

March 3, 2016

John Maki
Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority
300 W Adams St #200
Chicago, IL 60606



Dear Mr. Maki,

The task set before the Illinois State Commission on Criminal Justice and Sentencing Reform to reduce the prison population by twenty-five percent by 2025 is important and challenging work. The commission's recommendations will set the tone and standard of our state's corrections policies and practices for at least the next decade. Our families, clients, and communities will be directly impacted by the decisions being made by this commission. As advocates and members of this community, we want to be present, involved, and helpful in shaping the conversation.

We do appreciate the commission's efforts to be transparent and inclusive. By opening hearings to the public, allowing comments to be submitted on the commission's website, and making audio and documents from hearings available online, you have sent a message that the collective wisdom of those closest to the criminal justice system--current and formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and providers of community-based reentry services--is invited and valued in this process.

However, we have concerns about how community voices are being heard and considered by the commission. At the last hearing on February 18th, the opportunity for public comment started after 4:30 with the hearing scheduled to end at 5pm. Advocates still delivered well-prepared and concise recommendations. Community leaders provided critical context for the previously discussed agenda items through their powerful testimony. Unfortunately, quite a few commissioners missed this important piece of the conversation because it was placed at the end of the day's agenda.

Re-working community engagement could be as simple as setting aside a half-hour at the beginning of the meeting to listen to the community's concerns and recommendations before diving into the agenda. More robust efforts might include holding additional hearings dedicated entirely to public comment. However, to be inclusive and effective, these gatherings must include all members of the commission. Finally, to clarify any confusion about the commission's policies or communication, we would recommend including a short public Q&A session.

We understand these hearings and the subsequent commutes can make for long days. The community members, who have waited patiently to share with you their lived experiences, often feel similarly. We ask that the commission consider restructuring their public hearing process to be more respectful and inclusive of their stories and expertise. By being present for this important piece of the conversation, the commissioners may discover that the public's recommendations hold innovative solutions to the very difficult criminal justice issues the commission is working to reform.

Sincerely,

Melissa Banerjee
Policy Associate

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