

Wisconsin Policy Research Institute: Discussion on corrections reform strategy

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February 23, 2017 — The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute recently hosted a forum titled “Unlocking Potential” that drew more than 100 participants representing law enforcement, the judiciary, the Legislature, business, community groups and faith leaders.

Watch the full video of the “Unlocking Potential” event [here](#).

The Feb. 14 event in Milwaukee featured Hope for Prisoners founder and CEO Jon Ponder, Woodson Center President Bob Woodson, two representatives of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department and Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch.

Ponder, after serving a sentence for armed robbery, founded Hope for Prisoners in Las Vegas to help ex-inmates reintegrate into society.

The discussion at the Wisconsin Center focused on how ex-inmates, with help from one of their own and the same cops who once pursued them, can find a way back to their families and jobs. A key component of the program — law enforcement officers acting as mentors to ex-inmates — is starting to gain national attention as a way to help bridge the chasm between communities and police, both of which benefit from closer connections.

“This is a unique program that helps ex-inmates regain their lives and families; helps reduce recidivism and prison costs; helps police by building community

relations and trust; helps businesses by building the workforce; and helps just about everyone else by ultimately building a stronger economy,” said WPRI President Mike Nichols. “Wisconsin can learn something from this.”

Hope for Prisoners’ 18-month intensive program has shown impressive results and could be a model for the Badger State, which spends more than \$1 billion annually on corrections. At the same time that Wisconsin has almost 90,000 people in prison or under supervision, it has about the same number of jobs going unfilled.

Attendees at the Feb. 14 event included Milwaukee County District Attorney John Chisholm, state Sens. Chris Kapenga, Lena Taylor and Van Wanggaard, state Reps. Evan Goyke, Rob Hutton and Dale Kooyenga, federal Magistrate Judge Patricia Gorence and representatives from the Milwaukee Police Department, Milwaukee County House of Correction and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

A diverse range of stakeholders — foundation leaders, community groups, nonprofits and associations — also were represented, including the Alma Center, the Bradley Foundation, the Charles Koch Institute, Convergence Resource Center, Elmbrook Church, Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Jewish Community Relations Council, the Joseph Project, Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, Milwaukee Area Workforce Funding Alliance, Pro Trade Job Development, Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority and the Zilber Family Foundation.

Ponder shared his story with the audience: “I founded Hope for Prisoners back in 2009, when I came home from prison. And since that time, we had a chance to work with over 1,600 men and women who have been through our process. And of these 1,600 individuals we had the opportunity to work with, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas has determined that an unprecedented 70-plus percent are successful in gaining full-time employment and only 6 percent return back to the system.”

He continued: “The majority of people, they really do want to change. They have no idea how to do it. And for so long, we’ve been expecting people coming home from the prison system to go back and be a productive member inside the workplace. Well, this kid may never have worked a day before in his life. ... We provide them with these tools, but then we come alongside them to help them walk out with all these incredible things that they learned.”

Watch Jon Ponder’s presentation [here](#).

Watch Bob Woodson's presentation [here](#).

Watch LVMPD Assistant Sheriff Todd Fasulo's presentation [here](#).

Watch retired LVMPD Lt. Chris Petko's presentation [here](#).

Watch Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch's presentation [here](#).

Watch the Q&A session [here](#).

Read WPRI's "Unlocking Potential" report, which includes an in-depth profile of Hope for Prisoners, [here](#).