how to meet all their financial needs.

The mentees I work with in PHOENIX want to leave crime and prison behind. They are highly motivated and most have done well at getting jobs. They are committed to paying what they owe – especially child support and restitution to victims. But people who have been in prison typically make 40% less¹ than their peers. I'd like share two stories of mentees who couldn't be here because they're at work:

FRANK's STORY:

I've been out for a couple of years now, and have been working since the day I came home. It's a good job, but I hardly make my bills. I'm being garnished for a past fine of over \$5,000.00. My current address is on file at DMV, but somehow no one researched that fact. Instead, they sent notification to an address over 10 years old, and then, all of a sudden, I'm being garnished for 25% of my wages. That's about \$600.00 per month on top of the \$363.00 in back child support. Now that I'm already in garnishment I'm told there is no recourse. I don't mind paying my debts, but how about a little less trauma to my finances here. This bill would help me just to make it in a somewhat comfortable fashion. It would at least make a life of crime seem a little less appealing. Thank you for your time.

Chair Prozanski and Members of the Committee, for the record, my name is Ezequiel Ramirez. I'd like to share the experience of my housemate, Gary.

GARY'S STORY:

I was released from prison on March 1, 2013. Re-entering society is challenging. One of my first "welcome home" messages was that I would have to pay \$7,960.00 before I could get my driver's license back because somehow the county courts were unable to locate me when I was sent to prison. My \$775.00 fine was sent to collections for 5 years. I had to work, without being able to drive, for well over a year to pay that off, all the while having to pay monthly supervision fees for the privilege of being on post-prison supervision, which at times prevented me from working on the north side of the Columbia River. Last year I was released from Post-Prison Supervision, I paid a total of \$1,260.00 in supervision fees alone. I have also paid nearly \$1,100.00 to Marion County and well over \$10,000.00 to Lane County. In the calendar year 2016, I paid \$1,327.00 to wrap up the last known fines owed to county courts. Any options for working off monies that may be available to people coming home from prison are a good idea. Often prisoners are unable to pay the steep fines and fees required of them by courts and supervisory agencies. I know of far too many people, who in hopeless despair, turned again to crime and drugs and were again incarcerated at the expense of taxpayers. I am just one voice, but I implore decision makers to support Senate Bill 360 and approve alternatives to monetary payment of fines and fees.

Thank you.

GARY'S PROGRESS . . . despite the roadblocks and pitfalls mentioned above, this newsletter article from the nonprofit Growing Gardens demonstrates Gary's success in the community:

"Two years ago, Gary, a Lettuce Grow program graduate and a leader in PHOENIX Rising Transitions, was released from incarceration. Now he attends PCC and is pursuing a degree in Environmental Management. In addition to his studies, Gary works for a local company, installing and maintaining bio-swales and rain gardens.

When he looks back on his time as a Lettuce Grow student, Gary remembers how nice it was to take a break from prison culture every week and during class, have genuine "human interactions" and talk about topics that were important to him - at a time in his life when he was searching for a way to bridge his love of nature with a new career path.

Gary's metamorphosis over the past few years is impressive. His successes are a dramatic demonstration of the transformative powers that positive mentorship can have on at-risk individuals."

¹*Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*, p. 4. The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010