

Testimony before the Joint Committee on Public Safety
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Five years ago I didn't know anything about Massachusetts prisons. I was a writer and editor of a magazine about education and children's learning. Then at the home of friends I happened to meet a man who had just spent 17 years in Massachusetts prisons after being convicted of a violent crime. The story of his prison experience, his struggle for healing and rehabilitation, and his eventual return to the community captured my attention, so much so that I subsequently decided to write a book about it. And so in the past five years I have spent a lot of time learning about prisons and prisoners and thinking about how public safety is achieved.

I am asking you to support House Bill 3975, the bill that limits the time a prisoner can be sentenced to the Departmental Disciplinary Unit, because I believe long DDU sentences don't serve any public safety benefit, and indeed cause harm, both to the prisoners and to others. Reports from DDU tell us that inmates are coming out of it more violent, less able to function around other people, whether

in the general prisoner population or in the community. These long sentences are posing risks not only to the inmates but to others who have to deal with individuals who have suffered such debilitating effects that they are now more dangerous than when they were sent to the unit. If the inmates are released directly back into the community, as some are, the risks are to your constituents. If they are released back into the general prison population, the risks are to the other inmates and the staff.

By passing a bill that limits DDU time, you have the ability to cut down on these harmful effects. You have the ability to limit the violence, the antisocial behavior, and the mental health problems that so often result from these long DDU sentences. You have the ability to reduce the pain that inmates' families suffer. You have the ability to open up the discussion of corrections policy, to allow us to consider policies that are based on what we know about human beings. We know it in education and we know it in prisons: how people are treated affects the way they respond. How people are treated affects their behavior.

Consider the inmate I know who spent two years in the harsh punitive conditions of a segregation unit, still continuing to present problems for the institution. This same inmate was then transferred to another institution

where the superintendent took a different approach. He let the inmate live in less isolated conditions, and he treated the inmate with respect, shook his hand, said "Man to man, can I count on you not to cause trouble here?" The superintendent treated the inmate like a man, and the inmate responded accordingly. The superintendent had no problems with an inmate who had been such a discipline problem for the officers at the previous institution.

Long-term confinement to a disciplinary unit is not the only way to deal with problems in our prisons. I am asking you to support the bill that limits DDU time because I want to live in a Commonwealth in which our corrections policies reduce violence rather than exacerbate it. I want to live in a Commonwealth in which our corrections policies take into account what we know about human beings and human behavior, and recognize that how people are treated matters. It matters to them, and it matters to all of us.