

Public Hearing Testimony to:

**The Assembly Standing Committee on Codes
The Assembly Standing Committee on Correction
The Assembly Standing Committee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse**

Testimony Prepared and Delivered by:

**Renata Cobbs Fletcher
Vice President for Public Policy and Community Partnerships
Public/Private Ventures (P/PV)**

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Assembly Members of the Joint Standing Committees, good morning.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before you on behalf of my organization, Public/Private Ventures. P/PV is a national social policy, program development and research organization with proven experience designing, managing and evaluating programs that link returning ex-prisoners to labor market opportunities and community-based supports, including substance abuse treatment, mental health services and mentoring. Today, I will present findings from P/PV's work, which demonstrate the promise of comprehensive, community-linked reentry programs to reduce recidivism and support men and women in making healthy and productive transitions back to their families and neighborhoods.

All of us in this room are all too familiar with the overlapping and circular set of issues that perpetuate the cycle of incarceration and recidivism: poverty, unemployment, addiction, mental illness and crime, which is often committed to support addictions.

Of the more than two million people under correctional control across the country, 41% are incarcerated for nonviolent, felony offenses. Of these offenses, 21% are drug-related. And while law enforcement has attempted to target those at the top tiers of this country's illicit drug market, the fact is

that the vast majority of those spending time – often lengthy time – behind bars for drug crimes are the lowest-tiered drug dealers and often, drug users themselves.

It's no surprise, then, that nonviolent, felony offenders are the group with the highest recidivism rates of all offenders. They cycle in and out of incarceration, at no small expense to state and city budgets. These "revolving door" offenders are often in the grip of serious drug and alcohol addictions.

Like others returning from incarceration, substance abusers in New York return home with few supports. All too often, these men and women are unprepared for life outside of prisons and jails. They are jobless, and getting a job can be a near impossible feat. Lack of skills and experience, inadequate education, unstable housing, separation from children and families, denial of government benefits, physical and mental health issues, HIV-AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the stigma of a criminal record and the dearth of supportive networks can cripple efforts to overcome the addiction and stabilize their lives. Across the board, there are insufficient numbers of effective programs and a lack of adequate and coordinated services, supports and labor market possibilities to help ex-prisoners successfully reintegrate into their communities.

P/PV has played a leading role in developing effective and cost saving programs that address this critical issue of prisoner reentry. Ready4Work (R4W), a \$25 million, three-year national prisoner reentry demonstration project that recently concluded, served nearly 5,000 adults and youth in 17 sites across the country, including New York sites in East Harlem and Brooklyn.

Returning prisoners were provided with:

- A range of case-managed wraparound direct and referral services to address their critical needs, including substance abuse and addiction, HIV-AIDS, child support and custody issues, obtaining government identification, and mental and physical health needs;

- Job training, education, employment, job retention and advancement services that support success in the labor market and increase employment opportunities and economic viability; and,
- Social supports, including mentoring, which helps build a network of caring, strategic relationships to surround individuals and support them along a productive path, including sobriety.

Funded by the United States Departments of Labor and Justice, as well as several private foundations, Ready4Work results have shown highly encouraging outcomes in terms of recidivism, employment, job retention, and mentoring for the participants served through the program:

- About 60% of all adult participants secured a job and worked for at least one month during their participation in the program;
- More than 60% of those who became employed remained employed for at least three consecutive months; one third of employed participants remained employed for six consecutive months;
- Participants who were mentored (about 50%) were twice as likely to find jobs as those who had never been mentored; mentoring is also associated with helping participants remain employed;
- Participants who were mentored (about 50%) were 70% less likely to leave the program during the following month than participants who were not mentored;
- **Recidivism rates for R4W participants are more than 50 percent lower than the national average reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics:** Based on publicly available incarceration records for 8 of the 11 adult R4W sites, only 1.9% of Ready4Work participants have returned to prison with a new offense within 6 months of their release (compared to 5% for the BJS benchmark); 5% have returned within a year (compared to 10.4% for BJS); and,
- **Recidivism rates for Ready4Work's 18-34-year-old African American, nonviolent felony offenders (who represent the vast majority of all program participants) are more than 60 percent lower than those reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics for a similar population:** 2.4% of Ready4Work participants have returned to prison with a new offense within 6 months of their release

(compared to 5.6% for the BJS benchmark); 6.3% have returned within a year (compared to 13.3% for BJS).

At Ready4Work sites across the country, lead organizations built effective partnerships between local faith-based groups, criminal justice and other government agencies, businesses and social service organizations to offer comprehensive reentry programming. Program costs were approximately \$4,500 per participant per year, compared with an average cost of \$25,000-\$50,000 to incarcerate someone for one year; the average cost of incarceration in New York State is \$24,000.

P/PV's role in the Ready4Work demonstration was to act as intermediary – we provided overall management of the project, including technical assistance, data collection, program monitoring, and fiscal oversight of the grantees.

P/PV has learned tremendously from this project. We have learned about the potential of effective, comprehensive services to meet the many needs of those returning from incarceration, about new employment strategies for ex-prisoners and other hard-to-employ populations and about the promise and difficulties of mentoring former prisoners – about which little is known.

P/PV understands from Ready4Work, as well as our research on other programs, that a “silo” approach to serving high-risk populations is simply not the answer. Stand-alone substance abuse programs for formerly incarcerated people, minus the provision of other services and an effective, accountable and integrated approach to their delivery, are not the right choice for people facing multiple barriers to reentry. Recidivism and substance abuse will only be significantly impacted when the entire constellation of issues is addressed. People who are homeless, jobless and without positive social support will likely find their efforts toward sobriety hampered, no matter how effective the substance abuse program.

P/PV recommends to the Joint Committee that more funding be made available to community-based programs to implement effective, wide-

ranging and accountable reentry programs. Critical to these efforts are structured, well-defined and measurable partnerships that begin pre-release between these organizations and New York State Corrections and social service agencies, businesses and volunteer resources, such as faith communities. More and better linkages between reentry service providers and substance abuse treatment centers and providers are also needed.

Finally, consideration should be given to alternative sentencing programs for substance abusers who are being returned to prison for possession of illicit drugs, failed drug and alcohol testing as mandated by parole and probation conditions, and failure to attend or complete substance abuse programs. Propositions such as Assembly bill A8098-A, which expands eligibility to court-mandated treatment instead of incarceration and as part of a comprehensive reentry program, should be supported.

Long-term, sustainable change can be accomplished by permanently moving people out of the destructive cycle of incarceration and recidivism. The lessons from proven comprehensive reentry programs such as Ready4Work can have a tremendous impact in New York State and in states and cities across the country – should we chose to apply them.

Thank you.