

Barbara Ross

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Committee Chair Prozanski, Members of the committee.

My name is Barbara Ross. I am testifying as an individual, not on behalf on any organization. For 2 years I have been volunteering at Mercy Corps North West's Reentry Transition Center for people coming out of incarceration. I have very much enjoyed working with this group of folks who are in the process of rebuilding their lives. I have seen many display amazing courage and grace as they face incredible obstacles.

I believe that after offenders have paid their debt to society we should do everything we can to help them become, law abiding, contributing community members.

SB 692 is a constructive step in that direction. I would like to tell you a story about "Tom"(not his real name) and his struggle to reenter ordinary life after his prison term of 4 years. I did not know him personally, but I heard his story at the transition center.

Before going to prison, Tom was not able to straighten out his affairs. When he left, he had a lease on an apartment. Because he did not cancel his lease, his land lord used the eviction process to be able to legally refill his apartment. So when he got out Tom found he had an eviction on his rental record. He had had a membership in a gyn with an automatic withdrawal of monthly membership fees from his bank account. These withdrawal continued while he was gone until his bank account was depleted. His bank account was closed and it was the same as if he had written checks on an account with no money.

His positive relationship with the bank disappeared and his credit was damaged. He had been paying monthly on his student loans and since he abruptly quit paying he was was in default on his student loan.

When he got out of prison he began to work to put things back together. He had 3 months of subsidized housing, but after that he was unable to rent a place because of the eviction. It took him two years to be able to rent a place in his own name. Because of the default on his student loans he was not able to go back to school.

He had to regularly pay his loans for a year before he could enroll in college again. He had to go through bureaucratic hurdles before he could reopen a bank account.

Luckily Tom was determined to change his life and he tackled these problems one by one. It was not easy, but he made it. But not everyone has the ability or time to fight against the odds like Tom. Some members of the reentry community are trying to take care of families or are even struggling with health issues as they work to reintegrate into stable work and housing, not to mention the discrimination that they often face.

SB 692 will help persons convicted to a prison term to look at their debts and obligations in a clear eyed way and communicate with lenders and others about their circumstances. This would reduce unnecessary damage to their personal situation and make it easier to make a positive start after release. In many cases the outstanding obligations of the outside world can act as additional stressors, especially for a newly incarcerated persons. This stress can lead to behavioral problems, especially at the front end of a given sentence. The hope is that without the additional stress of outstanding obligations an incarcerated person may transition into serving their time with fewer incidents. This creates a safer environment for the offender and for those that work in the Department of Corrections.

We all want our criminal justice system to be more effective. With that goal in mind, I urge you to support 692.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.