



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator Van Wanggaard, Chair
Members, Senate Committee on Judiciary & Public Safety

FROM: Tia Izzia, Associate Director for Human Life & Social Concerns

DATE: January 3, 2024

RE: Support for Senate Bill 170 Earned Release

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), the public policy voice of the Catholic bishops of Wisconsin, urges you to support Senate Bill 170, which offers incarcerated individuals the opportunity for earned release upon the completion of an employment readiness training program. We thank all the members of the Study Committee on Increasing Offender Employment Opportunities for helping to bring this bill forward.

Others here before the committee today will speak to how this bill will help build supports for people exiting incarceration. What the WCC would like to speak to is the paramount importance of reintegrating those involved with the criminal justice system back into our communities.

In 1998, Wisconsin's Catholic bishops convened a 15-member Task Force on Corrections to review the state's criminal justice system. The Task Force included a formerly incarcerated person, several crime victims, a former Supreme Court Justice, the director of a community program that helps place formerly incarcerated persons in jobs and housing, an assistant district attorney for Milwaukee County, a prison chaplain, a retired county sheriff, a former probation officer, and priests who ministered to both the incarcerated and to victims. The Task Force heard testimony from Department of Corrections officials, incarcerated persons, victims of crime, theologians, and advocates for judicial and prison reform.

With the findings of the Task Force, the bishops then published *Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin*. Their statement called for a statewide evaluation of criminal justice policies to determine how they convey respect for the human person, serve the common good, exercise an option for the poor and marginalized, serve the end of restoration, and foster the principle of solidarity among all in the community. As they stated: "Policies must be assessed in terms of their capacity to assure that offenders will live a productive and peaceful life in the community to which they return."¹ Nearly 25 years after this report was published, and after countless efforts to improve Wisconsin's criminal justice system, much remains to be done. All too often, men and women are released from jails and prisons with little, if anything, to their name, and without a healthy community to call home.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to participate in dignified work. Yet, when exiting incarceration, many individuals have a massive gap in their resume, a criminal record, fewer social connections, and perhaps little work experience. In the words of Pope Francis: "Many times, once released from prison,

the person has to deal with a world that is foreign to him, and which also does not recognize him as worthy of trust, even going so far as to exclude him from the possibility of working to obtain a decent livelihood. Preventing people from recovering the full exercise of their dignity, these people remain once again exposed to the dangers that accompany a lack of opportunities for development, amidst violence and insecurity.”²

This bill will help people returning to our communities to build a career, provide for their families, and contribute to the common good of our communities. Senate Bill 170 will make reentry in Wisconsin more humane and individuals more successful. This bill demonstrates what can be accomplished through careful deliberation, stakeholder involvement, and bipartisan cooperation. We thank you for hearing this bill today and respectfully urge you to support it.

¹ *Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin by Wisconsin's Roman Catholic Bishops*. Wisconsin Catholic Conference, 1999.

² *Pope Francis Speech to the International Meeting for Regional and National Managers of Prison Pastoral Care*. November 8, 2019. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191108_pastorale-carceraria.html.