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Second Chance will lead to better lives



Barack Obama, One View

In America, nearly a third of African-American men will enter state or federal prison during their lives. Too many will be lost in the criminal justice system and end up in prison, poverty, and unemployment. And in some cases, the lack of job training and support programs means that those who are released could fail to become fully rehabilitated, and may go on to commit more crimes.

There is no question that breaking the law should have consequences, and we have to do more as parents to teach our children that violence is always wrong. But justice must be fair, and punishment must fit the crime. Yet, we still have a system that locks away too many young, first-time, non-violent offenders for the better part of their lives. It's a system where certain sentences are based less on the kind of crime you commit than on what you look like and where you come from.

In Illinois alone, more than 40,000 people are released from prisons each year with most of them returning to the Chicago community. Almost half of those released from prison lack a high school diploma or GED. Only one-third of inmates receive vocational training or work experience designed to improve their ability to obtain employment once released. Even fewer receive counseling and placement services after their release. Within three years, statistics indicate that more than half will be back in custody.

In today's economy, without a high school diploma, supporting a family is almost impossible. And with a criminal record instead of an education, the prospects for success are next to none. This has to stop.

The costs of crimes are high. But failing to break this cycle costs us even more.

That's why I am fighting to pass the Second Chance Act, which would support faith- and community-based organizations working with state and local authorities to give former prisoners a second chance at a meaningful life. The Second Chance Act makes funding available for transitional jobs programs and housing, supportive health services, and educational needs. Organizations such as the Safer Foundation and Heartland Alliance have demonstrated success giving formerly incarcerated people in Illinois an opportunity for a second chance. And the Second Chance Act would ensure that the federal government does its part by supporting reentry programs like these that help make our communities safer.

We must create a pathway for people coming out of jail to get the jobs, skills, and education they need to leave the life of crime. That means supporting effective training and mentoring programs

to help people transition into jobs. That means reevaluating the laws against hiring people with a criminal record so that we don't foreclose effective ways to bring people out of poverty and deter them from committing new crimes. That also means giving former prisoners parenting skills so they can give their children the sense of hope and opportunity that so many of them were denied.

Thurgood Marshall said: "None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody - a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns - bent down and helped us pick up our boots."

As we fulfill Marshall's legacy, let's bend down and help every kid pick up his or her boots for a second chance.