

Supporting “Home for Good” and a New Direction for Safety in Minnesota

My name is David Boehnke, I'm an IWOC volunteer organizer, high school teacher, and Northside resident, writing in favor of the “Home for Good” a work release expansion bill which contributes to the health and safety of our families, communities, and state in four essential ways. 1) setting up people to succeed as they leave prison, 2) reducing prison short staffing, 3) ensuring the MRRA is successful, and 4) solving long term prison issues rather than passing the buck.

1. Setting up for reentry success.

- a. A recent legislative report from the DOC noted that 25% of people released from prison last year were homeless. It is insane to spend hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars on one individual and drop them at a shelter with a few hundred dollars. Work release guarantees people housing during their transition. It guarantees housing while they're looking for a job, while working and gaining savings, work experience, and transportation, or continuing their college education. In short, it allows the transition to the community to be one-step-at-a-time rather than throwing people into the deep end. This is common sense, and prevents the desperate, but real, approach of planning a crime for when you get out of prison to get enough resources to get out of the crime business. Not to mention -- I've heard a few places are looking for workers right now?
- b. Work release is also extraordinarily safe, with less than 1 in 500 committing a felony while in the program from 10 years of DOC data. Work release reconnects families, allows people to fund themselves, their loved ones, and pay taxes, or go to college to join a higher income and tax bracket. The fact that this program is also less expensive than prison means that we should long term be able to do something that seems impossible but should actually be our standard goal -- increasing safety while saving money. From just these first points you can see why we need a dramatic expansion of this program.

2. Prison short staffing is a major issue that if unaddressed undermines any possibility for creating safety.

- a. Can you imagine being told you are locked into prison for another 8 hour shift as you are finishing one? We've seen an 11 million dollar rise in overtime since 2018 over what AFSCME then considered unacceptable staffing levels. This destroys staff morale and willingness to care for, much less take leadership in providing transformative opportunities for our incarcerated loved ones, which is how we get to safety.
- b. Worse, staff shortages create lockdowns, programming and treatment freezes, and lack of basics like hot food and showers. Regular prison is barbaric. Prison under lockdown is a rolling mental health crisis, a ticking time bomb for the safety of incarcerated people, staff, and our communities.
- c. Over the last many years by far and away the most effective and cost effective strategy for addressing this ongoing staffing crisis has been safely reducing the prison population. Without it our prisons would have literally imploded during COVID, and is the only truly real solution on the table.
- d. Expanding work release allows the DOC to do so by enlisting people who have demonstrated that they will succeed in the community to do so, providing an incentive for incarcerated people to change and a necessary workload reduction for prison staff and the functioning of our prisons. 75% of the current prison population meets the time served requirement to do so under state law. 20% meet that standard and are assessed as low risk by the MN DOC's risk assessment tool, MNSTARR. We need to be investing in them accessing the work release program, immediately.

3. Alignment with the MRRA is essential. The Commissioner has created a tremendous vision for moving towards safety, but like a gymnastics routine, all the acrobatics in the air mean nothing if you don't stick the landing. Three core problems to the MRRA must be addressed to ensure success, two involve work release:

- a. First, the MRRA must not exclude lifers. That's like trying to improve a high school while alienating all your senior leaders, when your seniors happen to be adults and will be there for 30 years. If we want our prisons to change, we must pass the MRRA with no exceptions, like the previous good time law.

- b. Second, we've mentioned the staffing crisis but not that the Governor's current budget projects a 1200 increase in prison population over the next two years. This is unacceptable. Not to mention that Stillwater and St Cloud are historic and unsustainable prisons housing over 2000 people. If we cannot address staffing -- which means prison population -- the MRRA won't be worth the paper it's printed on because people won't be able to do their plans. We will be talking with all of you this summer, fall, and next winter to generate solutions, but for now expanding work release as much as possible, ideally growing to 45 million a year by 2026 would safely and with existing tools move us in the right direction. In addition, we cannot stomach a 60 million dollar increase in supervision without ensuring that no one is ever again sent to prison on a non-crime. Surely counties can house petty violators with that type of investment, ideally with a 30 day cap to reduce the cost and warehousing that further decreases safety.
- c. Finally, as already discussed, we cannot set people up to succeed in prison if we set them up to fail when leaving them. We've already discussed why dramatically expanding work release is essential to this. Every incarcerated person should know on day 1, as part of their MRRA plan, that if they follow their plan they will be set up not only to get out early but to be able to have a place to stay, to find a job, and be able to pay rent, which means work release should be a standard and often extended part of such plans. I hope you will make an appropriate investment to make this so.

4. Lastly, these next few years is your time, Republicans and Democrats, to solve long standing prison problems.

- a. We've mentioned aging prisons. As important, Minnesota has seen an incredible 400% increase in prison population since 1980. Unthoughtful policy and opportunistic politics have devastated whole communities, billions spent in the name of safety that has in fact undermined families and contributed to crime and poverty. Prison should be for ensuring community safety, nothing more.
- b. We know we lock up too many people and for too long. If someone is not going to physically harm another human being, or is no longer likely to do so, they should not be in prison. More than a third of those in our prisons are in on nonviolent charges, while 20%, as we've said, are low risk and meet the statutory requirements for work release. 500 are in on petty violations that are not new crimes. Address these problems and invest the savings, in the spirit of the MRRA, in creating systems that work and we will not only address our prison population and our mass incarceration problem -- we will have the safest state in the country because we will effectively break cycles of violence.
- c. So we are at a crossroads. Roughly 90 million a year in the Governor's proposed Correctional Budget is to maintain current service levels, instead of taking this same 90 million and creating sustainable long term safety, through dramatic investments in things like work release, alternatives to the incarceration of nonviolent people, and utilization of existing avenues for releasing those who are no longer a risk, be they rehabilitated, old, sick, or disabled.

Expanding work release is a common sense program to ensure people reentry successfully. It is one of our few best existing tools to safely reduce the prison population, it is a key to ensuring the MRRA succeeds along with including lifers in its' provisions. Making dramatic investments in safely shrinking the prison population, including keeping technical violators out of prison, is how we sustainably create better services, rather than handing out blank checks to the DOC or others to maintain unsustainable populations and prolong the crisis in our prisons and communities.

Choosing safety, and solutions like the work release program, is how we temper the barbarity of our prisons until we learn from our Scandinavian and Indigenous relatives and do something better.

You, right here, in these seats, will choose the future of safety in this state, the Home for Good Coalition is at your service to do so wisely and well.

Thank you. David Boehnke, Home for Good Coalition, 651-315-4222, dboehnke@gmail.com.