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Testimony Presented by  
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**INTERFAITH COALITION OF ADVOCATES  
FOR REENTRY AND EMPLOYMENT  
(ICARE)**

ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CODES  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON CORRECTION  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES

**JOINT PUBLIC HEARING:  
The Rockefeller Drug Laws – 35 Years Later**

May 8, 2008

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Distinguished Assembly Chairs, Committee Members, other Elected Officials, Policy Experts, Advocates and Community Leaders represented at today's much-needed public hearing on the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Rockefeller Drug Laws,

Thank you for creating this opportunity and for allowing ICARE to testify. We applaud you for your vision and leadership in listening to the communities' voice on the Rockefeller-era Drug Laws, which in our current social and economic situation do more harm than good.

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I come today to speak from my own experience as the Acting Director of the Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Reentry and Employment, an organization of faith communities, partnering with direct service providers and policy organizations. Together, we advocate for the Restoration of Rights of formerly incarcerated women and men through reform in law and policy. We also support communities of faith in outreach to people in prison through a pastoral ministry-mentoring program we call "Circles of Care". In a "circle", 3-5 members of the congregation build a relationship with an incarcerated person and welcome that person home, continuing pastoral support through the fragile period of readjustment to life as a participating member of the community.

A person faces many barriers to employment, housing, education and reunification with family and community after prison.

What drew me to this work from a life as an educator, artist, parent and active citizen in Tribeca for many years was my faith and personal experience.

Forty years ago, in 1968, my awareness honed by the Civil Rights Movement, I had a summer job in the Youth House, a detention center for young women under 16 years' old on then, Welfare Island (now Roosevelt Island). In those three months of working as a day counselor in the dorm with 15 – 20 girls who were a little younger in years but for the most part smarter and wiser than I was, I saw up close, the context for the statistics and reports that seem to be coming out daily (at least this week!) about the relationship of poverty, race and incarceration in this country. In most cases, these girls were in detention for minor issues – in some instances simply truancy – or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In most cases it was because of a lack of

supervision and guidance, whether because of both parents working, newly immigrated families or parents with various disabilities. These were the intelligent, curious children of those families, who could not bear to sit in front of the TV all day, went out into their neighborhoods and got into trouble. They could read the library books I brought in a single afternoon. They taught me a lot. One of them - Alice - told me I could not ever touch her because of the physical abuse she had endured.

This spring 2008 I had the privilege of going to Albany with the Coalition for Women Prisoners. The formerly incarcerated women on my lobby team could have been the grown up version of those girls in the Youth House. In such a vast number of cases they were brilliant women who told stories of lives of self-medication and substance abuse and/or defending themselves in abusive relationships.

Thirty years later, in 1998, I ended up in Family Court with a fifteen-year-old son who, in a normally rebellious phase of life had decided that drugs, not sports or academic achievement, would be the vehicle for proving his toughness in his ascent to manhood. He bought drugs easily on the sidewalk in front of his elite public high school and with friends proceeded to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, provoked the notice of some police officers and because he had hesitated about taking the drugs he had bought, was found with them in his pocket and arrested. Later at an appearance before probation personnel and told that what they had found in his pocket could merit charging him, he (in my grantedly maternal, opinion) showed neither contrition nor wisdom; a pretty typical teenager. At his court appearance, two young lawyers took us aside and told us that they had decided not to charge him. To this moment I wonder if that would have been the outcome if I had been my African-American friend, Toni with her precious teenage son.

Two studies were issued this week detailing the racial bias in drug arrests and convictions. In the years following that incident my son got more heavily involved with drugs before he shook off a serious addiction through a variety of individual and group treatments and a lot of love over several years. He finished college and has been in recovery since 2003.

I tell these stories to put a human face on the issue. I am told that in the courts of law and opinion law enforcement often presents itself as the moral crusader against the evil drug user/ lawbreaker. I am sure there are instance where that applies, but in my work, first as a member of a prison ministry at Trinity Church/ Wall Street, and now as a representative of ICARE's interfaith coalition I have only found individuals, not "classes" or "categories".

I am not talking about "enabling crime", I am talking about approaches to public safety that can and does work – those that are premised on respect between people. When the subtext of "public safety" is protecting "some of us" from "the rest of us" whether it is discrimination based on class, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation or ability, we cannot expect to find comfort, peace or security.

We know the data about percentages and ratios of population to who is locked up in New York State. (That Black and Latino persons are 31% of the state population but 80% of the prison population). We know that although they may not have been incarcerated directly for drug-related crimes, 72% of New York State's prisoners reported substance abuse issues. We know that the more educated a person is, the less likely he or she will go to prison or return to prison after release, BUT, in New York State between 1985 and 2000 spending on education decreased by -25%, while spending on prisons increased by +137%. We know that New York City schools and neighborhoods are more segregated by ethnicity and class today than they were when Brown Vs. the Board of Education was decided. Investment in our citizens, whether through opportunities for education and employment or in treating disabling health conditions like drug addiction make economic sense. Prisons cost more person per year than private schools!

I am called to do the work of ICARE and to speak here today to advocate for a second chance for those coming out of prison and/or addiction by may faith. I am Episcopalian, a parishioner just down the street at Trinity Church/ St. Paul's Chapel, so, as an Anglican Archbishop from South Africa, Desmond Tutu, has said so clearly – from our faith perspective "God loves All, All, All." – Not just the good, the law abiding, the prosperous, the powerful – but ALL – most dearly, the children in detention, without good schools or enough love and food to eat, the young men

without jobs or opportunities to prove to their families, their society and most importantly, themselves, that they are worthy of community respect and love.

I cannot live truly as a Christian if I do not care for the difficulties of my sisters and brothers, if I do not seek to affirm the God given dignity in each of these, if I do not attempt to shift the paradigm from one of oppression and punishment to one of restoration, rehabilitation, accountability and reconciliation, if I do not look into that “burning bush” and see the scourge of substance abuse and self-medication in our society as inextricably linked with poverty, racism and the resultant lack of HOPE. According to Muslim, Christian and Jewish belief, we humans are made in the image of God and when humans are denigrated, humiliated and persecuted, the sanctity of human life is threatened everywhere. Our only calling is to *Tikkun Olam* – repair of the world. Without hope there is nothing but desperation and as long as there are those who are desperate – no one of us is safe.

So it is through efforts small, like our Circles of Care, and large, like this effort to reframe the conversation around substance abuse and to bring our laws up to date with what we now know scientifically, from one of punishment and law-enforcement to one of health and well-being through treatment and support. It is then that we will find a respectful, loving relationship to even our most neglected and powerless neighbor and thus our God, as well as the right answers to policies and treatments to create justice and safety for all in our time.

Thank you for the opportunity to present at today’s hearing. The Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Reentry and Employment looks forward to partnering with you to advance this important issue.