

Let's deal with this prisoner reentry problem

Again, this letter is to educate, because I am aware of how few citizens know how our prison, court and police systems work and the growing tax burden for all of us. The systemic failure is very expensive and ineffective. Former prisoners do not magically return “fixed” and ready to “be” the functional citizens our public expects them to be. They are often less prepared than before.

The disappointment I feel regarding our “justice system” is immeasurable after learning of Wayne Groen’s sentencing in federal court recently. He is a solid citizen, business and family man who will be forever impacted by this federal felony. However, Mr. Groen will not experience the ID issue I will explain below, as his sentence is quite short in comparison to many.

Most people are uninformed about our sentencing laws and imprisonment. When folks are released from prison, the barriers faced are often insurmountable. The large

GUEST OPINION



Irene Morgan

est barrier I have identified while working with this population is the lack of proper mainstream ID. Most of us take for granted our ability to show our ID whenever asked. Consider the difficulty you might have maneuvering within society without it.

I have learned there are three different types of incarceration within our system: Whatcom County jail (usually under one year), Washington State prison

system - Department of Corrections (DOC), and our federal system, Bureau of Prisons (BOP).

When a person is convicted of a crime, serves the sentence, paid their debt to society and is released as a free citizen from our state DOC prison system, the majority of those are released without proper identification. They are released with a “Department of Corrections (DOC) Offender Badge” that has their DOC number printed on it. The single function of this badge is to “identify” them to the Department of Licensing (DOL) when they can find their way to the proper office to purchase their Washington State ID. There also must be an e-letter on file from DOC. (Many cannot get their driver’s license due to fines or restrictions.)

Consider the conditions when it is *not* clear to the releasing citizen that this DOC Badge is *not* a form of identification to be used in their transition. When they try to use

it, they are mostly denied, plus they are being forced to identify themselves as though they are still incarcerated!

When folks can identify themselves, their success in cashing their \$40 release check increases, they can purchase medications, rent a home or apartment, enter school, find employment, etc. Without an ID, I believe they are hand-cuffed and set up for failure.

It became clear to me after hearing the same story multiple times that the problem needs to be addressed at the time of release.

I have been working on this for over a year. Several of us have traveled to Olympia to meet with our legislators, staff of DOC and DOL to find a solution. Both departments have worked on and found that solution. The one-time cost is \$35,000 to develop the computer program that would allow all those without current Washington State IDs released from our

state prisons to have them “in their possession” upon release. (This does not include federal facilities.)

We have contacted the governor’s office again with the hope this plan can be put into practice in the next six months. With only 77 (1 percent of 7,746 releases) people being successful in their return to society, the savings to the state are \$2.8 million per year (at \$36,000 per person).

We estimate that just \$5,000 per person can educate, train and make functional folks who don’t have the skills to be the citizens we expect them to be. It’s a far better investment of your tax dollars than the \$36,000 to \$50,000 per person, per year, just to warehouse them.

Some would say I am “soft on crime.” I see it as sound financial management.

Irene Morgan is the founder and current secretary of the Whatcom County Re-Entry Coalition, which is online at www.whatcom-rec.org.