

Ex-offender advocates believe "sentences" should have beginning and end

BY DENNIS GEISINGER

"I am an ex-offender, but I too, am America," Andre Corbett, an employment support consultant for Easter Seals Minnesota, told the circle of faces around him in the State Capitol rotunda on Wednesday, Feb. 13, using a phrase borrowed from the poet Langston Hughes.

Corbett was one of a dozen ex-criminal-offenders, support professionals and policymakers who spoke to approximately 200 to 300 displaced individuals who had come to the Capitol as part of a "Second Chance Day on the Hill" event organized by community coordinator Guy Gambill; re-entry services coordinator for Goodwill/Easter Seals Minnesota, Rob Hope; and director of juvenile services for local mentoring program, 180 Degrees, Inc., Sarah Walker.



Supporters at the Capitol. One advocate, John Poupart, of the American Indian Policy Center, said if something isn't changed, "half of us are going to be inmates and the other half guards." (Photo by Dennis Geisinger)

"We shall overcome!" a group of children brought by the Minneapolis Urban League sang inside the Capitol doors, setting the emotional, almost revivalist tone of the meeting. The lyrics prompted Dan Cain, president of a recovery and support service for people coming out of correctional facilities, RS Eden, to note in his opening remarks, "This is totally appropriate, because I see this very much as an issue of race."

According to figures provided by Gambill, 3.5 percent of Minnesota's citizens are black, yet they form 35 percent of its prison population; Native Americans make up 1 percent of the state, with over 7 percent incarcerated. Gambill also noted that according to the last survey done by the state's Wilder Research Institute, there has been a 30 percent-plus increase in the number of those without housing (out of Minnesota's 20,000-plus homeless population) who cite criminal records as a barrier to sustainability.

"I can't tell you the number of people who come to us with criminal records who face incredible problems with finding housing and jobs," said Sue Watlov-Phillips, executive director of Elim Transitional Housing, Inc.

Statistics show that in 1998 there were over 221,000 veterans in prison and jail in America and now over 200,000 on the streets, homeless. According to a proposal to help local vets that was prepared in January by the legislative chair of the Minnesota Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Brockton Hunter, "A 2006 study found that fully 25 percent of Minnesota's male homeless population are veterans. More than half of those homeless veterans were deemed to have a 'serious mental illness.' "

"Don't you think that these people who've been in Vietnam—been to Iraq—in the defense of their country—don't you think that they deserve more than a 5 by 8 cell?" asked Gambill. "I know a lot of guys who picked up a heroin habit in Saigon and came back home and got a ten-year sentence for drugs," Gambill said.

A bill introduced in January by Minnesota Senate Assistant Minority Leader Julianne Ortman (R-Chanhassen) would require state courts that try vets for misdemeanor or felony offenses to screen for post traumatic stress disorder. The bill is currently in Judiciary Committee and, if passed, would take effect in August.

A 2003 Wilder report said 28 percent of the state's homeless population had a substance abuse diagnosis (24 percent in the metro region) and 53 percent were mentally ill (45 percent in the metro region).

"I've been diagnosed with a bi-polar disorder and have been in and out of jail 89 times," said Charles Jensen, who is now on the board of directors of mental health advocates, the Barbara Schneider Foundation. "I had advanced university degrees, including a doctorate, and I couldn't get a job at McDonald's because of the promiscuous availability of criminal records," Jensen said.

This easy access to an individual's history in the justice system is pointed out by ex-offender and homeless advocates as one of the primary provisions of state law that needs change.

"So many acts are being criminalized today that good, decent people are receiving criminal sentences and records," said Anoka County attorney Bob Johnson. "With these records following people around for five, ten, 20, 30 years—every sentence is a life sentence, and something should be done about that," Johnson said.

Said State Rep. Michael Paymar, "Minnesota is totally out of whack with most of the country as far as sentences for drug offenses."

"We're using scare tactics and the politics of fear in the interest of public safety to encroach upon the rights of those who have served their time, paid their debt," said John Poupart, executive director of the American Indian Policy Center. "Pretty soon, half of us are going to be inmates and the other half guards," Poupart said.

State Sen. Ortman, who introduced the first bill in the state's history to expunge criminal records, said her bill did not pass without controversy. Ortman is co-sponsor of another bill currently in senate committee that would seal all related records held by a

government agency when a court issues an expungement order. Only recently did state judges order the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension to expunge criminal records when so ordered by state courts.

"Every person in the state has a stake in the expungement process," said Ortman. "When you've served your sentence—when you've earned it—you want forgiveness. We can give that to you," said Ortman, Said advocate Cain, while closing the meeting, "We believe a sentence should have a beginning and an end.