

Oral Testimony to:

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

House of Representatives

House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security

“Federal Bureau of Prisons Oversight”

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Tuesday, July 21, 2009

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Scott and Members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony before you today regarding the key role federal and state prison industries play in the overall mission and success of our countries' correctional institutions based on my decades of work as a correctional professional. I would especially like to thank Chairmen Conyers and Scott for inviting me to speak regarding the importance of prison industries and for their on-going support for the development of quality industry programs in our nation's prisons and jails.

I am currently the President & CEO of the Ohio College Access Network but until a few years ago, I spent thirty four years as a correctional administrator in Ohio. A more detailed biography is provided at the end of my testimony for the record.

I would like to provide you with my views based on my lengthy experience as a correctional administrator as to the importance of prison industries in federal and state correctional facilities, as well as a thumbnail sketch of what I experienced with Ohio's approach to prisoner employment. I hope my input will prove helpful as you examine legislative solutions available to you to resolve the very serious challenges facing the country's correctional facilities. And, specifically, the mounting obstacles that Federal Prison Industries (FPI) is encountering on the heels of the announcement that they are being forced to close eight factories, downsize an additional twelve more and eliminate seventeen hundred inmate jobs and one hundred plus staff jobs all associated with the

downsizing of these operations. These are sobering statistics in combination with the fact that the number of eligible inmates employed in the FPI program has already fallen precipitously over recent years by thousands and specifically from 25% to 18%. I understand that this is due to limitations imposed on FPI by Congress and the FPI Board on FPI's mandatory source authority relating to federal agencies purchases' from FPI.

The Importance of Prison Industries

Let me first address the issue of why I believe that it is vital to maintain an effective and viable federal and state prison industries programs. In my view, there are at least six primary rationales:

First: Federal and State prison industries' jobs are a management tool to keep prisoners productively busy. When prisoners are idle, tension and violence increases in correctional facilities. Prison industry programs keep thousands of inmates productively involved in the day-to-day, structured operation of our nation's correctional facilities, thereby increasing the safety of the correctional officers who are on the front lines, as well as for civilians, inmates, and the communities surrounding the facilities.

Second: Federal and State prison industries' job training reduces crime. Inmates who participate in meaningful job training demonstrate a significant statistical reduction in recidivism. A Washington State Institute for Public Policy study showed that for every \$1 spent on prison industry programs, as much as \$6.23 is saved in future criminal

justice costs (arrest, conviction, incarceration, post release supervision and crime victimization). In addition, a previous study conducted by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections showed that participation in Ohio Penal Industries jobs reduced the return rate of offenders released from prison by 20 percent. Participation in high-skilled Ohio Penal Industries jobs resulted in a 50 percent reduction in recidivism. Similarly, studies also show that FPI inmates are 24 percent less likely to recidivate than those inmates in non-FPI jobs.

Third: Meaningful job training contributes to the successful reentry of offenders and increases their chances of finding and keeping jobs after release.

Now, more so than ever, with our country's tough economy, one can imagine, former prisoners attempting to find jobs are at a natural disadvantage. Like FPI, Ohio's mission is to teach them skills so that they can compete in the job market after they have served their prison sentences. For example, Ohio has one hundred plus vocational education programs ranging from building maintenance to welding, from brick laying to auto mechanics. And, their industries program works with areas in the Ohio Department of Corrections, as well as with other state agencies to enhance the skill-sets obtained by offenders.

Fourth: Federal and State prison industries' contracts with private sector businesses boost economic development and in particular minority-owned and small companies.

In an attempt to expand prison industries and create more real-world and high-skilled jobs, prison industries have placed an emphasis in recent years

on partnering with the private sector. These partnerships benefit both federal and state Departments of Correction and the companies they contract with. Thousands of private sector businesses from around the country benefit from purchases made by both federal and state prison industries. In 2007, FPI alone purchased \$538 million in goods, services, and raw materials from the private sector OR in other words, 77.4 Percent of FPI's Revenues. Of this 77.4 Percent, nearly two-thirds of these purchase contracts are with small businesses, many of them female and minority-owned or disadvantaged. Estimates indicate that roughly 5,000 jobs in the private sector are the result of goods purchased by FPI alone, not including state industries purchases. This is one of the best examples I have seen of the public/private partnership model working to benefit all parties, the federal and state governments, private businesses across our nation and our country's overall correctional programs.

Fifth: Prison industries offsets the cost of incarceration. FPI and most other state correctional industry programs are self-supporting entities that do not require financial assistance from the general revenue fund thereby creating cost savings to taxpayers, an all too critical goal for both federal and state governments in light of our country's current tough economic climate.

Finally, federal and state prison industries imbue inmates with a work ethic and a sense of self-responsibility. Many inmates have never held a job for any length of time, nor have they learned to take instruction or feel the satisfaction of a job well done. In FPI, Ohio, and other jurisdictions, prison industries work standards mirror the normal

work environment as closely as possible so that when offenders are released to the community they are as ready as possible to join the work force with real world job skills so they can be as successful as possible at making a productive contribution.

Ohio's Inmate Employment and Reentry Efforts

Ohio has worked very hard to increase the employability of ex-inmates through initiatives such as the Offender Job Linkage Program, where local business leaders are invited to interview skilled inmates close to release at job fairs in the prisons. As a prerequisite to participation in the job fairs, inmates must be within 90 days of release and are required to produce a current resume and participate in classroom training to develop interview skills. To date, thousands of inmates and hundreds of potential employers have participated in over 300 plus job fairs across the state.

One of Ohio's most important employment initiatives is the community service program. Ohio has expanded the numbers of inmates and hours devoted to this area from over 75,000 hours in 1991 to millions of hours in 2007. This program has provided Ohio communities with over 40 plus million hours of volunteer inmate service since the inception of the program.

Finally, it is important to note that offender employment is just one component of a broad systems approach to managing offenders returning to the community following a period of incarceration. In Ohio, and many other jurisdictions, innovative "reentry initiatives" are underway that emphasize a continuum of services, programming,

support, and offender accountability from the time of sentencing to well beyond an offender's release to the community. I previously testified before Congress in support of the landmark legislation, The Second Chance Act, as I believe efforts such as those embodied in this legislation further enhance public safety and ensure that many more offenders return home as tax paying and productive citizens.

Recommendations to Address the Current State of FPI and State Programs

I would like to briefly address some specific points of legislative discussion. At this juncture, due to the serious challenges FPI has just announced it faces, I would urge you to work towards legislative and administrative solutions that lift these onerous restrictions on FPI's mandatory source authority relating to federal agencies purchases' from FPI. It appears at this point that if these constraints remain in effect that FPI would incur further loss of inmate jobs and training opportunities, along with the loss of many civilian industry jobs. Additionally, the private companies who supply raw materials and partner with correctional industries would be placed at further risk to lose their jobs should these types of legislative constraints remain on the books. Certainly a less than desirable outcome on all levels.

CONCLUSION

As I have stated above, prison industries provide many positive benefits to federal and state correctional agencies by keeping inmates meaningfully engaged and by providing them with marketable job skills that may reduce the likelihood of future recidivism. They also provide positive economic benefits to taxpayers by reducing reliance on federal

and state general revenue fund sources, creating demand for raw products and supplies purchased from the private sector, and by increasing skilled labor. Communities and families benefit by offenders being returned to society with a greater likelihood for employment, a chance to become productive, law-abiding, and drug free citizens.

Based on the concerns that I and other corrections professionals have articulated, I urge you to work towards legislation that enhances prison industries and lifts the legislative and administrative constraints that clearly are impeding their mission and ability to succeed.

Mr. Chairman and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to offer my testimony. I would be pleased to address any questions that you may have.

Reginald A. Wilkinson

President & CEO

Dr. Reginald A. Wilkinson is currently the President & CEO of the Ohio College Access Network. He is formerly the Executive Director of the Business Alliance on Higher Education and the Economy. Previously, he was employed by the State of Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC) since September 1973. Dr. Wilkinson is past President of the nation's oldest and largest corrections organization: American Correctional Association. Dr. Wilkinson has authored numerous articles on a variety of correctional topics. Dr. Wilkinson has received awards from such organizations as the National Governors' Association, the American Correctional Association, the Association of State Correctional Administrators, the International Community Corrections Association, the National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice, the Volunteers of America, the Ohio Community Corrections Organization and the Ohio Correctional and Court Services Association. Dr. Wilkinson's academic background includes a Bachelor's degree in political science and a Master's degree in higher education administration, both from The Ohio State University. He was also awarded a Doctor of Education from the University of Cincinnati.