



Georgia Justice project Living City May 2017

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Not ex-offenders, but people

Working together for criminal justice reform in Georgia

By Sarah Mundell

Across the street from the golden dome of the Georgia State Capitol building in Atlanta, and just minutes away from Martin Luther King’s boyhood home and the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church where he first preached, people are gathering from all over the state to promote criminal justice reform.

Georgia has taken a leading role in criminal justice reform in the U.S., but it also has the highest rate of prisoners, parolees and probationers in the country — more than double that of any other state, says a 2009 Pew study — and it hasn’t changed much since then. In fact, 1 in 13 Georgians are under correctional supervision by the state.

“You come to Georgia on vacation and leave on probation!” says Waleisah Wilson, one of the speakers at Justice Day 2017 and founder of New Life Second Chances Outreach.

The crowd chuckles with recognition. They know this reality close-up: some have personal experience in the system, some are advocates for those receiving sentences that seem harsher than the crime, others are legislators sympathetic to the cause.

Wilson shares about her struggles, shared by many as they try to exit the system: getting released from prison and having just 30 days to come up with \$250 for their probation officer. That’s not easy to do without a job and with a criminal record, plus pay rent, buy food and cover other no-frills expenses. “How do you expect a person to do that without committing a crime again?” she said.

Marilynn Winn from Women on the Rise shared her 50-year long struggle in and out of the prison system. She began stealing when she was little because that’s what her grandma taught her to do. The 7th time she was convicted, she lied and said she was still addicted to drugs so she would be sent through Drug Court instead, where she would get better help than in prison.

But even after that, she still struggled to find full-time employment — getting hired countless times only to be let go after her background check was completed. Eventually she was asked to join the board of an organization trying to empower women and convinced them to focus on women with criminal records like her.

Is there another way?

There must be another way to respond to people who get into conflict with the law, reducing costs and helping them to become functioning and even contributing members of society again.

In fact, reducing sentences and probationary periods is a question of better public safety, speakers argued. How could that be? Aren't more time and harsher sentences more effective in getting the message across that certain behaviors are not acceptable in our society?

Speakers quoted statistics and personal anecdotes. The conclusion: the more time someone spends in prison, the more likely they are to miss out on positive experiences of how to support themselves in life and increases the chances that they reengage in dangerous or violent behavior on their release. It also leaves other family members struggling, making them more likely as well to engage in unlawful behavior just to keep food on the table.

Poverty, education and race also make a big difference. Being poor, less educated and black statistically make it more likely you will end up in the system, whether rightly or wrongly accused.

Andy Stein was sentenced with 20 years for a crime he committed 9 years ago. He realizes he has multiple advantages after being released after six years to finish his sentence on probation.

“The difference I have is that I'm a computer programmer. I have a valuable skill coming out. My old job held a spot for me for six years. But I can't for the life of me understand what they expect people to do after sitting there in prison all day from the last five or however many years. There's no rehabilitation, there's no training, just some GED classes,” he said.

Even with a skillset, he's making 50% of what he should because he works from home. “If I went to an employer and said, here is my going rate, and then they'd see my felony, they'd say no.” Even with a job, the rest of his family had to move out of state with other family because his current income is not enough to support them.

Seeing without the stigma

Besides advocating for legal change in the justice system, a big step is changing people's mentality in dealing with those who committed crimes.

“You need to ask yourself, why is that person in the prison system and why am I not? A lot of times it's luck,” said Wilson. Poverty leads to more crime because people are trying to make ends meet. Or sometimes people make stupid mistakes, she said. “I understand the victims, I respect them. I've been victimized, but we all need a second chance, or a third, fourth or fifth one,” she said.

It may be easier to see that in Georgia, where for many, it is talking about another chance for a son, a nephew or a cousin.

Joje Wilson-Gibbs of the Re-Entry Services Unit of the Georgia Department of Community Supervision is one such advocate. “That lady stood up and said that we don't call them inmates, ex-offenders. We call them people. We're trying to take the stigma out ... We don't call them parolees anymore, we call the people being released from prison ‘returning citizens.’ That's what they are,” she said.

Improving lives

It's clear that the changes advocated at Justice Day — organized by the Georgia Justice Project and in its fifth year— are not just about changing laws. Like the GJP's main goal, the day is about defending the indigent criminally accused and improving their lives so they can still contribute to society in a meaningful way.

Theodore H. Barnes was helped by the Georgia Justice Project, initiators of the first Justice Day, after a minor drug crime 18 years ago, reducing his probation from 20 years to 2 with

500 community service hours and a fine. With GJP's former landscaping business, he gained positive work experience, has gone to college, and now works as an operations supervisor for Emory University's shuttle service.

"Right now the present is very good. Education-wise I'm going to school, job-wise I'm looking for more employment, I'm employable again. I have a little self-esteem again. I try to share that with people who are coming forward today," Barnes said.

Back at the capitol, it is the first time that the GJP is joined by other partner organizations for Justice Day. They are all part of the Criminal Justice Working Group, begun in early 2016 by the Southern Center for Human Rights as a forum for organizations all working for justice reform. The Justice Day collaboration was a natural outcome of that as the GJP began planning for 2017 and it magnified the efforts of all in their advocacy work.

Joint purpose

Late morning, participants went together to the capitol building and spoke to their legislators on a few major issues: raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to 18, as it currently ends the day a person turns 17, stopping shackling of pregnant women during labor and birth while incarcerated, reducing the probationary period for first-time offenders, allowing increased access to jobs, sentencing non-violent offenders to probation instead of prison, and increasing housing opportunities for Georgians with criminal records.

A worthwhile, focused effort that paid off on March 1 when three major reforms, including reducing probationary periods, were unanimously passed.

There is an air of hope, determination and joint purpose, especially knowing that everyone there that day is returning to their jobs and cities with a renewed commitment to criminal justice reform.

Step by step, they know their efforts — working for better housing opportunities, better access to jobs, better rehabilitation and educational opportunities, and just showing that someone cares — will affirm the dignity of those supervised by the state.

And it's more: these tools are the real long-term building blocks that will help those who have made mistakes to change their lives and meaningfully contribute to society, positively affecting the lives of their children and communities as well.