

Episcopal City Mission

March 18, 2008

Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Thomas Shaw; I am the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.

I am here to speak in support of House Bill 4476, the governor's bill for CORI reform, and to share the experience of our churches and our communities as they have been involved with this work.

First, I want to highly commend the governor and his staff for their work on this bill. Many of us here have been waiting for a governor in this commonwealth to show leadership and take action on this issue, and it is an occasion to be very proud.

But more work remains to be done.

This morning a few hundred of us gathered for a service of healing just down the hill at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, where we had a time of prayer for the clergy in our diocese who participate in healing ministries – caring for the sick and the needy.

I reminded those present this morning, and I remind you now, that it's not only the physically ill among us who need restoration and care, but also those who suffer inwardly because of mistakes they have made or crimes they have committed. And their families suffer as well: parents and children and sisters and brothers experience the same shame and guilt from the stigma our society places on those who make such mistakes – mistakes that lead to the existence of a CORI, a permanent mark on your record. And not just people with CORIs and their loved ones, but our whole society is suffering from this culture of silence and stigma and fear. 2.8 million CORI profiles are kept right now in Massachusetts: our whole commonwealth is in desperate need of healing, within and without.

However, beyond even the vast numbers of people who have a CORI, the real tragedy of this story is how CORI is used every day in Massachusetts to block people from housing, from employment, from education. *The tool that was meant to promote public safety and the common good is now preventing people from coming back into society, preventing them from getting jobs, or loans to finish school, or a place to live.*

A number of our parishes work with inmates, mentoring and tutoring, along with many other congregations of all faiths across Massachusetts. And there are strong and vital organizations that provide job training and skill-building for ex-offenders, and create support for former prisoners trying to re-enter the community. But if a person's CORI prevents them from working or finding housing, how is that a real "second chance"? Instead of giving opportunities, our public policies deny them to the people who need them most.

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I say again: our commonwealth is in desperate need of healing.

You'll hear from many more people during this hearing who will give you all the relevant facts, and I'll leave that to the experts. But I do want to name a few specific recommendations.

First, the social science tells us if an offender has stayed crime-free for the first few crucial years afterwards, he or she is as likely to commit a crime as someone who's never offended in the first place. The waiting period for sealing should match the social science: *records should be sealed after 3 years for misdemeanors and 7 years for felonies*. This is a common-sense approach that acknowledges the facts and gives people a chance.

Also, the anti-discrimination provisions from the 2007 Public Safety Act need to be included: not asking a potential employee about their CORI until the interview process begins. Let's create a fair hiring process where we give people a chance to be seen and evaluated on their skills and qualifications *first*, then determine if the CORI is relevant.

Lastly, non-convictions and dismissed cases should be removed from CORIs. Why should a person be held back by crimes they were never convicted of?

I'm not here this afternoon to pray for a miracle of healing for Massachusetts. We've done that and we'll keep on doing it, just like we'll keep building relationships with inmates and working for opportunities for housing and jobs for people with CORIs.

But at *this* moment, I am here to challenge you to act so the work the community is doing doesn't take place in vain. I urge you, members of the Judiciary Committee, to stop the crisis our current CORI system creates: to change the waiting period on sealing of records to reflect the social science, to put fair hiring guidelines in place, and to remove non-convictions from the CORI. The people who have made mistakes and want to move on deserve the basic right to work and to provide for their families – otherwise, how will they experience healing and restoration? How could any of us?

I urge you to support 4476 and implement these additional reforms. Thank you for your time and attention.

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