



The Fortune Society
Prisoner Re-Entry
CHANGING MINDS & BUILDING LIVES

Testimony Before the City Council: December 19, 2006

Re: Non-Health Related Discharge Planning

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. My name is JoAnne Page. As a teenager I began volunteering in a prison teaching decision making to prisoners. Over thirty years later, I continue to teach this course. Along the way I decided to make helping former prisoners successfully reenter their communities my life's work.

For the last seventeen years I have been the head of The Fortune Society, a not-for-profit organization that is a primary resource for New York City men and women released from jail and prison seeking to build constructive lives in the community. Currently, we serve nearly 4,000 former prisoners each year, offering a holistic and integrated "one-stop-shopping" model of service provision that has received national recognition. Services currently provided include outpatient substance abuse treatment, alternatives to incarceration, HIV/AIDS services, career development and job retention, education, family services, drop in services and supportive housing as well as ongoing access to aftercare. In addition to our services in the community, we have office space at Rikers Island, serving family members and prisoners at the point of release.

For nearly forty years, The Fortune Society has been developing model programs that help former prisoners successfully reenter their communities. Over the past few years our substance abuse treatment program has been featured as a model program by The U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, we have been funded on six occasions as a Special Project of National Significance for our HIV/AIDS work, our 24-Hour Drop-In Center was highlighted in a report by the Re-Entry Policy Council and our emergency and longer term housing facility, The Fortune Academy, has been cited as a model for providing housing for recently released prisoners by The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Justice, The Urban Institute and AIDS Housing of Washington.

We are committed to providing every released prisoner who comes to our door with baseline services including crisis intervention, counseling, and linkage to needed services. Over almost four decades, we have grown our services to meet the needs of our clients, paying special attention to those who were unable to access appropriate services elsewhere, and to building services that were needed but unavailable to our clients. Now, we provide extensive wraparound services and make a lifetime commitment to work with our clients, with a welcome to keep coming back no matter how they left us, because we know that change in long-term patterns of addiction, crime and institutionalization is a long-term struggle and takes long-term commitment both by our clients and by those invested in their success.

The most important recent addition to our services is our supportive housing program, opened in West Harlem in April 2002. We have been so moved by the impact that this housing has had on the

lives of our residents – and the way in which community opposition has changed to community support - that we are moving forward to construct more housing on the vacant lot that we own behind our building. Our planning calls for approximately 100,000 square feet of new construction, which will provide a service center, permanent housing for graduates of our housing program, and truly affordable rental apartments for the community in which we are located. Because of the high rates of asthma and other health issues in our community, we are also planning to build this as a green building. As part of our planning process, we worked with Professor Dennis Derryck and a team of students from the New School for Social Research's Milano and Parson's schools, whose design for the building was entered into and won the JPMorgan/Chase Community Development Competition. Through funding for a planning grant provided by Enterprise Social Investment Corporation and the Corporation for Supportive Housing a feasibility plan has been completed by the Jonathan Rose Companies LLC. We are currently deciding on a co-developer and designing our fund-raising strategy. Our goal is to have new mixed use services and housing available to our clients and to the community within three to five years.

Fortune has been selected by the National Institute of Justice to have our service model studied for impact on clients' employment, substance use, recidivism and housing stability, finding it of interest to "service providers involved in reentry programming for ex-offenders, researchers and policymakers interested in key components of successfully transitioning ex-offenders from prison to society...." NIJ issued a \$400,000 request for proposals to evaluate our model and selected Abt Associates, Inc. to serve as evaluator for the project. We are honored to have been chosen for this project and eagerly await the results.

In 2005, we helped nearly 3,902 men and women. Examples of how we served them include:

- placing 473 former prisoners at jobs, which combined had an average starting salary of over \$10 per hour, more than 50% above New York's minimum wage;
- housing 225 homeless former prisoners on an emergency and/or long-term basis; and
- providing substance abuse treatment to 273 individuals.

Under Commissioner Martin Horn's administration, we and our sister human service agencies have had unprecedented access to those locked up on Rikers Island as well as unprecedented support in providing releasees with discharge planning. The periodic discharge planning retreats have greatly enhanced communication among the criminal justice service providers and between the service providers and the Department of Correction. Much progress has been made, but much work remains. Too many people continue to be released to homelessness and addiction, with inadequate identification and without the benefits that they need to access drug treatment and needed medical care. All too many leave incarceration with the same unaddressed problems they had when they went in, and far too many leave in worse shape than when they were locked up.

Many releasees show up at Fortune's door and the doors of other community-based organizations for assistance. They come with multiple needs that often include housing, employment, food, clothing, drug treatment and counseling. When they get help, their odds of success go up, and that is in everyone's interest. From Fortune's perspective, the discharge planning initiative has been extraordinarily successful in bringing released prisoners to our doors. We have been given unprecedented access to Rikers Island and our literature is readily available to prisoners, we have been allowed to expand the reach of our Drop-in Center from its site in Queensboro Plaza to office space at the Control Building, and we have been able to pick released prisoners up at Rikers Island and take them by van to the services that they need. These improvements must be continued and built upon.

It is important to have the City Council's support in increasing the resources available to men and women returning home after incarceration, and in reducing the barriers against successful re-entry. Some of the actions needed do not cost money. In fact, they save money. I make four such recommendations to the City Council:

- Continue to support Commissioner Horn's efforts to increase communication between the Department of Correction and criminal justice service providers, to provide access to those soon to be released on Rikers and to continue to work on means to improve linking releasees to community-based service providers.
- Protect the continuity of benefits upon release. Medicaid should be suspended rather than terminated while a person is incarcerated, so that s/he does not face a period that is often 45 days long between release and ability to access needed medication or drug treatment.
- Take the steps needed to allow releasees who do not pose a safety risk to return to their families in public housing. This would require no additional allocation of housing and would significantly decrease the number of prisoners released to homelessness.
- Look hard at the number of City prisoners who are short-stayers, spending a handful of days in confinement at inordinate cost to the Department of Correction and at risk of losing employment, benefits and housing that they might have had in place prior to incarceration.

If you really want to address the issue of discharge planning for soon-to-be-released inmates, some investment of public funds will be necessary. But these are investments that truly save the taxpayers money in the long run:

- Invest in comprehensive discharge planning services for the New York City jail system. Preparing inmates for release and linking them to appropriate supportive services in the community will greatly improve their chances of successfully reentering their communities and becoming productive members of society. An investment in discharge planning will reduce recidivism and reduce the City prison population, a savings of \$252 per person, per day.
- Invest in expansion of alternative to incarceration programs to meet the scale of the need. Several such programs, including Fortune's, received rigorous evaluation by New York City's Criminal Justice Agency and Vera Institute, demonstrating that they saved significant incarceration costs with no negative impact on community safety. Fortune's programs save approximately \$30,000 in incarceration costs for every \$10,000 invested in them.
- Invest in the community-based re-entry services needed to bring prisoners home safely and successfully. It is an investment that will pay enormous dividend in cost savings and in the coin that matters most: the safety and quality of life of our city and its communities.

In closing I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address this committee. I would also like to extend to each and every one of you an invitation to visit The Fortune Society. It would be my pleasure to show you around our facilities and to show you the empty lot that will become a resource in a handful of years. I would like for you all to see our programs in action and for you to meet our staff of former prisoners who have dedicated their professional lives to helping other former prisoners to successfully reenter their communities. In fact, most of the staff and much of the management at

The Fortune Society are former prisoners and/or former substance abusers. I'm continually impressed and inspired by their example. I sincerely hope you will take me up on my offer. Once again, thank you.

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