

Hon. Constance A. Howard and Hon. Donne Trotter, co-chairs
Task Force on Employment of Persons with Past Criminal Convictions
Hearing, Roosevelt University, Chicago, 3 May 2008

The League of Women Voters of Illinois appreciates this opportunity to add our voice on behalf of individuals who are released from our state facilities each year. We commend you for passing legislation that awards educational credits to parolees and for continuing to work on the State Employment Act which was vetoed last year.

The recently-enacted Second Chance Act promises a role for Illinois to work in partnership with the federal government to address the multi-needs of individuals who are transitioning to the community—employment services, substance abuse treatment, housing, family programming and mentoring.

Over the past several decades, the League has supported:

- Prevention and treatment programs to ease the burden on the criminal justice system.
- Funding for correctional and vocational programs and such specialized services as programs for female offenders with children, mental health services and substance abuse treatment.
- Pre-release planning and an emphasis on services when individuals are first released from the Illinois Department of Corrections [IDOC].

More recently, The League has:

* Participated in the Governor's Transition Team that offered recommendations to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice [IDJJ].

* Worked with the Safer Foundation and others in support of measures that would enable more individuals with criminal records to gain employment.

Today the League offers four recommendations designed to restore offenders to useful citizenship and reduce recommitments. The first addresses the need for a comprehensive IDJJ aftercare program, one would strengthen educational programming during incarceration and two suggest changes in administrative procedures.

* ISSUE #1. The IDJJ no longer has a range of aftercare [parole] services, with the result that a high percentage of youth will be recommitted either to the juvenile or the adult system. Most lack skills that would enable them to remain trouble free in the community. Yet in most areas of the state, youth continue to be supervised by IDOC parole officers who are not trained to work with juveniles.

RECOMMENDATION #1. Provide resources to enable the IDJJ to create a quality system of aftercare [reentry].

* ISSUE #2. At one time, IDOC educational programming was closely associated with community colleges throughout the state and had access to Pell grants. That is no longer true.

RECOMMENDATION #2. Strengthen educational, vocational and industry programs for individuals incarcerated in the IDOC.

* ISSUE #3. Individuals need identification papers when seeking employment upon release. Personal documents are commonly confiscated during intake procedures and may not be returned. A bill introduced last year [HB 222] passed the House but died in the Senate.

RECOMMENDATION #3. The issue should be followed up.

* ISSUE #4. Federal medical assistance is terminated upon incarceration. Individuals have no access to medications until their reapplications have been approved, usually a lengthy process.

RECOMMENDATION #4. Support SB 2303 which proposes to suspend benefits, which can be promptly reinstated.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Submitted by: Eileen Subak, LWVIL Issues Specialist