

**Little Hoover Commission Hearing  
The Impact of California's Parole Policies on Women Offenders**

**May 27, 2004, Room 113, State Capitol, Sacramento, California**

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**Introduction/Background**

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue and share my observations and recommendations with you. As the Director of a Victim/Witness Assistance Center for the past 17 years, I am pleased that your study will include the perspective of crime victims. Too often, crime victims' issues have been an afterthought by the criminal justice and correctional system. And, despite the best efforts of a dedicated group of advocates at YACA, post-sentencing services for victims are not well-coordinated with local service providers and reach only a small percentage of victims. We can, and must, do better.

Crime victims are not a "one size fits all" group. Even within the same family, crime victims often hold a wide range of views on offenders, incarceration and parole practices. Consequently, my comments and recommendations do not, and cannot, reflect the opinions of all crime victims or all crime victim service providers. In preparing these comments, however, I consulted with Victim/Witness colleagues around the state and allied professionals to enhance the quality and accuracy of this information. I hope you find this helpful in crafting a new vision for California prison and parole practices.

Victim/Witness Centers are located in all 58 counties in California. As "systems-based" victim service agencies, we provide a wide variety of legally mandated services to all types of crime victims and witnesses in California. In 2002/2003, Victim/Witness Centers served 143,115 new victims of crime, an increase of 34,211 victims from the prior year. While Victim/Witness Centers serve all types of crime victims, 40% of victims served last year were victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.

Victim/Witness Centers were created by the California legislature in 1983 to reduce the trauma and insensitive treatment that victims and witnesses may experience following a crime and to minimize further victimization of crime victims by the criminal justice system. Our focus is ensuring that crime victims are informed of their statutory rights through the criminal justice process and are aided in exercising those rights through the provision of numerous services. While local demographics, crime patterns, needs and resources impact the specifics of service delivery from county to county, the services we provide are standardized throughout the state. Our community partners include local law enforcement agencies, county social service and health departments and "community-based" domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, food and clothing banks, ministerial associations, and other agencies and groups. Many Victim/Witness Centers are involved with local prisons and youth authorities to provide victim impact classes and collaborate on special fund-raisers and the annual Crime Victims' Rights Week activities.

**How the state can ensure that strategies designed to promote parolee success and reduce the rate at which parole violators are returned to prison also protect the rights of victims.**

\*Strategies designed to promote parolee success should be developed with direct involvement with experienced crime victim service providers to ensure that protections for victims' rights are incorporated into the strategies prior to their adoption and implementation. The newly created YACA Victim Advisory Committee could be a resource for this purpose, as well as the Victim/Witness Coordinating Council which represents all Victim/Witness Centers in California. The two state domestic violence coalitions and the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASA) could serve valuable roles as well.

\*Crime victims have a right, upon request, to be notified of an inmate's release date, parole hearing, escape or death and to request the collection of restitution orders. Currently, 75% of victims are not included in the CDC data base, which means that only 25% of victims are exercising their right for notification and restitution collection. The current process for notification should be streamlined and automated where possible and standardized so that ALL victims are given the option for follow-up notification and other services. Training of local advocates on post-sentencing rights and resources is underway now as part of the curriculum for required advocate training and should be expanded to include annual or biannual updates.

\*Current risk assessment measures should be evaluated for efficacy and validity and revised or replaced with the best available measures. Risk and needs assessments should always include the level of risk for violence and inmates with higher risk levels should be placed on a higher level of supervision. Assessments should be gender-specific for female inmates to take into account their reduced level of risk for violence, if appropriate, and their special needs (ie, child care and health needs specific to women). Assessments should be shared with local agencies and groups working with the parolee and updated on a regular basis based on the parolee's performance. Parole agents should have knowledge of orders which prohibit inmate contact with the victim and include any violations in their consideration of sanctions.

\*Good Time/Work Time Credits should be redesigned to link incentives to successful completion of job training, educational or vocational classes, drug treatment and life skills and parenting classes to better prepare inmates for their reentry into our communities. Basic victim impact classes should be required, with incentives for the successful completion of more advanced classes. Community work service projects, developed in conjunction with local community agencies, should be "phased in" as inmates approach release dates to help them prepare for the transition.

**Why, as a part of their successful re-entry into the community, it is critical that offenders understand the impact of their crime and work to repair the damage they have inflicted on their victims and communities.**

\* In the absence of taking responsibility and accountability for their crimes, offenders are likely to commit new crimes. Crime victims who participate in victim impact classes report that many inmates, especially female inmates, respond positively to the experience. A mother of a murder victim who conducts victim impact classes at CMC believes that it is important that inmates know that "forgiveness is possible, even if not from the victim of their crime." Victim impact classes humanize the crime victim for the offender, who often depersonalizes their victim to help them rationalize their crime. Reaching inmates through their own history of abuse can help the inmate develop insight about the devastating effects of crime. Victim impact classes should be institutionalized throughout the system and coordinated with work currently done by prison chaplains.

**The roles that victim's organizations can play both in preparing offenders for release and as part of community-based reentry partnerships.**

\*Victim's organizations can serve a valuable role in both preparing offenders for reentry and as part of community partnerships but not without adequate funding. Unfortunately, most victim's organizations are operating with limited personnel and small budgets and cannot accommodate additional duties or services beyond what is currently mandated. However, if financial resources or other resources were provided, victim service organizations would be an investment well made. The use of victim advisory committees and collaborations between YACA and victims' organizations on statewide and local trainings should be supported. For female offenders, mentoring programs and group counseling projects specially designed for women in re-entry could be provided through Victim/Witness Centers, local rape crisis centers, women shelters and other women's support agencies. Coordination with the local Child Welfare Services would be vital to ensure that the parolee's minor children are also receiving "wrap-around" services for at-risk children and families.

**Specific strategies used to encourage offenders to make reparation for the harm they have inflicted, including victim impact classes, financial restitution, community service and others.**

\*Victim impact classes are an important tool towards helping offenders understand the very real and devastating damage of their crime and should be a part of every inmate's pre-release programs. The completion of advanced victim impact classes could contribute to Good Time/Work Time credits as an incentive for offenders.

In conjunction with CDC, the California Victim Services Training Institute (CVSTI), the training arm of the California Victim/Witness Coordinating Council, could develop a "best practices" model and coordinate the training of victim advocates, crime victims and correctional personnel for program delivery throughout the CDC system. CVSTI could provide institutions with a roster of speakers who have completed the training course as approved by CDC and CVSTI.

\*Restorative justice efforts include the collection of restitution orders, victim-offender mediation or reconciliation programs and community service projects. Victim-offender mediation or reconciliation projects can play a valuable role for both the victim and offender IF certain criteria are met and clear standards and expectations are identified in advance. Most communities have programs in place which could be coordinated with Victim/Witness Centers (or other crime victim service providers) and crime victims. For inmates who are housed in prisons far from the victims, video-conferencing could be utilized.

\*Restitution collection by CDC has improved dramatically in the past 5 years, although the process remains cumbersome and inconsistent. The current automation project is a step in the right direction towards full restitution recovery for victims. An innovative new project initiated by the California Victim Compensation and Government Claims Board (VCGCB) by which the Franchise Tax Board collects unpaid restitution fines from post-parole offenders could be expanded to include direct restitution orders to victims.

\*Citizen advisory committees at prisons are a resource that could be developed to serve as community links for pre-release programs and to help identify local resources and agencies which may be contracted to provide the parolee services upon community re-entry. Business leaders could be mobilized to provide more programs if tax incentives were better publicized and promoted. Pre-release, the expansion of "joint venture" projects whereby businesses conduct work from prisons would have a mutual benefit for the community, the inmate and improve the rate of restitution collection. Victims or victim advocates should continue to be represented on prison citizen advisory committees and consideration given to an expanded role.

**What more needs to be done—at the state and community level—to ensure that victim issues are adequately addressed in reentry strategies.**

\*To achieve the best outcomes for female offenders, CDC should consider the information published in the June 2003 DOJ National Institute of Corrections "Gender-responsive Strategies: Research, Practice and Guiding Principles for Female Offenders". The authors make a compelling case for developing gender-specific programs and planning which take into account women's pathways to crime, histories of sexual abuse and domestic violence, substance abuse, educational challenges and health issues. While offenders' histories of abuse do not excuse criminal conduct, they do suggest implications for developing programs to enhance parole success, including successful reunification with the offenders' children. Mentoring programs which include a victim impact component would be valuable at both the pre-release and post-release stages.

\*If resources are shifted to the community level, CDC could contract with local mentoring projects, domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, community mental health projects and programs for the economically disadvantaged to provide a wide array of support services. One idea developed by the "Roundtable Project", a National Network for Women in Prison, teams former female inmates with advocates and service providers.

\*Education and job training resulting in economic independence would greatly enhance parolee success. Community college reentry programs for women would be a potential resource for collaboration with CDC. Likewise, drug and alcohol treatment services especially tailored to women would be vital for women whose histories and commitment offenses include substance abuse.

\*Local churches could be sponsors for women on parole to help integrate them into communities and provide support and a sense of belonging. Ministerial associations and churches, working in collaboration with other community partners, could serve a larger role in the successful reentry of women offenders.

### **Closing Comments**

The new parole strategy recently adopted by YACA and CDC is designed to help prepare inmates for their reintegration into communities while providing protections for victims. It offers a best, new hope for making fundamental changes to a broken system which was not working for victims, inmates or communities. The inclusion of crime victim issues in the further development of that strategy and its implementation is essential for its success. Thank you for the opportunity to provide information from the perspective of a crime victim advocate. I hope you find it meaningful and helpful as you move forward with your recommendations.