

March 12, 2007

Dear Member of Congress:

The American Bar Association joins with a broad range of juvenile and criminal justice, corrections, civil rights, faith-based and community organizations in urging you to cosponsor the bipartisan Second Chance Act of 2007 and seek its passage this year. Its enactment will help former prisoners successfully reenter our communities and thereby reduce recidivism.

The ABA strongly supports efforts to improve correctional policies to increase the chances that prisoners, once released, will be equipped to become productive citizens and not engage in criminal activity. In August 2003, the ABA adopted a set of standards, *Collateral Sanctions and Discretionary Disqualification of Convicted Persons*, which seek to establish a legal framework for dealing with unreasonable discrimination against convicted persons and to limit laws that unfairly disqualify offenders from a multiplicity of benefits and opportunities solely because of their conviction record. In 2004, the ABA House adopted policy that urges jurisdictions to adopt programs and policies to prepare prisoners for release back into the community and to assist prisoners after their release with transitional housing, job placement assistance, and substance abuse avoidance. Last month the ABA House approved a series of recommendations dealing with employment and licensing of offenders and use of and access to criminal record information.

Each year, more than 650,000 people are released from prisons and return to their communities. Of these, almost two-thirds are expected to be rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years. The recidivism rate for the one in six offenders returning from prison who are under the age of 21 is even higher. Many hundreds of thousands more adult and juvenile offenders are released each year from jails.

The high rate of recidivism among those being released is attributable at least in part to a lack of effective transitional programs, either in prisons and jails or in the community. The transition from confinement to "life on the outside" presents particularly great risks and opportunities for young people and society, since juveniles released from confinement still have many "prime crime years" ahead of them.

Prisoners upon release face countless barriers when trying to reenter society. Societal costs are high when they fail. The legal barriers to employment and housing for

convicted persons make reentry difficult under the best of circumstances, and many of those released from prison return to communities where persistent poverty, lack of jobs, limited access to drug or alcohol treatment, and lack of affordable housing are the norm. Our failure to prepare people leaving prison for reentry into the community thus becomes a major contributor to homelessness.

The Second Chance Act is an important next step toward reducing the unacceptably high recidivism rate among people being released from prison and jails. This in turn will not only save the taxpayers money by reducing expenditures on law enforcement and corrections, it will also reduce the other burdens on society imposed by our high rate of incarceration. In helping to transform the lives of many ex-offenders, the Second Chance Act would have a positive impact on the families and communities from which they came and to which they will return. The unquantifiable cost of broken family relationships is often overlooked in calculating the cost of crime, but there is no doubt that children growing up without one or both parents are more likely themselves to get into trouble with the law. By providing a second chance to criminal offenders, the bill will also provide a second chance to their children and families.

We urge you to become a cosponsor of the Second Chance Act and to support moving it forward to enactment early in this legislative session.
Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen J. Mathis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Karen J. Mathis