

**Testimony of David R. Jones, Esq., President & CEO
Community Service Society of New York (CSS)**

**NYS Assembly Committee on Correction Hearing Concerning Merger of Department of Correctional Services
(DOCS) with Division of Parole (DOP)
November 10, 2011**

The Community Service Society of New York (CSS) is pleased to submit this testimony concerning the merger of the Department of Correctional Services (DOCS) with the Division of Parole (Parole) to create the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS). The merger offers great potential for synergies and information-sharing. It also offers an opportunity for better coordination of reentry services. Our written testimony will address this issue: **reentry matters** are of core concern to CSS.

CSS is a 168-year-old nonprofit organization that promotes policies and programs which effect systemic change, advance the economic security of working poor persons, and, as a result, strengthen New York City. We engage in advocacy, research, litigation and direct service targeted to communities of color that have been historically disadvantaged and now comprise the majority of the City. In light of a recent CSS report's finding that in New York City only one in four young African-American men is employed, our work is urgent.¹ Over the past five years, CSS has focused its anti-poverty work on eliminating practices that frustrate the economic mobility of people with criminal records. Some of our programs and services include:

- Our Record Repair Counseling Program helps clients understand and manage their criminal histories as they seek employment and housing. Volunteer record repair counselors are trained in the rudiments of New York criminal law and how to spot and fix mistakes on rap sheets. Senior volunteers mentor clients through the record repair and job application processes, and help clients apply for certificates of rehabilitation.
- Our Reentry Roundtable brings together reentry advocates to discuss strategies to successfully transition the formerly incarcerated back into family life and their communities. There are more than 58,000 inmates in New York State prisons. Once released, these individuals return in high concentration to a handful of communities, particularly in the South Bronx, Central Brooklyn, and Harlem neighborhoods. CSS formed the Roundtable in 2005, inviting the formerly incarcerated, direct service providers, government agency representatives, and community activists to come together each month to address the obstacles faced by those released from prison.
- Our Legal Department works with clients, many referred by the Record Repair program, who face employment discrimination on the basis of their conviction histories. When we are unable to resolve job denials through informal advocacy, we may file litigation in federal or state court. We co-counsel impact cases with other groups, including a nationwide class action challenging the Census Bureau's hiring practices as violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

¹ Michelle Holder, "Unemployment in New York City During the Recession and Early Recovery – Young Black Men Hit the Hardest," The Community Service Society, 2010, p. 3.

In these times of economic downturn and job loss, people with conviction histories face increasing barriers to employment, no matter their enthusiasm and will to work. While CSS's programs and services work to help smooth our clients' reentry transition, a number come to us having spent time in state prison, where they were unable to attain the skills, education, training or licenses necessary to land the jobs they now seek. The merger of DOCS and Parole offers an historic opportunity for change: to build on and improve existing prison-based reentry programming so that it effectively prepares as many people as possible to work and thrive in the New York State economy of the 21st Century.

DOCCS should take this occasion to focus on education and vocational training programs and forge stronger partnerships with the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Labor (DOL). Vocational pre-apprenticeship programs deserve particular attention, because they provide industry-tested training for jobs that exist in the State's economy, and because the current programs are too small and scarce to serve anything like the numbers of people who express interest in them.

Working together, DOCCS, DOE and DOL can expand pre-apprenticeship programs that meet industry standards in areas forecasted for job growth. These agencies can engage community-based organizations to help provide some of the training (drawing on contacts forged by Parole), and engage unions to improve opportunities for a "seamless transition" to union apprenticeships post training. They can also explore the possibility of issuing conditional vocational licenses to people who complete rigorous training, so that they can be employed in select professions directly upon release from custody. Likewise, DOCCS can take steps to expand work release opportunities for eligible people in order to give them meaningful, hands-on training prior to completion of their prison terms. It can also explore and cultivate partnerships for training in non-traditional areas, such as organic and dairy farming.²

There are opportunities here for creativity and partnership with industry. In Suffolk County, Massachusetts, for example, the Sheriff's Department partners with Xerox Corporation to both provide job training to jail-sentenced inmates and assist with job placement upon release. In North Carolina, Meineke partners with the federal prison system to teach automotive repair, provide necessary equipment and help with job placement upon release through its Second Chance program. Similar partnerships can and should be established in New York State with industries looking to grow and in need of a well-trained workforce. A recent *Crains' New York Business* article found, for example, that the microchip and nanotechnology industry is moving full force ahead in the New York City-to-Albany corridor, and that it will need skilled workers to grow.³

In sum, the newly-created DOCCS can and should draw on the strengths of its component agencies to improve and expand reentry programming – particularly educational and vocational programs – and should look to do so by enhancing partnerships with the DOE and the DOL, and by creating new partnerships with unions, community groups and industry. DOCCS' creative approaches to reentry can help the State prepare workers to enhance New York's economy, not take from it. CSS welcomes the opportunity for further dialogue on these issues, and to assist in any way we can.

² While farming may appear to be an upstate pursuit, the movement supporting local, sustainable agriculture makes opportunities for skilled work on farms and food cooperatives in the metropolitan area an increasingly real possibility.

³ <http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20111106/SMALLBIZ/311069980>