

Statement of Alex Crohn

General Counsel, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice

New York City Council

Higher Education Access for Incarcerated and Recently Incarcerated Individuals
Committee on Higher Education

September 22, 2015

Good morning, Chairperson Barron and members of the Committee on Higher Education. My name is Alex Crohn and I am the General Counsel of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. I am joined here today by Deputy Commissioner Winette Saunders and Executive Director of Educational Services Francis Torres from the Department of Correction.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. The Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice advises the Mayor on public safety strategy and, together with partners inside and outside government, develops and implements policies aimed at achieving three main goals: reducing crime, reducing unnecessary arrests and incarceration and promoting fairness. To the extent that crime reduction is simply about controlling behavior and managing risk, we now know that there are a number of strategies beyond traditional law enforcement that can lead to lower crime while building trust and creating the strong neighborhoods necessary for enduring crime reduction.

Our office strongly supports expanding access to higher education among incarcerated individuals. From a criminal justice standpoint, expanding access to education is a proven strategy for reducing recidivism and preventing crime: according to a 2013 study by the Rand Corporation, prisoners who participated in educational programs were 43% less likely to return to prison within three years than those who did not participate. In New York State, the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) has supported using private funds for post-secondary education for incarcerated individuals, resulting in programs such as the Bard Prison Initiative and the Cornell Prison Education Program. Here in New York City, we also strive to provide services and to connect people to services after discharge. The Rand report and other extensive studies, spanning several decades, have established and affirmed education's effect on preventing further crimes.

In an effort to broaden this access to education, the Obama administration recently announced a plan, the "Second Chance Pell Grant Program," that will provide State and Federal inmates access to Pell grants — education grants provided by the government — for the first time since 1994. The New York City-based Vera Institute of Justice will provide technical assistance to the correctional facilities as they partner with academic institutions to provide educational opportunities as part of the experimental program. The City wholeheartedly supports the establishment of this Second Chance Pell program and its efforts to expand on educational opportunities to this underserved criminal justice population.

Educating inmates better prepares them for life after prison. Individuals face a host of barriers upon release, and increasing educational attainment can increase both employability and earnings, which has a number of collateral benefits. Research shows that prison education not only reduces recidivism but increases chances of employment when inmates enter the general population. There exists a strong empirical link between access to high quality educational programming and successful re-entry post-release. Successful re-entry leads to fewer repeat offenders and stronger neighborhoods, creating virtuous cycles that ensure enduring drops in crime.

Higher education programs are traditionally associated with prisons, where people can participate in multi-year programs, but the NYC Correction Department provides a number of programming opportunities. The Department partners with community groups to provide literacy programs, career and technical education, skills development, reentry services, and some post-secondary education programs. Three programs are specifically focused on higher education. These provide services inside to help transition incarcerated individuals to college upon discharge.

- The College and Community Fellowship (CCF) program provides information on college applications and financial literacy skills. Once individuals are released and accepted to college, participants are given an academic stipend upon completion of 12 credits with a 2.5 GPA.
- Another program is College Way. College Way volunteer educators provide a college readiness class on college life, college admissions tests, and college mathematics. Professors and Adjunct Lecturers provide lectures on mathematics, business and other subjects.
- The third higher-education program, implemented in 2012, is the DOC-Manhattan College Inside Out program. Undergraduate students from the college and selected “inside students” take a course on Criminal Justice Ethics at Rikers Island. Upon completion, inside students who meet the class requirements are admitted to the college upon release free of charge. This is the first “Inside-Out Prison Exchange” program on Rikers Island.

By working to support higher education programs for those rejoining our communities, programs such as the Second Chance Pell Grant Program and the aforementioned DOC initiatives will help to improve reentry outcomes and ensure public safety. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.