



March 8, 2023

Dear Minnesota Legislators,

I am writing in support of House Bill 2167 on behalf of Voices of Hope, an organization that provides choral singing opportunities in Minnesota prisons. This bill would provide supportive arts for incarcerated persons and persons on supervised release, including the potential for grant funding to make such work possible. Voices of Hope, alongside such artistic partners as the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop and Art from the Inside are excited about the possibility of this bill to provide arts access where it is currently very limited.

Voices of Hope currently has choirs in two facilities - MCF-Shakopee (since 2015) and MCF-Stillwater (since early 2020). Our organization was able to provide weekly virtual programming at both facilities throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and returned to in-person programming earlier this year. The incarcerated people we serve have responded very positively to their experience in choir, saying things like:

“Choir is definitely the highlight of my week... for me, this is like a booster shot of positive energy.”

“A key element in recovery and reform is to reconnect with what makes us human and functional upstanding citizens, not to mention mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends. [Choir] could make all the difference in our future experiences.”

“During choir, I feel a sense of belonging. It brings me joy and hope for a better future.”

“[Choir] gives me a sense of joy that nothing else but my kids have been able to give me. I love being a part of something positive.”

“Our individual suffering paints every square of these walls but the power of our melodic voices singing together helps to strip the sadness and self-hate bare, leaving only... Hope. We are given many tools at Shakopee but none have healed me like music.”

Working for Voices of Hope has also connected me to other prison choir practitioners across the U.S., who are finding similar results. Evidence-based research demonstrates that choral programs inside of correctional facilities can provide transformational opportunities for incarcerated people. These include, but are not limited to: fulfilling the criminogenic needs of peer social support and alternative community; targeting the behaviors of communication, empathy, coping, anger, and motivation; and reducing recidivism rates and inmate incident

rates. Research in these areas, while promising, is limited due to the protected nature of incarcerated people as a vulnerable population in research. With more government support in this area, Minnesota could be a leading state in demonstrating the efficacy of the arts as a means of supportive programming in prisons.

Minnesota is one of the most highly regarded states for our arts (especially choral singing) and for the generous support given to artists. However, not all Minnesotans are given equal access to artistic opportunities. This bill could make all the difference for Minnesotans currently serving time, not to mention thousands more who are struggling to find supportive communities upon their release.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this bill. Feel free to reach out with further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amanda Weber". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Amanda Weber

Voices of Hope, Founder & Artistic Director

wearevoicesofhope.org