Chairman Heaton and Members of the Commission: I am Victor Dickson, President of the Safer Foundation. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. For 43 years now our Illinois-based, not-for-profit has made our communities safer and saved our taxpayers money. Safer’s mission is to support the efforts of people with criminal records to become employed, law-abiding members of the community and as a result, reduce recidivism.

Two weeks ago, we heard President Barack Obama addressed the nation giving a historic speech on criminal justice. In that speech he said “justice is not only the absence of oppression, it is the presence of opportunity.” During President Obama’s visit to a federal prison he described the second chance given to returning citizens because of the education and training leading to employment the inmates receive. President Obama, bi-partisan alliances in Congress, and billionaires like the conservative Charles Koch and liberal George Soros are teaming up on criminal justice reform. They all recognize the importance of access to jobs and fairness in the hiring process, creating opportunity, we should too in Illinois.

Any serious discussion about improving the justice system in Illinois must acknowledge and address the enormous issue of reentry. Approximately 30,000 people are released from prison annually. Forty-seven percent (47%) of them return to prison within 3 years. Reducing our prison population 25% requires that we scale reentry programs which reduce recidivism.

There are two types of reentry programs Community-Based Reentry Employment Programs and Residential Supervised Transition Facilities that have the empirical evidence, demonstrated success and outcomes, verified and measured, that the commission values. These solutions have been implemented on a small scale here in Illinois but on a much larger scale with greater success in other states.

First, Community-based employment and reentry programs give those diverted and those released from prison the opportunity to receive the treatment, education, skills and assistance needed to secure a job. When returning citizens are employed, the cost to Illinois’ taxpayers for reconvictions and re-incarceration decreases.

The most recent study of the impact of Safer Foundation programs on recidivism revealed that the three-year recidivism rate for our clients who achieved 30-day employment retention was 17.5%, which was 63% lower than the statewide
recidivism rate. Other statewide Results First analysis’ funded by Pew & McArthur Foundation makes it clear that Community Based Employment & Reentry Programs have the best cost benefit ratio of any expenditure designed to reduce recidivism. We can expect the same result in Illinois. Bringing Community Based Employment & Reentry Programs to scale in Illinois will increase public safety, reduce reconviction costs and incarceration levels more efficiently than any other efforts.

Next, Residential Supervised Transition Facilities in the community are being used on a small scale in Illinois, but on a much larger scale in other reform states, to successfully to divert from prison “low level/non-violent offenders with short sentences”, divert “technical parole violators” and “provide transition centers to prepare inmates for reentry 6 - 24 months pre-release”. In Illinois, Adult Transition Centers (ATCs), offer inmates who have non-violent offenses with less than two years remaining on their sentences the opportunity to prepare for transition to the community. Safer Foundation currently operates two of the four community-based transition centers on behalf of the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). ATCs operated by Safer are secure facilities that operate at approximately 60% of the daily per person rate of a prison. ATCs in Illinois represent less than 2% of IDOC bed space with 958 beds (580 of those beds are operated by Safer).

The recidivism rate for individuals released from one of Safer’s ATC’s is more than 33% percent lower than an individual released directly from prison.

Our ATC facilities provide DASA licensed treatment services, GED programs, behavioral therapy, job preparedness and job placement services. In addition, the Safer ATCs, at no cost to the state, provide residents vocational training leading to industry recognized credentials in high demand fields like advanced manufacturing, welding, Microsoft digital literacy. Participants are securing living wage jobs, enjoy much better than average job retention.

In FY14, Safer’s ATC residents earned more than $3,791,000 in gross wages and paid more than $859,000 in income taxes. Safer ATC residents contribute to the economy. They fill positions that generate revenue & profits for our businesses, pay income taxes, and support their families and purchase products & services. In prison, those same people would not make this significant contribution to their families and our economy.

The Commission should recommend the scaling of Residential Supervised Transition Facilities for diversion, step down reentry and halfway back opportunities. The state of Ohio, with a recidivism rate of 27%, has more than 40 such facilities and recently appropriated an additional $17M annually to further scale up the use of community based residential facilities!

Members of the commission, I urge you to place equal emphasis on helping those released from prison to reenter the community in a productive way. With almost 15,000 recidivating each year how can we realistically achieve a 25% reduction in our prison
population? How can this commission succeed without properly addressing the reentry issue in our state?

We also offer the opportunity for the commission to hear the results of the Urban Institute evaluation of The Safer Return Project funded by MacArthur Foundation. Safer Return was a groundbreaking 5 year demonstration project designed to provide a prison to community continuum of reentry services. The results are very positive, especially for the partnerships with parole which impacted technical violations and securing employment for participants. These programs should be considered by the commission.

Scaling Community Based Employment Reentry Programs, Residential Supervised Transition Facilities and successful aspects of Safer Return is primarily within the power of the administration and the Illinois Department of Corrections to implement. These solutions that reduce incarceration levels, crime and costs are not as dependent on all the planets aligning; the politically challenging agreement of law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, the administration and the legislature.

I appreciate the opportunity to share the views of the Safer Foundation on this pressing subject. We invite the commission to visit our facilities to get a first-hand look at these important programs. We look forward to working with the Commission to transform our criminal justice system. Thank You.

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For additional information on these issues, please contact Victor Dickson (312-922-4767; Victor.Dickson@saferfoundation.org), President/CEO, or Sodiqa Williams (312-922-7044; Sodiqa.Williams@saferfoundation.org), Associate Vice President, Policy & Strategy.

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