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May 14, 2021

Representative Rena Moran
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
449 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Moran,

I am writing to express support for Senator Osmek and Representative Koegel's reentry support services bill, SF 519, which is a result of collaboration between these legislators and the Department of Corrections. We thank Senator Osmek for leading the charge of institutionalizing comprehensive reentry practices into Minnesota law and appreciate Representative Koegel's valued contributions to the bill, particularly as it relates to the homeless mitigation plan provision.

This legislation is incredibly important for Minnesota communities and has far reaching implications as it will ensure that individuals releasing from prison in Minnesota have the tools they need for success. The appropriation is included in the public safety and judiciary omnibus bill. Some of SF519 codifies the work that our Department aims to do through our current policy and procedures. We have a dedicated staff of transitions coordinators who teach prerelease classes, work to prepare people to leave, give resources for community needs, process identification documents, and more. This bill guarantees that Minnesota will continue to use foundational best practices in bridging people from prison into communities. These critical services will no longer just be addressed in DOC department policy, which can change as personnel or interests shift.

This bill also stretches our ability and capacity to do new things that will make a difference in our partnerships and practices. For example, SF519 includes the provision of a form of secondary ID documentation so that people can get a valid state ID upon release, if we have not been able to help them. Also included in this legislation are critical gap filling measures such as increasing the amount of non-narcotic medication and prescriptions provided upon release so that people reentering our communities do not run out before they find coverage and navigate their way to finding a qualified, insurance eligible, and available provider.

The proposal before you will positively impact people being released from prison and working to get on with their lives, which is why the homelessness mitigation plan and reporting requirements are so important. The latter part of this bill charges DOC to uncover the real data, illuminate the issues, find solutions with other agencies and partners, and develop real methods to get people "home" instead of "homeless." Our first glances of homelessness data showed that on the night of January 19th of this year, 4,000 people on correctional supervision were experiencing homelessness or housing instability in Minnesota. No one should be homeless in Minnesota in January and collectively we can and should do better.

In the packet of letters of support we have gathered from our community partners and shared with you are some incredible stories of Minnesotans' experiences. I would like to highlight two that speak to the importance

of this legislation shared by our partners at Emerge, an agency works with large numbers of citizens returning home post-incarceration, supporting them with career training, employment and other supports as they resume their lives.

- **The importance of supporting access to identification document:** One example they shared is the story of an individual we will call Marcus, who connected with EMERGE right after being released from prison. Upon connection with EMERGE, Marcus was full of optimism with his heart set on getting his Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and becoming a truck driver. Despite doing everything right, because he did not have access to an official identification card, Marcus experienced months of delays that kept him waiting until the summer for critical identification paperwork to start the CDL training. Then his training provider suddenly closed and at the same time, he lost touch with EMERGE. Eventually it was discovered that the repeat frustrations of being stuck had led to chemical dependency relapse for Marcus. Fortunately, he had Emerge and medical assistance and was able to connect with treatment. Marcus is now back in recovery and finally resumed his CDL training in January. For Marcus, the simple lack of correct identification contributed to setting him back almost a full year in his reentry process. If he had not been able to access the healthcare he needed, it could have been far worse.
- **The importance of the homeless mitigation plan in this bill:** A former EMERGE employee shared a story of being released from incarceration directly to homelessness and spending his first winter out of prison living in a \$600 used car, while keeping warm by parking between idling semi-trucks at a rest stop, and showering at a gas station before driving to work. While his release was several years ago, they have people they work with everyday who they know or suspect to be homeless or at significant risk. Emerge has a staff person whose job includes carefully searching their recycling business that offers transitional jobs to returning citizens to make sure no employees are hiding in waste recycling plant overnight rather than being on the streets.

These stories illuminate the very need for the investments in the provisions in SF519, for which the appropriation is contained in the public safety and judiciary omnibus bill. Ninety-five percent of all incarcerated people will eventually be released and will become our neighbors and community members. By passing this legislation, you will codify the work the DOC aims to do, stretch our ability and capacity to do new things, and positively impact the people releasing from prisons and trying to get on with their lives - to become employed, in their own homes, going to school, supporting their families and being fully invested, tax paying citizens.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me or Safia Khan with any additional questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Paul Schnell

Commissioner, Department of Corrections

CC: Representative Erin Koegel
Representative Pat Garofalo, Republican Lead
Representative Melissa Hortman, Speaker of the House
Representative Kurt Daudt, Minority Leader