

**Performance Oversight Hearing: Committee on the Judiciary
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG)
Council of the District of Columbia
Testimony of Tara Libert
Co-Chair, DC Reentry Action Network (DC RAN)
February 8, 2018
Room 500, 9:30 am**

Good Morning Chairman Allen and fellow Judiciary Committee members. My name is Tara Libert and I am the Co-founder and Executive Director of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, an OVSJG grantee that provides comprehensive literacy and reentry services for returning citizens in our city. I am also the proud Co-Chair of the DC Reentry Action Network (DC RAN), along with my co-chair Paula Thompson (Executive Director of Voices for a Second Chance). I am here today to represent the 16 nonprofit members of RAN.

Thanks to the vision and leadership of Michelle Garcia, Director of the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants, Grants Management Specialist Mary Abraham, and Grants Program Specialist Michon Moon along with the rest of her strong team, the RAN coalition was formed last year and we are starting to build a community of reentry service providers for collective voice and impact. Because of OVSJG's support, this is the first time that reentry providers have united in this type of coalition and we are excited to create change together.

RAN is also grateful that OVSJG has also granted funding for administrative support for RAN by the Council for Court Excellence (CCE). We admire how well organized the victim providers are and we know that reentry providers still have progress to make, but we are confident that we are moving quickly in the right direction.

As you know, the DC Reentry Action Network (RAN) connects effective, local, client-centered reentry service providers to exchange knowledge, strengthen services and give voice to a historically underserved population in our city—men and women returning home from incarceration. RAN has determined the priorities for returning citizens in our city to be access to quality and culturally competent mental health services, safe and affordable housing and most importantly, coordination of care. RAN is a collective voice of reentry service providers to communicate the needs of returning citizens and work closely with city agencies.

The Efforts to Outcome (ETO) system that OVSJG rolled out has all providers collecting data for the same metrics, which means we will soon be able to evaluate the quantity, quality, and effectiveness of the reentry services we are providing. This reporting structure will be key for providers to be able to track and report collective impact.

OVSJG also provided funds for professional development in FY17. A Free Minds staff person attended Social Solutions Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) summit in Austin Texas to learn more about best practices in evaluation. We have never had access to data collection and professional development opportunities as a group before and this OVSJG funding is invaluable to re-entry providers as we tend to run on shoestring budgets.

I would like to thank you, Chairman Allen, and the Judiciary Committee for prioritizing reentry work and for recognizing the vital importance of OVSJG reentry funds. The needs are immense. In this city, one in twenty-two adults are under some form of correctional control and one in seven adults have a criminal record. The RAN members work hard every day to provide quality services but the need is so much greater than just the 460 returning citizens that were supported through funding to nine grantees in FY17. Between 1,500 and 2,000 DC code offenders return to school every year from Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) facilities alone and nearly 12,000 released from the Department of Corrections (DOC).

The OVSJG grantees in RAN include Collaborative Solutions for Communities; Community Connections, Inc; Community Family Life Services; Council for Court Excellence; Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop; House of Ruth; Jubilee Housing; Lorton Art Program, Open City Advocates, THRIVE DC, University Legal Services, Voices for a Second Chance, and the Justice Research and Statistics Association.

I would like to share some real success stories that the OVSJG funds have enabled. The impact on the lives of returning citizens has been tremendous.

The Jail and Prison Advocacy Project (JPAP) at University Legal Services works with DC residents with serious mental illness and intellectual disabilities who are returning to the community from BOP, the DC Jail, and halfway houses. In a recent case, the BOP escorted David, a man with an intellectual disability, to his parole officer where JPAP staff and the client's community provider awaited his arrival, in accordance with JPAP's prerelease plan. A year earlier, the BOP had placed the same man on a bus from one of their facilities, without an escort. David ended up living in a park near Union Station where the bus dropped him off. He was arrested within a week and sent back to prison for a year for violating his release conditions—failing to report to his parole officer within the required time period after his release.

In another case, JPAP worked with Jerome, a man so paranoid he refused to sign most papers and initially refused treatment for mental illness and necessary dental work. He was living in a garage after his release from a BOP facility. JPAP gained his trust, linked him to a dental clinic and a mental health provider he was willing to speak to, and assisted him in obtaining SSI benefits. That client is now living in his own apartment and is well engaged with his treatment team, who considers him quite a success story. JPAP's reentry work makes a critical difference in people's lives

Voices for a Second Chance (VSC) serves clients like Timothy and Joy, who were connected to VSC's First Responder Inmate and Reentry Services at the DC Jail. VSC utilizes case management, counseling, and support groups to arm clients with new insights and tools for a successful reintegration, which is crucial before release. Once released, funding makes it possible to provide for essentials like birth certificates, which are key for returning citizens as they make it possible to secure employment. They even provide transportation assistance for those who do not have the funds to look for a job or to make critical medical and support services appointments.

We met Barry, a Free Minds member, because he happened to give one of the RAN members a Lyft ride to one of our regular Wednesday night meetings. When the passenger explained where he was going, Barry became emotional and started to cry in the driver's seat. Barry was illiterate until he was 48 years old and his cellmate, who had a life sentence, told him he would teach him to read rather than continue to read his letters aloud to him. They worked together every day for several years. He served more than twenty years in prison and he was shocked upon release that an organization such as Free Minds exists to help formerly incarcerated people. Today, Barry can read on approximately a 7th grade level and he is an active and enthusiastic member of Free Minds which has helped him integrate into the community and has connected him to a peer support group.

Another one of Free Minds' members, referred to as S, was recently released from the juvenile unit at the DC Jail. His mother was shot and killed in front of him by drug dealers when he was only five years old. His father died the next year. His grandmother raised him and his brother. While S was in the juvenile unit, his grandmother died and he was not, of course, allowed to attend the funeral. He is still only seventeen years old and he had no place to go when he was released, but a family friend and neighbor has since offered to take him in. Free Minds is working with him to get him re-enrolled in school and to provide the support system that he lacks.

We, as a city, need to recognize that in order to stop the cycle of violence and creation of new victims, we must fully fund high quality reentry services. We need increased local funding to reach more returning citizens. By addressing their needs, we can prevent them from re-offending; we know firsthand from our years of experience at our nonprofits that re-entry work reduces crime. By working with returning citizens, we can reduce costs in policing, corrections, probation and courts and most importantly, we can rebuild lives.

I look forward to continuing the conversation on reentry during the budget hearings. Thank you for this opportunity.