



News from **Assemblywoman Watson Coleman**

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MAJORITY LEADER TO CONVENE ‘SECOND CHANCE’ HEARINGS ACROSS NEW JERSEY TO HELP PRISONERS AVOID RETURNING TO CRIME

(TRENTON) – Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman today announced she will convene hearings throughout New Jersey on how services for inmates and their families can be improved to help released prisoners avoid returning to crime.

Watson Coleman said the “Second Chance Hearings” will hear from experts and citizens on how the state can overhaul programs to prevent recidivism and save taxpayer money.

New Jersey spends \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year per inmate, about twice as much as the per-pupil cost to educate a child.

“From a fiscal and a social perspective, it makes more sense to focus on keeping people out of jail,” Watson Coleman said..

Watson Coleman said about 18,000 inmates are released from prison annually in New Jersey, often times into communities with limited jobs, housing and social services. The Majority Leader said the hearings will build consensus, understanding and support for more effective policies.

“Once a prisoner has served their time and paid their debt, we cannot shove them aside forever,” Watson Coleman said. “Many individuals who returned to a life of crime did so because they felt they had no other choice. They would gladly take the opportunity to better their lives, but our system too often makes that impossible.”

The following hearings, all from 3 to 8 p.m., have been scheduled:

- **Friday Nov. 21 at First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens at 771 Somerset St. in Somerset, where the Rev. DeForest "Buster" Soaries, a former secretary of state, is pastor.**
- **Monday Dec. 8 at Shiloh Baptist Church at 340 Rev. S. Howard Woodson Jr. Way (Calhoun Street) in Trenton.**

(MORE)

- **Thursday Dec. 11 at the Paul Robeson Campus Center at Rutgers Newark at 350 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.**

Watson Coleman spent about two months preparing for the hearings with a group that included service providers, advocates and families of ex-offenders, including the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, Families Against Mandatory Minimums, the American Civil Liberties Union and about 40 others.

Assemblywoman L. Grace Spencer (D-Essex/Union) and Assemblymen Albert Coutinho (D-Essex/Union) and Joseph Cryan (D-Union) have been instrumental in organizing the hearings.

“We need to address New Jersey’s lack of a substantive and strategic rehab plan for exiting prison and the lack of flexibility in the system,” Watson Coleman said. “And it’s important to remember that services cannot simply start when inmates are released. To give them the best chance at starting their lives anew, services must be available – and accessible – from the first day a person enters the prison system.”

The hearings will focus on, among other areas, the need for continuing education, literacy services and trade school and substance abuse treatment programs behind bars, along with finding ways to provide viable job training, employment and housing after being released.

“In fact, there’s no reason why someone shouldn’t be required to take courses while behind bars as part of their sentence or as a requirement of parole eligibility,” Watson Coleman said. “But a top component in my mind is the role of family. No better support group exists than family, and we should do everything in our power as legislators and policymakers to ensure that family plays a central role in the life of each individual.”

Watson Coleman has already sponsored several new laws regarding prison release, including giving courts discretion to impose penalties for some drug offenses, establishing a rehabilitation certificate and increasing participation in drug courts.

She’s also proposed reducing the waiting period for expunging certain criminal offenses, requiring county sheriffs to establish plans to help county inmates obtain state and federal public assistance before their release and a “Prisoners’ Re-entry Bill of Rights,” under which inmates would have to be informed in writing of their right to have records expunged and of their right to vote, along with the availability of programs to help get jobs and education.

“Individuals who have paid their debt to society and have made sincere efforts to reform should not be eternally punished,” Watson Coleman said.