



Budget Testimony – Cook County Board

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President Preckwinkle and distinguished Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to address you today on behalf of the Safer Foundation. For more than 43 years our non-profit based here in Cook County has provided services to help people with criminal records secure employment, which breaks the cycle of recidivism. I want to thank the county board for their efforts to approve a budget that preserves the county's support of those with the greatest needs; our elderly, our children, the poor and those returning from prisons and jail. While no one wants to increase taxes or pay higher taxes we also do not want to lose the safety net of services supporting our most vulnerable neighbors. And for President Preckwinkle's undeterred commitment to the latter we are very grateful.

With this budget our county leaders will have begun a legacy of uplifting the disenfranchised. The drop in Cook County's jail population this year to the lowest it has been since 1991 is a great preamble for your budget – one that exemplifies an important shift in justice reform towards programs that empirically work and are rehabilitative. The planned destruction of three Cook County jail divisions and reduction in jail capacity complements support for diversion, and reentry. This two fold strategy is vital not only as a cost-saving measure but to mitigate some of the 38,000 collateral consequences suffered by the 70 to 100 million Americans who have been justice involved.

The consequences are especially harsh for the poorest of American people who suffer crushing and prolonged punishment. According to a 2015 report by the Prison Policy Initiative, the median annual income of people who were incarcerated was 41% lower than those who hadn't been. Amongst men of the ages 27 to 42 this number was 52%. Prior to incarceration 57% of incarcerated men and 72% of incarcerated women earned less than \$22,500 per year. In other words poverty tied closely into incarceration. The January 2014 Social Impact Research Center report on poverty in Illinois revealed that there are more poor people in Illinois in 2012 than in 1964 when President Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty. 32% of African Americans in Illinois are poor. 44.6% of African American children live in poverty. We also know that poverty is concentrated, and racially tilted. Of Chicago's 800 census tracts, 40 percent have deep poverty rates above the city average. Nearly two-thirds of tracts with above average poverty rate are predominately black populations. These are also the people that we lock up in our jails and prisons. We have 30,000 per year released from prison and over 70,000 cycling in

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and out of county jail each year. They were poor before incarceration, made worse during incarceration and now face greater poverty & barriers to prosperity because of their criminal records.

There is bi partisan agreement that were it not for the mass incarceration era, poverty would have reduced by 20% in our nation. So we commend the Board for addressing systemic injustices by focusing on rehabilitation. We applaud them all the more for doing so when faced with an imbalanced budget. Safer too has complete faith in a systemic approach because it ties together justice, deterrence, and opportunity. Over 40 years we have built and refined our work so as to leave no stone un-turned in matters of reentry. We have, with the support of state entities and the County been able to provide a wide range of services from the bond court, to the PACE Institute, to adult transition centers, and finally employment services for people with criminal records. Systemic wrongs can be righted only with systemic changes.

The latest addition to our programming is the Safer Foundation Demand Skills Collaborative that aims to equip people pre and post release for jobs in high growth industries like advanced manufacturing, transportation and healthcare. Employers get the workers they need to seize revenue and profit opportunities. Workers get living wage jobs that lift them out of poverty and break the cycle of recidivism. Taxpayers no longer pay for incarcerating people or supporting their families. Our neighborhoods become safer, because not recidivating means no new crimes. In 2014 in our Chicago Work release centers, while in custody, our residents earned almost \$4M and paid close to \$860,000 in taxes. Seizing this opportunity, by scaling these programs, preparing people with records great existing opportunities will reduce our future need to raise taxes. We appeal to the county to support this important effort.

Our ability to reach our goals is inextricably tied to a justice-minded leadership and we're thrilled to find that in this Board. Thank you for your continued support to Cook County's most vulnerable. We are confident that this way the county will relieve itself of the cycle of poverty and recidivism.

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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.

