

Testimony for the Public Hearing before the Labor Committee on 2/16/17

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### No One is Exempt From Human Rights

I am addressing the labor committee as the Executive Director and member of CT for One Standard of Justice, a civil rights advocacy group seeking compassionate and intelligent reform of sexual offense laws. We believe, as you do, in the human rights of all people and that all people deserve a second chance. Sadly, sex offenders have become a class of people who are being denied reintegration into society(1a), because of misguided laws and policies that not only lump all offenders of sex crimes in the same pot, but are also failing to keep our children safe(1b). It all starts with a public registry that instills and perpetuates fear in the public by creating a largely fictional "boogeyman." Fictional because false information about high re-offense rates(2), multiple victims, and inability to change are repeated endlessly but not supported by scientific research.

The empirical data proves about 95% of all new sexual offenses are perpetrated by people NOT on the registry(3). We believe, based on supporting empirical data, that many if not the majority of our registered citizens pose no threat to communities or children.

This offender population, just like any other, deserves a chance to become fully employed, educated and functioning members of their families, communities and of society. This group must be eligible for all the same reentry and employment services as any other. There is nothing unique about this group, other than the label, which through media sensationalism, public misinformation, and the misguided wrath of some special interests, becomes a lightning rod for unwarranted shaming, stigma, and social excommunication, all justified under the dubious guise of the public safety law, which is the sex offender registry. We cannot continue to support laws that make people "feel good," as they not only miss the mark on public safety but do more harm than good to all citizens (4).

Employment is where all reentry begins. Many registered citizens have been forced to abandon highly skilled, highly paid positions for menial, minimum wage jobs at best. Many are unemployed for years simply because they are on the public registry. The strain and despair of unemployment, limited housing and isolation takes a huge toll on people mentally and physically and many end up on disability. Whatever problems felons encounter in obtaining employment, the obstacles are far worse for those with the label of "sex offender." Post incarceration supervision often prevents them from returning to careers they have invested decades of their lives to or prevents others from learning a new career. Teenagers and young adults whose lives have yet to really begin are forced into underemployment and unemployment. The jobs that these people are able to secure often take years to find, especially when they are unable to use a computer, the Internet or email(5). Even before a conviction at the time of

arrest, the majority of people accused of sexual offenses lose their jobs. As one mother reported, my son was an employee in good standing. When he was arrested for a consensual teenage relationship, the media sensationalized it and within a week he was fired. He was devastated. The public shaming (TV and newsprint), getting fired and the strain of a legal proceeding upset him so much he quit college in the middle of a semester. He walked away from 6 classes he was doing well in!

CTOSJ has implemented its own community based resource program: Fearless Support Groups(6). These emotional support groups give registered citizens a safe environment to express themselves without judgment and fear. Fearless is a positive affirming support model presenting a refreshing alternative to our current supervision and state treatment models which tend to support continued shame, stigma and a false narrative instead of focusing on enabling a person to restore his sense of dignity and worth. We believe registered citizens' participation in Fearless groups will reduce recidivism caused by violations, technicalities and petty crime. The sexual re-offense rate for offenders is already low. According to a 2012 report by the CT Office of Policy and Management, 1.7% of "sex offenders" were returned to prison to serve a sentence for a new sex crime over a five year period.

Another community based program that is working successfully in Vermont and in other parts of the United States is Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA)(7). COSA is a voluntary reentry program for high risk offenders in any offender group, including those convicted of sexual crimes. A team of 4 community volunteers are assigned to an offender to help reintegrate the person back into society, assisting with anything from grocery shopping to looking for housing and employment. This is a collaborative effort with Vermont's community reentry programs and the Department of Correction. Vermont's COSA has proven itself year after year as recidivism has decreased.

We believe that while people may have to take a break from certain careers while they seek treatment, the majority of these offenders should be allowed to return to their careers or seek other gainful comparable employment. Many of these registered citizens are highly educated and they have a lot to offer to other possible disenfranchised or special groups. Other registered citizens must have access to an affordable education at vocational schools, colleges and universities. Once they have completed their education, opportunities must exist to gainfully employ them. Access to professional licenses and unions must be made available. There should be no limitations on what an offender can accomplish.

As we know a person's self-esteem is often linked to his income. Inmates worry about how they'll make it out in the world; how will they be able to afford a life with a partner or support a family. (Many of them are being supported by their parents and or partners and wives.) Please give registered citizens every opportunity that you would any other offender group. With employment will come better housing and social supports. Without this level of support, an offender is destabilized and that's when the risk of recidivism (not of a sexual offense) appears. I ask the state of CT to think outside the box, to be innovative, to invest in quality reentry programs and employment services and to provide education, job and career opportunities for all. Incentivize our small businesses, companies and corporations to hire felons. As of January 1, 2017, Georgia joined other states that offer tax credits to employers for hiring parolees in full-time jobs. We must educate the public and CT's employers. Together we can build stronger, safer communities—communities that all our citizens are invested in.

Stop the discrimination now!

I support Bill No. 6219 as long as it does not discriminate against any class of offender reentering society (including offenders of sexual offenses, "sex offenders").

Thank you.

Cindy Prizio

1a. H.R.1854 - [Comprehensive Justice and Mental Health Act of 2015](https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/993/text)  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/993/text>

1b. Sex Offender Registries Are Not Really Keeping Your Children Safe: Here's Why  
Paul Heroux, State Representative, Massachusetts -- 3/2/2015 | Updated 5/2, 2015  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-heroux/sex-offender-registries-are-not-really-keeping-your-children-safe-heres-why\\_b\\_6760908.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-heroux/sex-offender-registries-are-not-really-keeping-your-children-safe-heres-why_b_6760908.html)

2. The Supreme Court's Crucial Mistake About Sex Crime Statistics  
A COMMONLY-CITED STATISTIC ABOUT SEX OFFENDER RE-OFFENSE RATES IS WRONG.  
Ira Ellman – Professor at Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, Arizona State University -- July 28, 2015  
<https://casetext.com/posts/the-supreme-courts-crucial-mistake-about-sex-crime-statistics>

3. Five Myths about the Sex Offender Registry  
<https://rsoresearch.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/five-myths-about-public-registry.pdf>  
(Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000) (USDOJ)

4. U.S. Department of Justice  
SMART Office -- July, 2015  
<https://www.smart.gov/pdfs/AdultSexOffenderManagement.pdf>  
The U.S. Department of Justice, July 2015, report shows that sex offender laws are ineffective and creates more harm than good.

5. Sixth Circuit Considers Internet Restrictions on Former Sex Offenders This Week  
RITA CANT - JANUARY 27, 2016  
<https://cdt.org/blog/sixth-circuit-considers-internet-restrictions-on-former-sex-offenders-this-week/>

6. CTOSJ Fearless Support Groups  
<http://www.ctosj.org/fearless-support-groups/>

7. Vermont DOC Builds Commitment to Restorative Justice  
By Chidi Umez, the CSG Justice Center -- May 5, 2016  
<https://csgjusticecenter.org/reentry/posts/vermont-doc-builds-commitment-to-restorative-justice-2/>

. Public sex offender registries, like one created with Megan's Law, are often unfair and ineffective:  
magazine editor  
BY JACOB SULLUM -- senior editor at Reason magazine -- July 27, 2014  
<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/expert-branding-sex-offenders-not-work-article-1.1881664>

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... 2003 Justice Department study, nearly 9 out of 10 people convicted of rape or sexual assault have no prior convictions for this category of crime, so they would not show up in registries.

. Sex offenders are among the most harshly punished criminals in the state, but how often does the punishment fit the crime.

January 5, 2017/ Research by UCLA Students

By Rebecca DiBennardo, PhD Candidate, ACLU Sociology

<https://csw.ucla.edu/2017/01/05/sex-offenders-among-harshly-punished-criminals-state-often-punishment-fit-crime/>

. Life on the List

STEVEN YODER -- APRIL 4, 2011

Does publicly posting names of convicted sex offenders actually reduce the number of sexual offenses?

<http://prospect.org/article/life-list>

Patty Wetterling says (people on the registry) "... You need housing. You need a job. You need family support, community support. ... Everyone on the registry is somebody's brother, somebody's son, somebody's father."

. New evidence says US sex-offender policies are actually causing more crime

By Steven Yoder -- December 21, 2016

<https://qz.com/869499/new-evidence-says-us-sex-offender-policies-dont-work-and-are-actually-causing-more-crime/>

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