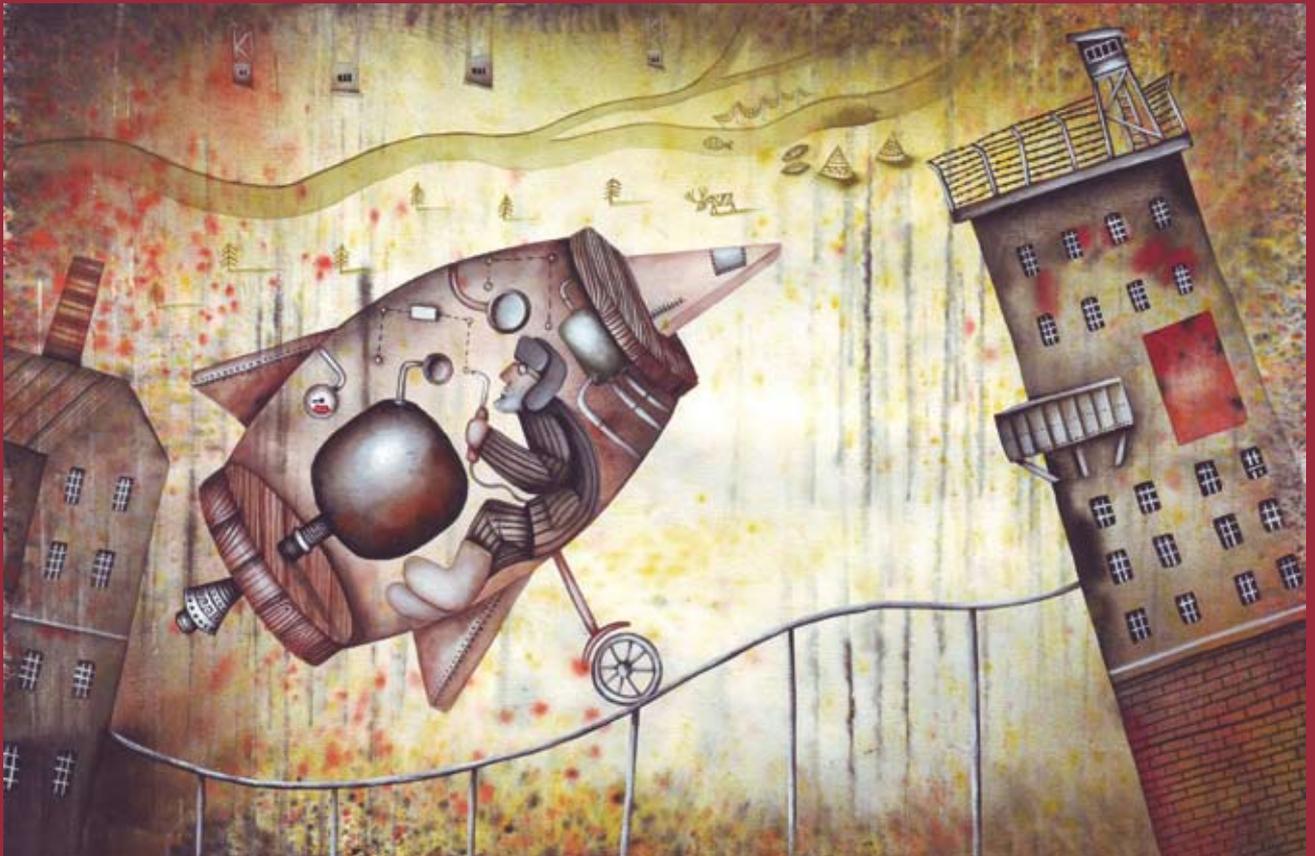


# FACILITATING REENTRY



An ex-offender's return from prison back into society is every bit as challenging and delicate a process as that of an astronaut returning from outer space. Formerly incarcerated persons, or FIPs, must adjust to an atmosphere radically different from the one they left behind, and the strain on their bodies, hearts, and minds is enormous.

Civil society and government must partner to facilitate their reentry. In this story we bring the political landscape into focus and see how communities are gathering to make the homecoming of our nation's prisoners both a celebration and a lasting success.

# JUSTICE, MERCY, and the LAND OF THE SECOND CHANCE

BY LINDA MILLS

**IN THE SPRING OF 2008**, in the midst of a blistering campaign season, a remarkable thing happened. The issue of how we treat our nation's prisoners as they reenter society brought together members of Congress representing vastly different views and constituencies. They joined President George W. Bush at the White House to see him sign a bill they had sponsored to smooth the path of prisoners returning to their home communities.

Looking over the president's shoulder as he signed was the bill's chief sponsor, Rep. Danny Davis from Chicago, along with cosponsors from the House and Senate, Republicans and Democrats, liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

Standing before the officials were leaders of some of the 225 organizations that had been working together for the previous four years to pass the bill, organizations that included the NAACP, the Family Research Council, Sojourners/Call for Renewal, American Values (Gary Bauer), the Children's Defense Fund, and the American Conservative Union.

The legislators on hand for the signing rarely agree on anything. The endorsing organizations are at sharp odds with one another on scores of issues. Yet this bill, the Second Chance Act, brought them together.

This is the story of how this remarkable bill came to pass and also of how its passage signals the kind of sound public policy that can be developed when partisanship and point-scoring are set aside.

But first we must look at the dissonant political landscape that preceded—and, sadly, survived—this extraordinary comity. By the fall of 2007, the presidential primary campaigns had been lobbying attacks and counterattacks for over a year. The pundit class—acting as surrogates for the candidates, the political parties, or both—ramped up the volume with smears, innuendos, and their own brands of vitriol.

The mood in Congress was no less acrimonious. The Democrats controlled both chambers for the first time since

1995, and the Republicans were desperate to secure their majority again in November 2008. The Democrats were equally desperate to maintain their control. Issues of consequence and inconsequence were weighed and argued in terms of the impact their positions would have on '08.

## CHOOSING AMONG "THE LEAST"

Matthew 25 lays out six injunctions for caring for "the least of these": feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, house the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the prisoner. The injunctions themselves are not contentious. What fans the flames is the debate over whether the government has any legitimate role to play in responding to these injunctions.

Agreement has never existed across the political divides about the role of government in addressing hunger and thirst. Food Stamps and, to a lesser extent, the Women's, Infants and Children's (WIC) nutrition program have always been controversial.

In the same vein, the government's role in welcoming the stranger—the immigrant—has always been contentious. Likewise, the provision of housing. From public and subsidized housing to homelessness assistance, government is regarded by some as spending too much money and working outside its natural boundaries, while others argue the government is not doing enough.

While virtually all government programs to care for the "least of us" have sparked opposition and even outrage, the Matthew 25 injunction to care for the sick has sparked the most rancorous and protracted debates about the government's appropriate role. In 2007 the reauthorization for the State Children's Health Insurance Program sparked charges of a "hugetastic" entitlement explosion and socialism on the one side and shameful heartlessness for not supporting it on the other. And seldom have we witnessed such vitriol, stridency, and hysteria as was exhibited in the months before the recent

healthcare bill was passed. No hyperbole or invective was too strong to hurl in the name of stopping the bill—or in the name of passing it.

## THE SECOND CHANCE ACT

But one day in October 2007, the House was civil. No outbursts. No thundering charges of treason. Rancor was replaced by comity on the House floor during the debate on the Second Chance Act. With the exception of a small minority of members, who voiced only tepid opposition, they were united around the issue of returning prisoners and how the federal government could help in smoothing their transition from prison to their communities.

The legislation, first introduced in 2004, was designed to encourage and fund collaborative strategies at the state and local levels to provide a continuum of services and supports for people from the point of entering prison to the point of successful reintegration into the community.

The services and supports are intended to include everything on the Matthew 25 list and more—from food to clothing, from housing to healthcare (including drug treatment and mental healthcare) to mentoring both in prison and in the community. All at government expense.

The legions of volunteers from the faith community who had been visiting prisoners for centuries would be enlisted to help, and now they could even apply for mentoring grants. But despite this being what could be called “another big government program,” it was not debated in those terms. There were no allegations of socialism, liberalism, communism, or any of the other words so often used to describe programs that provide food, housing, or healthcare.

Instead, the bill evoked comments like this from Rep. Chris Cannon of Utah, rising on the side of the aisle most closely associated with opposition to government programs and historically associated with “tough-on-crime” laws:

It is part of our Judeo-Christian ethics that we have a responsibility to care for widows, orphans, and those less fortunate, including, always and explicitly, prisoners.

The issues addressed in the Second Chance Act are not only safety and cost savings but reflect a moral imperative. This bill will give those released from prison a better chance to improve their circumstances by turning away from crime and turning into productive contributing citizens.

## A RAINBOW OF PLAYERS

The backroom discussions over the terms of the bill—taking place from 2004 through 2007—involved a remarkable cast of characters.

With the Republican Party leading the House, the original sponsor of the House bill in 2004 was Congressman Rob Portman, a conservative from Ohio on the House Republican leadership team who went on to be Bush’s Trade Ambassador and then his director of the Office of Management and Budget. In the Senate, it was Senator Sam Brownback, a conservative legislator from Kansas, and later Joe Biden, once the Democrats won the majority in the Senate. The conservative Republicans were joined by liberal Democrats such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton in the Senate, and Charles Rangel of New York City and Chicago’s Danny Davis in the House. Davis went on to be the final bill’s chief

*Continued on page 12.*



George W. Bush



Rob Portman



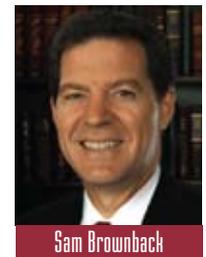
Danny Davis



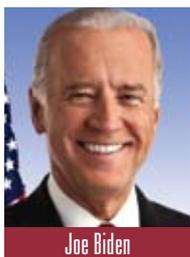
Bobby Scott



Pat Nolan



Sam Brownback



Joe Biden



Chuck Colson



Gene Guerrero



Chris Cannon



Charles Rangel



Barack Obama

# TAKE TWO: THE SECOND CHANCE ACT IN ACTION

BY KRISTYN KOMARNICKI

“I’m a nurse by background,” explains Rev. Carmen Warner-Robbins. “I know the importance of healing from the inside out.”

As a chaplain at Vista Detention Facility in Vista, Calif., Warner-Robbins is intent on helping prisoners do just that. But she was frustrated by the many rules that prevented inmates from successfully reintegrating after their release. For one, volunteers ministering with the inmates were forbidden from contacting the prisoners’ family members and thus from nurturing any meaningful support network for the women upon release. Also, they were not allowed to maintain contact on the outside with anyone they had worked with on the inside, making impossible any continuity of care.

“I went to the sheriff and said, ‘This isn’t going to work!’” recounts Warner-Robbins. Amazingly, Sheriff William Kollender not only agreed, but he also changed the policy. That was the beginning of Welcome Home Ministries, launched in 1996, a reentry program that started working with women inmates while they were still incarcerated, preparing them for their release by coaching them, raising them up as peer leaders, and connecting with their families. Upon release, Welcome Home picks the women up at the door of the prison, helps them find housing and work, and stays connected until they are successfully reintegrated in the community—and sometimes well beyond that time.

For over a decade Welcome Home accomplished this on a wing, a prayer, and a lot of sweat equity. So when the Second Chance Act was signed into law, the ministry was one of the first groups to apply for a mentorship grant and one of the first to be approved. The monies from their two-year (renewable) \$150,000 annual grant came through in February, and by April they were running their first professional training workshop for 30 mentors.

“The Second Chance grant has given us the ability to develop a top-notch peer-driven mentorship training program,” explains Warner-Robbins. The grant allows for recruiting community members, quarterly training sessions for the mentors, and a mileage stipend so mentors can be

reimbursed for picking the women up, taking them to job interviews, shopping, etc. The ministry hired one of the women who came out of the prison leadership program to a full-time position coordinating the training program, two more peers on a part-time basis, and an outside consultant with expertise in training and PR who helped the peers put the program together.

The rest of the money goes to supplies, equipment, celebrations to mark milestones along the women’s reentry road, and, significantly, a high-level data collection program. “If you’re going to measure the success of your ministry, you need a data program that collects solid, uniform data,” says Warner-Robbins.

In May, representatives from the first 36 groups to receive funding gathered in DC for additional training and networking provided by Second Chance. Warner-Robbins, who calls herself the ministry’s “vision-bearer” (the peers call her “Mama,” but her official title is CEO), was there, soaking it all up and sharing with others her passion for peer-driven, faith-based reentry programs. She’s convinced that these are the ones that make real change possible, and thus our greatest hope for the future of justice in this country.

Welcome Home is based in San Diego County, with satellite programs in Northern California, Oregon, and Costa Rica, with others currently starting up in Los Angeles, Dallas, and Minneapolis. Learn more at [WelcomeHomeInt.org](http://WelcomeHomeInt.org).

*Kristyn Komarnicki is the editor of PRISM magazine.*



*Starting over after prison: Brianna C, left, celebrates her first day on the job as an EMT, pictured here with Welcome Home peer support Coleen F.*

*Justice, Mercy, and the Land of the Second Chance*  
continued from page 10

sponsor after the Democrats took control of the House.

More remarkable were the people who regularly assembled to hammer out the details.

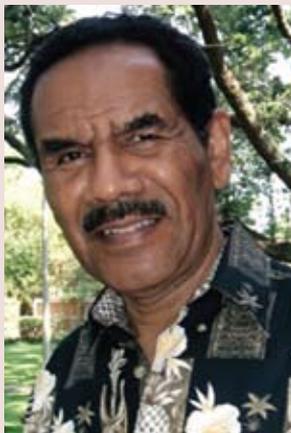
No one was more scorned and reviled by the Republicans during the 2004 election than George Soros, who put over

\$23 million of his money— not counting his campaign contributions—into 527 groups (such as MoveOn.org) to elect Democrats. Soros' Open Society Policy Center, under the guidance of Gene Guerro, a senior policy analyst for criminal justice and civil liberties at the Center, organized the working group that brought the diverse parties to the table.

Chuck Colson had been equally reviled by Democrats. He had served as Special Counsel to Richard Nixon and was incarcerated for Watergate-related charges. After being released,

## WILBERT RIDEAU: RETURNING PRISONERS NEED SOMEONE WHO CARES

INTERVIEW BY KRISTYN KOMARNICKI



After killing a woman in a botched bank robbery at the age of 19, Wilbert Rideau was sentenced to death (later amended to life) in the infamous Angola penitentiary in Louisiana. He spent 44 years there, becoming editor of the prisoner-produced newsmagazine *The Angolite* and the first prisoner in American penal history to win freedom from censorship. He went on to win many of the nation's highest

journalism awards. Rideau eventually won a new trial because of the systematic exclusion of blacks from the grand jury that indicted him in 1961. In 2005, a racially mixed jury convicted him of manslaughter, a crime for which he had already served 23 years more than the maximum sentence. He was released immediately.

His book *In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance*, just out from Knopf, is both personal memoir and unblinking exposé of the failures of the US legal system.

**PRISM:** You've written about your life from both sides of the bars. The final chapter of your book, which describes your new life out of prison, is called "Heaven." Your story may not be typical, but as someone who spent so many years behind bars, what do you think makes for successful reentry?

**Wilbert Rideau:** I was an extremely fortunate man to have a ready-made support system to help me when I was released from prison—the woman who is now my wife, Linda. I had no money, was not eligible for any social benefits programs, was unemployable because of my high profile despite my award-winning journalism, and lacked many of the basic skills needed to function as a free citizen in modern society. I couldn't perform the simple math necessary to make intelligent choices in the grocery store; I couldn't drive; I couldn't figure out how to coordinate my new clothing, as all I had worn for decades was denim and blue chambray shirts. Obviously I didn't know anything about the internet or email. Linda has been my teacher, my safety net, my crutch, and my best friend, in addition to making me feel accepted, valued, and loved.

**PRISM:** What would you like to see churches and communities do to welcome and assist returning men and women?

**WR:** In too many instances, ex-offenders are released into society with no job, no place to go, a token amount of money, and no assistance or guidance. In Louisiana, those released get a bus ticket and \$10. The biggest help anyone coming out of prison can have is a safe place to stay, food, transportation, and someone who cares about them and is patient with them.

Being in prison is a debilitating experience, especially for anyone who has spent a long time there. Prison has its own culture and its own rules; to survive, you conform your behav-

he founded Prison Fellowship Ministries, whose policy advocacy arm, Justice Fellowship, was instrumental in bringing Christians in Congress aboard as sponsors to the Second Chance bill and in getting it passed.

Yet Soros' nonprofit Open Society Institute staff sat down with Prison Fellowship's conservatives and congressional Republicans and their staff to help move the bill—even as those shrill campaign battles raged offstage.

It is similar to what Thabo Mbeki observed when

Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk sat down to negotiate the end of apartheid in South Africa. He saw the two men look at one another and the others in the room, and it suddenly became clear that “none in the room had horns. And try as hard as you did to see, none of them was sitting uncomfortably... on a tail.”<sup>11</sup>

The SCA's organizational endorsers reflect the same breathtaking range of support across ideological lines as its congressional sponsors. Rightwing stalwarts such as the

ior to that culture. Most men and women who go to prison were somewhat outsiders to the mainstream American culture before they were incarcerated, but their experience in prison magnifies the sense of not being part of society. In prison, you lose skills you don't use; you lose the ability to make normal social conversation. Whatever tact or sensitivity you may have once possessed has likely been replaced by the bluntness that prevails in prisons. You're socially awkward.

Churches and communities can play a very important role by establishing programs to help those returning to society in ways large and small. Assistance finding housing and employment are the big things; and ex-cons should always be encouraged to take any job they can get that will count toward their social security “quarters,” especially if they have been in prison for a long time. Personally, I believe that ex-offenders should not return to the environment they were in before they went to prison, as it is too easy for them to slip back into old ways and bad habits—especially if making a new life gets too tough for them—so I would recommend efforts to “relocate” ex-cons.

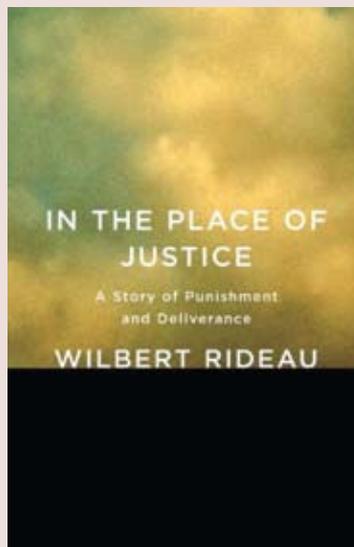
Other ways churches and the community could help would be to tutor ex-cons, not only in literacy, if they need it, but in life skills. Be aware that the ex-offender returning to society may need to learn simple manners in order to conduct him- or herself appropriately in a job interview. Take them shopping—even at a thrift store—to help them understand how to dress tastefully and how to coordinate clothing. Take them to a library and show them how to use the computers there, which can help them search for jobs and learn just about anything. One of the most important things that ex-offenders need is someone to listen to them, to really hear what their problems are, and to try to help them find

solutions. Attentive, compassionate listening is something that all people need, but ex-offenders especially need to know that someone “out here” really cares about them.

**PRISM:** Your work as a journalist at Angola was clearly a lifeline for you and provided a bridge for you to the outside world. What can churches and communities start doing while prisoners are still on the inside that would help build a bridge to successful life on the outside?

**WR:** Visit them. Write to them. Be a “dose of normality” in their abnormal life. Talk to them about ordinary, everyday life—not just about religion. Listen to their hopes and fears about returning to society. Their hopes may be pie-in-the-sky unrealistic—prisoners tend to think life on the outside is a bowl of cherries—and while you don't want to throw cold water on their dreams, they need to be aware that they will face challenging times when they get out. To the extent possible, start addressing some of the deficiencies they have. If the prison allows it, establish a program where inmates can role-play in practice for going on a job interview or applying for an apartment. Let them role-play making conversation about something other than their incarceration with a stranger. Listen carefully to them, but also teach them how to be active listeners, which is a skill that will serve them well the rest of their life. Most prisoners have been trying for so long to get someone to listen to them that they have not developed the art of listening to others. Ask them to keep a journal of their ideas, hopes, questions, and fears about reentry, and discuss those entries with them.

*Kristyn Komarnicki is the editor of PRISM magazine.*



Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, and the American Center for Law and Justice (which defends school prayer and Ten Commandments monuments, among other things) endorsed the bill along with leftwing stalwarts such as the Children's Defense Fund, the National Council of La Raza, and the National Urban League. When it comes to helping prisoners, parties who have long demonized one another become aware of an absence of horns and tails.

Supported by 92 cosponsors, the bill passed the House

by a vote of 347-62. The following spring, the Senate passed the bill by unanimous consent.

Given the mudslinging in the capital and on the airwaves in the spring of 2008, the bonhomie at the signing ceremony was breathtaking. After thanking the members of Congress and his administration who had worked on the bill, President Bush explained the underlying principles that brought these otherwise fractious parties together. He said that each human being matters. That redemption is possible. That everyone

## JOSEPH WILLIAMS: MAKING SURE FIPs DON'T FLOP

INTERVIEW BY KIM FIELD



Joseph Williams is the founder of the Christian Association for Prison Aftercare (CAPA), which annually hosts the nation's largest faith-based prisoner reentry conference. He is also the founder and CEO of New Creations Community Outreach, based in Detroit, Mich., an international ministry model for serving prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. In 2006, Williams was elected to Ashoka, a global association of

social entrepreneurs with system-changing solutions for the world's most urgent social problems. Williams' book, *Sheep in Wolves' Clothing*, describes how he went from drug addict and petty criminal to highly regarded reentry expert—a powerful story of redemption and transformation that fuels his ministry to other former prisoners.

New Creations' TOP (Transition of Prisoners) program

fosters human connections and forms positive social networks for each person in transition from prison. Mentorship, training, and social institutions such as churches replace antisocial support systems in the life of an offender by providing a sense of belonging that is critical to engaged citizenship.

**PRISM:** Why are FIPs (formerly incarcerated persons) and caring for FIPs so important?

**Joseph Williams:** Most FIPs are poor, young, inner-city African American men—there are around 2.3 million in the US today. That's devastating to urban communities and black families. So it's important for the rebuilding of lives, families, and communities that they be restored as contributing members to society.

**PRISM:** What do faith-based initiatives offer that state programs can't?

**JW:** When a person is released by the state the relationship is one of monitoring via parole, etc. But a corrections mentality doesn't work in reentry because successful reentry requires a philosophical shift. Corrections officers are indoctrinated to have adversarial relationships with prisoners, but at the point of release and reentry these people are no longer prisoners; they've paid their so-called "debt to society."

So the state is unable to provide social integration and spiritual guidance to returning prisoners, but faith-based organizations can—and at a very high level. They provide opportunities for networking; they promote positive values; they offer a presence. People coming out of prison institutions often go back to communities where there are churches, but the churches need resources. That's where we help out.

**PRISM:** How long does successful reentry generally take?

**JW:** About two years—at least at that point it is measurable. The first six to eight months are the toughest.

**PRISM:** What kinds of legal changes do you think would

deserves a second chance. (See Bush's comments in sidebar on page 18.)

Bush had been sounding this theme since his 2004 State of the Union, when he first spoke of second chances. It was the first time in anyone's memory that a president had spoken of the challenges facing people coming home from prison.

The *New York Times* wrote of this speech in a 2006 piece called "The Right Has a Jailhouse Conversion" saying, "Despite his strong support for capital punishment, President Bush

may be the most pro-prisoner president in American history—at least if you disregard the war on terror (an admittedly enormous caveat). Certainly in terms of rhetoric, Bush has done more to advance the interests of prisoners than either Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton."

The *Times* acknowledged that the policies Bush was pressing in his speech, which would soon be reflected in the Second Chance legislation, "won't be an elixir. But as a symbolic political gesture, the SCA completely reverses recent

facilitate reentry?

**JW:** I would like to see a law passed that prohibits employers from categorically denying employment based on a person having a felony conviction. They should only be able to ask questions such as conviction for certain kinds of crimes that may pose a real liability to an employer. For instance, if a person is convicted for distributing drugs, it is reasonable for an employer to have concerns about hiring that person as a pharmacist.

Things like collateral sanctions, mandatory minimum sentences, and waiving children's rights as juveniles also make reentry difficult. Collateral sanctions deny returning citizens access to certain jobs. For instance, in some states a person with a felony conviction cannot work as a barber. In many states felons cannot vote. Felons are routinely denied access to public housing and federal tuition assistance, to name just a few.

Mandatory minimum sentences and waiving juveniles' rights mean that many people are convicted in adult court at younger ages and serve longer sentences than they would have in the past. It is not unusual for a young man or woman to enter prison at age 15 and spend over 20 years in prison. This presents unique challenges. They probably have never been a part of the workforce. They are vastly out of touch with today's technology and the demands of the current workforce. Their family ties are often significantly weakened.

And then there are the drug laws. Drug laws that mandate a certain minimum sentence for a particular amount of drugs should be repealed. In these instances, judges do not have the discretion to give lighter sentences even when they want to based on the circumstances surrounding the case. There should be no distinction in the mandatory sentences between those arrested for crack cocaine (typically black and poor) and those arrested for powder cocaine (typically more affluent). Once a person has proven that he has truly become a productive member of society and has desisted from crime for a significant length of time, his entire criminal record should be expunged. Otherwise, there is no paying the so-called "debt to society."

**PRISM:** Obviously it would be better to keep someone from ever going to prison than to try to reintegrate him afterwards. What kind of preventative measures would make a difference?

**JW:** The decline in quality education leads to an increase in crime and imprisonment, so improving education is important. And employment opportunities are essential. Unemployed people lack the benefits, both material and psychological, offered by the dignity of work. When jobs are scarce, underground employment flourishes. People have to work.

**PRISM:** What are your goals for the future regarding FIPs and reentry?

**JW:** At a macro level we would like to take all we've learned and teach others how to work with the FIP population, so we're positioning ourselves to provide technical training and resources. On a micro level we would like to fill in the gaps in the system by providing social support, spiritual guidance, and resources to FIPs.

**PRISM:** What suggestions do you have for a congregation that wants to become a support network for FIPs?

**JW:** I am delighted that the Annie E. Casey Foundation has committed resources to the development of the Healing Communities model (see page 17). The Healing Communities model encourages and teaches congregations not to look at ministry to those in prison and their family members as a separate ministry. If the prisoner reentry movement is to be successful, it is critical for churches to seriously address the issue of criminal justice ministry.

(To learn more about Joseph Williams' work or to contact him, go to [NCCOinc.org](http://NCCOinc.org), [CAPAassociation.org](http://CAPAassociation.org), and [SheepStreet.net](http://SheepStreet.net).)

*Kim Field earned her MA in political science at Howard University and is currently earning her MTS at Palmer Theological Seminary, with a concentration in theology and public policy, and her PhD in public policy at University of Pennsylvania.*

practice. For the first time in decades, Congress is poised to pass a bill that aims to make the lives of prisoners and ex-prisoners easier, not more difficult.”

## EVOLVING VIEWS ON JUSTICE

The policy reversal reflected in the bill reflects what seems at first glance to be an astonishing political sea change. Pollsters and pundits chalk up much of the change in mood, rhetoric, and policy to shifts in public opinion. In the 1960s our cities saw riots in the streets, and politicians made much of their “law-and-order” campaigns. By the ’80s the increasing crime rates had the public citing “fear of crime” as among their most important issues for government to address.

In 1988, the George H.W. Bush campaign made the most of an ad created by the National Security Political Action Committee that depicted Bush’s opponent, Governor Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime. The ad highlighted the case of Willie Horton, a man convicted of first degree murder who was allowed, on Dukakis’ watch, to take weekend passes from prison. Horton committed rape and murder while on furlough. That ad was successful because it reflected the fearful public sentiment. On the trail, Bush brought up the Horton case frequently.

Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America, proposed in 2004, when the Republicans took control of Congress for the first time since 1954, mirrored the public’s sentiment. Its second clause was the Taking Back Our Streets Act, which was an anti-crime set of bills that would strengthen “truth in sentencing”—laws that effectively remove incentives for rehabilitation by reducing the possibility of early release—and fund more prison construction, among other things.

By the late ’90s, the crime rate was plummeting and public opinion was shifting dramatically.

A poll by Peter D. Hart Research Associates in 2002 was one of the first hints of the shift. It found that Americans believed we should be addressing the underlying causes of crime rather than the symptoms of crime; that prevention should be the top priority for fighting crime, far ahead of punishment or enforcement; and that the wisdom of harsh prison sentences as the centerpiece of the nation’s crime strategy should be reconsidered, especially for nonviolent offenders.

Some thought this poll was an outlier, but Zogby polling in 2006 and 2009 replicated these findings. Consequently, in neither the 2004 or 2008 presidential election cycles did any candidates have anti-crime platforms. The public was no longer naming crime among its top 10 issues.

This then opened the door to politicians looking at solutions to slowing prison growth, reducing recidivism, and providing former prisoners another chance.

A second impetus behind the shift is that people were

increasingly realizing that what we have been doing simply does not work. With the prison population growing eight-fold over the last 40 years and costs going up at nearly the same rate, and with recidivism becoming an ever-increasing problem, activists and policymakers of all persuasions are saying that there is something just plain wrong with the nation’s criminal justice policies.

Recessionary pressures on state budgets have heightened the interest in reexamining policies adopted over the previous generations and in doing things differently. Lawmakers are saying they can no longer afford to keep building new prisons—prisons that are needed largely to house those people who cycle in and out over the years because nothing was done during their first (or subsequent) term to rehabilitate them.

The SCA gives states and municipalities the opportunity to develop five-year strategic plans to reduce recidivism and thus slow prison growth. Many states and localities had already been deeply involved in this work. The successful plans are profoundly collaborative, bringing together not just government actors, but faith and community-based providers and mentors as well as the business community.

In Florida, Michigan, Connecticut, and Oregon, business is leading reform efforts. Standing up to the “law-and-order” stalwarts, they are arguing that enacting tough-sounding laws that do not reduce crime but mandate longer sentences is a costly and failing strategy.

## THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANS

And the third force behind the political shift to help prisoners? Faith was brought into the conversation.

Christians have been engaged in prison ministries for centuries, but their voices did not play a significant role in the policy debate about sentencing, corrections, or reentry for many years. This began to change over the last decade.

As Christians have followed their faith into politics in many other spheres, faith has led them to provide a different lens to the conversation about crime and punishment.

Mark Earley, the former attorney general of Virginia, is a good example. Like many other Republicans, he was influenced by Chuck Colson, who asked him to take over Prison Fellowship when Earley lost his race for governor. Earley’s initial reaction was, as he explained to the *New York Times* in 2006, that this would be “tantamount to throwing his life ‘down a dark hole.’” But he reconsidered. “Over the next few months, Earley read his Bible and was struck by the number of criminals who play starring roles: Moses, for example, murdered a man and became a fugitive. Paul presided over the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Earley came to a realization: ‘If Moses or Paul had lived in Virginia or any

*Continued on page 19.*

# CREATING A HEALING COMMUNITY

BY LINDA MILLS

As members of Congress deliberated the Second Chance Act, people in local communities were impatient for help. Hundreds of thousands of people were returning from prison each year, and some neighborhoods were receiving a wildly disproportionate share of them.

Programs, even successful ones that had inspired the Second Chance legislation, were too few, underfunded, and not being replicated to any great extent by the federal government, states, localities, or the philanthropic community.

In response to this challenge, the Annie E. Casey Foundation considered tapping the rich resources of the faith community to help fill the tremendous gap between the needs of returning citizens and the scant resources available. The faith community was already engaged in prison and reentry ministries, but it also possessed formal and informal networks of support that are critical to successful reintegration.

The initial Casey vision, which was focused only on reentry, was quickly transformed by a true story—about a pastor and his congregation, a killer and his family, and the victim’s family—that gained attention when Chicago public television station WBEZ produced the documentary *A Justice That Heals*.

In 1996, when Father Robert Oldershaw of Evanston, Ill., heard that a teenage boy in his community had been shot and killed, he silently wished that the killer would be locked up forever. But a couple of days later, when he learned that the accused was Mario Ramos, a former altar boy from his church, Oldershaw knew he had to act.

First he went to see Mario’s parents, then to see Mario, who was being held in the Cook County jail. He prayed with them and offered his support, but he wasn’t sure what else was needed or what he could do to help.

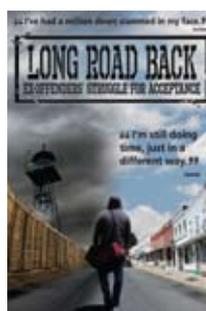
“So I just punted,” Oldershaw told Studs Terkel, who interviewed him for the book *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Difficult Times* (New Press, 2003). “I went to the community, to the church, to the people at Sunday services, and I said, ‘Our boy, one of our kids, shot and killed another boy in the neighborhood. Mario Ramos has killed Andrew Young.’ I said, ‘I want to ask you all to pray for Mario and his family, for

Andrew Young and his family.’ So the people did. I preached on it the very Sunday after the shooting.”

He kept preaching on the topic, and he included Mario and his family in the church bulletin’s weekly prayer list, a section traditionally reserved for the sick. Members of the congregation began to reach out to Mario’s parents, who were stricken with shame over their son’s crime. Eventually, they were brought back into the fold of St. Nicholas Catholic Church, the church that they had avoided since the killing.

Then Oldershaw was introduced by a member of the congregation to Steve and Maurine Young, the parents of the victim. Mrs. Young’s personal path to healing led to her writing a letter of forgiveness to Mario (“I don’t know whether you would ever feel up to asking for my forgiveness for killing my son. So I’ll go first. I forgive you.”); that same day, Mario penned a letter of contrition to her. The letters crossed in the mail. Later, when Mrs. Young visited Mario, she told him how hard things were since her son’s death. “You caused this mess,” she told Mario, “and now you have a responsibility to hold us up in prayer. You’re part of this family, whether you wanted to be or not. OK? You’re like my own son.”

Mr. Young dealt with his pain by becoming a youth violence activist and by joining Oldershaw’s church. Seeing the victim’s parents worship side by side with the killer’s parents was a portrait of reconciliation no one could have dreamed of. The congregation had created a healing community—a sanctuary



**Long Road Back: Ex-offenders Struggle for Acceptance** (Vision Video, 2009) documents the agonizing difficulties facing Americans who come out of prison, regardless of their background, education, or support structures. Follow Jamie, a young woman who went into prison at 19 and came out at 30, as

she job hunts, struggles to sustain relationships, and reflects on how much easier life was on the inside. Meet Klaus, a former city government official and businessman who, in spite of his employment experience and postsecondary degrees, struggles to find a job and acceptance on the outside. Hear from the folks working on the front lines of reentry discuss the obstacles returning citizens encounter and how churches, nonprofits, and communities can lend a hand. Learn more and download the discussion guide at [bit.ly/cZzRMb](http://bit.ly/cZzRMb).

that opened doors to acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption. The Casey Foundation seized upon the many steps to healing taken by the pastor, the two families, and the congregation, which became the basis of a new model for congregational ministry: Healing Communities.

The original idea of just addressing prisoner reentry thus expanded to embrace a ministry to all parties affected by crime and the criminal justice system—perpetrators, victims, and their families—from the point of arrest through incarceration to reentry. At the same time, the original vision contracted. Instead of churches reaching out to the community at large, the Healing Communities model starts at home, in the very congregation of the individuals and families affected by crime.

The foundation developed a guide for congregations and made it available in a variety of denominational versions (these can be downloaded from the Casey website at [bit.ly/bGOOj1](http://bit.ly/bGOOj1)). One of the editors of the Progressive National Baptist Convention version of the guide was Rev. Deedee Coleman, who was already operating a reentry program called Wings of Faith ([WingsofFaithDetroit.org](http://WingsofFaithDetroit.org)) out of her Russell Street

Baptist Church in Detroit. While many churches were involved with prisoners or reentry in one form or another, Coleman recognized that this was a transformational endeavor, and not a program or a project.

The goal was to change the hearts and minds of the congregation and to create, as Coleman called them, “Stations of Hope.” Coleman regularly preaches on the role of the church toward prisoners, and she has persuaded state and local government officials to stop using the stigmatizing term “ex-offenders” and instead speak of “returning citizens,” a new moniker that is now spreading across the country.

Coleman’s church helps mothers prepare for the return of their sons from prison, helps former prisoners find jobs, and provides numerous other kinds of supports to defendants, prisoners, victims, and their families. It is currently helping a mother prepare for the death and funeral of her son who is dying of cancer in prison. But more than anything, Coleman’s Station of Hope is a beacon of light that says, “You are welcome here. We will love and support you. This is your home.”

*Continued on page 39.*

## PRESIDENT BUSH'S REMARKS ON SIGNING THE SECOND CHANCE ACT (APRIL 9, 2008)

The country was built on the belief that each human being has limitless potential and worth. Everybody matters. We believe that even those who have struggled with a dark past can find brighter days ahead. One way we act on that belief is by helping former prisoners who’ve paid for their crimes—we help them build new lives as productive members of our society.

The work of redemption reflects our values. It also reflects our national interests. ... An estimated two-thirds of [prisoners who are released] are rearrested within



three years. The high recidivism rate places a huge financial burden on taxpayers, it deprives our labor force of productive workers, and it deprives families of their daughters and sons, and husbands and wives, and moms and dads.

Our government has a responsibility to help prisoners to return as contributing members of their community. But this does not mean that the government has all the answers. Some of the most important work to help ex-convicts is done outside of Washington, DC, in faith-based communities and community-based groups. It’s done on streets and small town community centers. It’s done in churches and synagogues and temples and mosques.

I like to call the folks who are engaged in this compassionate work “members of the armies of compassion.” They help addicts and users break the chains of addiction. They help former prisoners find a ride to work and a meal to eat and place to stay. These men and women are answering the call to love their neighbors as they’d like to be loved themselves. And in the process, they’re helping prisoners replace anger and suffering and despair with faith and hope and love.

[The Second Chance Act] will build on work to help prisoners reclaim their lives. In other words, it basically says: We’re standing with you, not against you.

*Justice, Mercy, and the Land of the Second Chance*  
continued from page 16.

state in the United States today, they would be serving, had they been caught, a multiple-decade prison sentence.' He took the job."<sup>2</sup>

Chuck Colson also got to Pat Nolan, who, like him, had done prison time. He had been the Republican leader of the California Assembly when he was indicted on a federal bribery sting related to campaign contributions. Now the head of Justice Fellowship, he is on the stump, state by state and before Congress, arguing for prison reform. Last fall, he spoke before a Florida justice summit and expressed the same kind of regret as Earley. "One of the mistakes I made as a legislator," he said, "was that I thought we could put them in prison and forget about them. But I forgot that 95 percent come back. What kind of neighbors will they be?"<sup>3</sup> A Catholic, Nolan was told by a friend upon being convicted that prisons are the monasteries of the 20th century. His faith was reinvigorated, and today there are few who see the face of God in the faces of prisoners as Nolan does.

Faith has prompted hundreds of less visible people to foray into justice reform. Henree Martin is a Tallahassee real estate developer who has been ministering to prisoners for 30 years and who was tapped by Jeb Bush in 2005 to serve on his ex-offender task force. Martin was joined in her efforts by another former Republican official who has done prison time, also appointed to Governor Bush's task force: Vicki Lopez Lukis. Lukis was convicted for lying to a newspaper reporter about having an affair while serving as a county commissioner—and putting the lie in an envelope, making it mail fraud. After President Clinton commuted her prison sentence in 2000, Lukis emerged as a full-time warrior for juvenile and adult criminal justice reform. In her view, public safety is simply not protected by long prison sentences with no efforts made at rehabilitation. Like some of the others mentioned here, Lukis' work is prompted by her personal prison experience and grounded in her faith.

The Progressive National Baptist Convention has made prisoner reentry and prison ministries a central part of its mission and was central to creating Healing Communities, a new model for ministering to families affected by crime and incarceration (see "Creating a Healing Community" on page 17). The American Baptist Convention has followed suit.

Former prisoners, many of them Christians, are in leadership roles throughout the country in advancing new policies and new ways of thinking about the criminal justice systems (see "Joe Williams" on page 14).

Increasingly, Christians are casting America's approach to

imprisonment in moral terms. Senator Jim Webb of Virginia has introduced a bill in Congress that calls for a commission to examine the criminal justice policies and practices of the federal government and all 50 states. In introducing this bill, he said, "We have 5 percent of the world's population; yet we have 25 percent of the world's known prison population. We have an incarceration rate in the United States, the world's greatest democracy, that is five times as high as the average incarceration rate of the rest of the world. There are only two possibilities here: Either we have the most evil people on earth living in the United States; or we are doing something dramatically wrong in terms of how we approach the issue of criminal justice."<sup>4</sup>

Chris Cannon, the SCA's Republican leader in the House, is critical of his colleagues who aren't yet part of the sea change. "Republicans," he told the *New York Times*, "have taken a pretty harsh position, just locking people up . . . Our current system is fundamentally immoral . . . I think society has a huge obligation to prisoners. I think that obligation transcends our current view, which is: Lock them up, hide them away, keep my daughter safe, keep my house safe; if he or she burgles, I want that person gone. Out of sight, out of mind. Away. I think that violates the fundamental concepts of who we are as Americans."<sup>5</sup>

Cannon, like others, does not see the reforms undertaken thus far or the SCA as the ultimate solution. "Nobody thinks this is a bill that solves our moral dilemma," he told the *Times*. "Maybe I should say moral crisis. But it is a first step, an agreeable first step, and it allows us to take a look at where we ought to think about ending up."<sup>6</sup>

Rep. Danny Davis presented his case for the bill in myriad practical terms, but also in terms that reflect these core values. "These men and women deserve a second chance," he says. "Their families, spouses, and children deserve a second chance, and their communities deserve a second chance. A second chance means an opportunity to turn a life around. A chance to break the grip of a drug habit. A chance to support a family, to pay taxes, to be self-sufficient."<sup>6</sup>

By casting the issue of how we treat the prisoner in moral terms, Christians have made a tremendous difference in the policy debates in Congress, statehouses, and city halls. They have joined forces with liberals, with fiscal conservatives, with economists and criminologists studying evidence-based practices, with judges sick of seeing the same people come before them time after time and with prosecutors sick of trying them year after year.

Their voices bring a tone to the criminal justice debate that has not been heard before. People in prison, they are saying, have value. They can be redeemed. This is in sharp contrast to the demonized view of prisoners that had been

cultivated and exploited for political gain for so many years, and it is shaping both policy and practice.

Because of the voice of the Christian community, the SCA provides for mentoring grants to nonprofits, which includes churches. Drawing on the experiences and successes of mentoring programs across the country, the Act's authors require the grantees' mentoring relationships to start in prison and continue upon release. This requirement flies in the face of some states' "no contact" policies that say that prisoners cannot have contact upon release with anyone they met while incarcerated. Those who have been mentoring for decades know better—a relationship sustained and nurtured from incarceration through release can make all the difference in successful reintegration. As a consequence, states are now reconsidering their "no contact" policies.

Christian voices are also central to the policy debate about the condition of prisons, about how accountable they should be, how transparent, how safe, and how humane. Evangelicals served on the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons and brought the critical and core message of morality to the discussion. They were also critical to passing the Prison Rape Elimination Act.

## A PERFECT STORM

The public is less fearful and wants more rehabilitation. Policymakers want a system that is less costly and more results-oriented. The faith community is growing more activist on criminal justice issues and wants a more just system that recognizes the promise of redemption. As these forces come together, the political evolution seems more inevitable than astonishing.

Enactment of the SCA reflects the shift in the way the nation is now looking at issues of criminal justice and corrections reform, both of which have increasing numbers of supporters—from governors to state legislatures to the judiciary to faith and community-based activities. And the SCA's range of sponsorship and endorsements closely mirror those tackling these issues in communities, cities, and statehouses across the country.

In Illinois, for example, community members, primarily from a consortium of churches, came together to think about how to make their communities safer. They live in neighborhoods where half the young men have felony records that made it all but impossible to get a job. As a result, these young men tended to stay involved in criminal activity.

The activists, pastors, and lay people wanted to pass legislation that would expunge those records—and give these young men and women with records a second chance. They found a legislative champion—the House representative from their community. For a few years, their bill went nowhere.

Then a House member who was formerly a prosecutor started helping them out. Then a former police chief. Then a former FBI agent. All these were Republicans whose backgrounds were very different from that of the bill's Democratic sponsor. Finally, as the bill came to the House floor, the FBI-agent-turned-legislator rose to speak and said:

When this [bill] initially came to us, I was adamantly opposed to it. There's an old saying, though, that if you can't change your mind, maybe you don't have one...

As a 30-year law enforcement veteran, one thing that I have become completely convinced of, and President Bush recently so eloquently put it: that many, many people who make mistakes as young people get caught up in a cycle of poverty and crime, and can never break that cycle. This [bill] gives them the opportunity to break that cycle. This is good legislation.<sup>7</sup>

The bill passed and was signed into law. The law, like the Second Chance Act, is an incremental step. But later Illinois came to make much more substantial reforms, reforms that states across the country are making as well.

In April of this year, the Pew Center on the States reported that in 2009 the prison population in America declined for the first time since 1972. Twenty-six states reduced the number of people in their prisons.

## JUSTICE AND MERCY

America has always been the refuge of people seeking second chances. Whether fleeing discrimination, abuse, or dictators, or whether they were just idealists, people coming to America have shared the vision of John Winthrop as expressed in his 1630 sermon, preached on a ship of fellow dreamers sailing toward Massachusetts: "We shall be as a city upon a hill," he said. "The eyes of all people are upon us."

He called on his fellow passengers to realize this vision with a simple mandate: "There are two rules whereby we are to walk one towards another—justice and mercy."

But for many years, it seemed that only half his injunction had survived the trip across the Atlantic. The emphasis of our society has not only been short on mercy but also long on a misguided definition of justice.

When we focus, as our nation has until recently, on longer and more frequent prison terms and a growing host of collateral sanctions (such as putting housing, jobs, and public benefits off limits, often for life, to people with criminal records), when we focus on applying punitive rules rather than nurturing restorative relationships, we all pay a terrible price.

*Continued on page 39.*

It wasn't until the nation's prison population passed the 2 million mark (over 7 million when you include those on parole or probation), until we started seeing over 700,000 people coming home unprepared from prison a year, until we noticed that almost a quarter of the US population has a criminal record, and until the voices speaking of redemption began to be heard that Winthrop's other rule began to get some attention: mercy.

Just as Americans recoiled at the sadistic treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib because it was so at odds with our values, many are recoiling over the harsh penalties imposed for drug offenses and myriad other crimes and the ceaseless punishment we inflict on people coming out of prison.

Where, Americans are asking, is the mercy? How can we be a beacon of liberty to the world if we show no mercy, whether it be toward others or toward our own?

Given the bipartisanship that flourished around the SCA, we might also ask: Can we not apply that lesson in cooperation to other issues and in other arenas? How can we be a beacon of liberty to the world if we expend so much political will battling so-called enemies on the other side of the aisle rather than debating constructive solutions to our shared problems, so many of which require measures of both justice and mercy?

Enactment of the Second Chance Act delivered on the promise of justice and mercy, not only to the prisoner but also among the bill's supporters. It was a dramatic change from typical lawmaking. May this be the model for realizing the other injunctions in Matthew 25. ■

*Linda Mills, an attorney in Chicago, has focused on policy reform since*

*1979 through major litigation, lobbying, and reform partnerships with policymakers. She does consulting on criminal justice for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, think tanks, and governments and is the author of the Healing Communities materials.*

(Editor's note: Due to space limitations, the endnotes for this feature have been posted at [ESA-online.org/2010endnotes](http://ESA-online.org/2010endnotes).)

### ***Creating a Healing Community***

*continued from page 18.*

The Healing Communities model has gone viral. Since its launch at Casey-supported test sites in Detroit, Houston, and Richmond, it has now spread to seminaries, denominations, churches, and faith-based organizations across the country. Churches don't need a grant to become a healing community, and all can benefit from the free Healing Communities curriculum.

The Second Chance Act grants are highly competitive. Last year, there were 119 applications from state and local governments, yet there were funds to award grants totaling less than \$8 million for the 15 successful applicants. There were 507 applications for adult mentoring grants, yet only \$10 million was awarded and divided among 36 grantees. But changes in federal law, such as the Second Chance Act, can foster new attitudes along with new programs.

Programs focus on changing outcomes; Healing Communities focuses on transforming hearts and minds. Both are essential to undo the damage wrought by crime and incarceration.

*See Linda Mills bio above.*