

TESTIMONY OF NORMA FERNANDES,  
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HEARING: “*U.S. DRUG POLICY: AT WHAT COST?*”  
CONGRESSIONAL JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
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The youngest of three children, I grew up in a dysfunctional environment. When I was eleven, my mother passed away from cirrhosis of the liver. At age fifteen, I dropped out of high school because I was addicted to heroin. The foundation of my teenage years revolved around jail and the street corners of Brooklyn . . . either selling drugs or, at a more desperate time, robbery. Because of my addiction, I didn’t care who I hurt. After many attempts to get sober through 30-day detoxification, as well as time in jail, these experiences did nothing to keep me off drugs. Although time in jail prevented me from committing crimes while I was there, it gave me only the opportunity to clean out my system, rest, and time to think about how I would become a better criminal when I would eventually be released. This was the cycle of my life until when, at age twenty-two, I decided to enroll in a methadone program.

At the time of my final arrest, I was on ninety (90) milligrams of methadone and charged with felony-level criminal sale of a controlled substance. I knew I had effectively outgrown my “status” with the New York City Department of Corrections, and would soon find myself in an upstate prison. Fortunately for me, the Brooklyn D.A Charles J. Hynes believed in substance abuse treatment alternatives instead of prison, and

for this I'll always be grateful to him. I never thought I would ever be able to live my life without getting high and committing crimes; however, I was given the opportunity to participate in DTAP. I was diverted into a program of long-term residential drug treatment instead of going upstate to prison.

Detoxifying off the methadone at Rikers Island (New York City's jail) was a nightmare. I lost 45 pounds in less than two months, and felt like I was going to die. I had no appetite, nor was I able to sleep as my body reacted violently and painfully to the awful withdrawal from methadone. It was an agonizing process that included many fights with fellow sufferers, undoubtedly because I was still a sick, suffering, and very angry person during this period.

I was later mandated to Samaritan Village, a therapeutic community located in Ellenville, in upstate New York. My time spent there will never be forgotten. It wasn't easy adjusting to a structured environment and sitting in groups, and when I arrived to Samaritan Village, I was scared, angry, and lonely. As time went on, however, I began to learn a lot more about myself, the real me, and I can proudly say that Samaritan Village helped me to grow up. I obtained my GED while there, learned how to live life soberly and responsibly, and learned how to set short and long-term goals. These experiences empowered me and encouraged me to strive hard so I could accomplish anything I want to achieve in life.

Today I'm a college graduate, and owner and landlord of a four-family building in Brooklyn. I'm also a proud single parent with a very intelligent, level-headed daughter. I love the person I am today. I have no doubt that had I not been offered the chance to enter long-term residential treatment, I would not have set any positive goals nor accomplished them, and definitely would not be here today sharing this story. The only choices guaranteed me in the future I would've faced back then were pretty grim: either become a recidivism statistic in prison with an even higher sentence, or a death statistic buried in a cemetery somewhere. Instead, I have accomplished every goal I've set for myself, and will continue to be prosperous in everything I do. Is this an individual with high self esteem or what?

I am now employed by the Kings County District Attorney's Office as Community Resources Coordinator for the ComALERT reentry program, assisting individuals paroled to Brooklyn in obtaining vital supportive services. The services include outpatient drug treatment, job placement, vocational training, free GED courses, health benefits, and VESID entitlements. The fact that ComALERT is sponsored by the Kings County District Attorney's Office plays an essential role and has a positive impact on each agency providing supportive services to our ComALERT clients. And even though there are clients who walk into ComALERT initially resistant because it's a program sponsored by the DA's office, once they become engaged by the re-entry program and involved in the different services provided at ComALERT, they're anxious to come back.

I know how imperative it is for a formerly incarcerated individual to have these essential supportive services in order to successfully reintegrate back into the community. Supportive services are particularly important for a population that is highly at risk to recidivate because they don't have access to effective substance abuse treatment, or have any marketable skills to secure employment. As a former client, and now as a productive community member and a social services professional, my personal experiences have shown me in a number of ways that programs like ComALERT and DTAP aren't only effective at restoring lives. Thanks to the enlightened thinking of civic leaders like Brooklyn DA Charles Hynes, I've now also seen how these programs have solid economic and public safety benefits that each and every one of us can all enjoy.