

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY BRENDA WARD, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS, WISCONSIN CHAPTER, IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 240, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR, ELECTIONS AND URBAN AFFAIRS ON OCTOBER 13, 2009

The Social Work profession has historically helped families overcome barriers that reach beyond the psychological. By paying attention to “individual in the environment”, social workers pay attention and work to change the environmental and cultural forces that create, contribute to and address problems of living.

Returning prisoners face enormous environmental and cultural barriers including lack of an employment or credit history, lack of financial or family support resources, resistance from employers to hiring ex convicts, mental health and substance abuse challenges, lack of employable skills and low levels of education.

To reduce recidivism we need to assist returning prisoners to access support services that exist that will help them make a successful reentry into society. We also need to recognize and work to change those barriers in resources, attitudes and policy in our community, state and nation that make it so difficult for returning prisoners to reintegrate into society.

One of those policies that needs to be changed is the prohibition on voting for returning prisoners until they have completed their probation or parole.

Part of a successful reentry into society involves empowering these returning prisoners to make a life for themselves and integrate themselves in the community.

One very powerful way for self-empowerment and community integration is involvement in the community, of which the most basic level is the ability to vote. Restoring the right to vote for individuals newly released from prison would help empower ex offenders to take an active and positive role in their community and society and therefore greatly improve the likelihood that their reintegration would be successful. Indeed as the ACLU Wisconsin documented on their website (<http://www.aclu-wi.org>), a book by Christopher Uggen and Jeff Manza entitled, *Locked Out: Felon Disfranchisement and American Democracy* showed an inverse link between voting participation and re-offense-those who voted were less likely to reoffend than those who did not vote.

Finally restoring the right to vote for ex offenders on probation and parole would address the current racial impact of this current disfranchisement on voting. As documented by the Wisconsin Chapter of the ACLU, one in nine African-American voters is disfranchised in Wisconsin, compared to one in fifty of all Wisconsin voters. African Americans and other communities of color are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and therefore disproportionately affected by this policy denying newly released prisoners on probation or parole the right to vote.

Please vote to support Senate Bill 240.