

All of Us or None

A proposed National Strategy Session to Strengthen the Voices of Formerly Incarcerated Persons and Felons

Over 30 million people are walking around in this country with felony convictions. Seventeen million of these people have served prison time, and it is estimated that 3 million more people will be released from prison over the next five years. These are substantial numbers. Most groups in society have found ways to organize themselves so their collective voice could be heard, their political reality could be assessed and their common interest identified and pursued. The time has come for ex-prisoners and former felons to organize to fight the discrimination we face and to regain our civil rights.

Over the course of the last thirty years politicians have enacted tougher and tougher laws under the guise of a war on crime, followed by the war on drugs. These wars have directly and disproportionately targeted communities of color. Public policy has shifted from rehabilitation to punishment, which simply has not worked regardless of longer sentences or torturous conditions of confinement. The prison population has mushroomed to over two million people and the voices of former prisoners and felons have been silenced. Their voices have been drowned out by the voices of victims finding new ways to articulate old arguments for punishment, the noise of politicians trying to secure public offices, and by lobbyists for corporations whispering in the ears of influential people so they can turn a greater profit.

The manifestation of these wars has not only been longer sentences but more severe collateral consequences attached to felony convictions. In fact, discrimination moved from ugly hidden practices to public policy. Accessing basic survival needs when people are released from prison has become nearly impossible. Such fundamentals as housing, education, employment and voting rights are more difficult to secure than ever before. For example, in over half of the states in the U.S., women convicted of drug offenses are coming out of prison permanently prohibited from ever receiving cash assistance or food stamps - a lifetime welfare ban. One strike evictions of whole families because of suspected criminal activity by one family member is now public housing policy. In California, over half the parolees in urban areas wind up homeless, and two-thirds of the people released from prison go back within 3 years.

The lack of basic survival needs not only restricts the quality of life for former prisoners, it also dramatically impacts the quality of life for our families and communities. The mental and medical health care problems of people coming back from prison pose a public health crisis for our communities. Our children suffer life-long scars when more and more of their mothers are imprisoned for longer amounts of time. Grandparents and other family members are taking care of millions of children with incarcerated parents, but still many of our children end up in the hands of an often-abusive foster care system. The political power of our community has been systematically undermined by felon disenfranchisement – over 2 million prisoners and nearly 4 million parolees are denied the right to vote. For

example, in Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, one in four Black men is denied the right to vote because of felony convictions. George W. Bush's march to the White House was over the bodies of inactive and disenfranchised felons. It is the silence and the lack of consistent organizing strategies of former prisoners and felons that have allowed politicians and others to rob millions of us of our civil rights and sacrifice us on the altars of systematic injustice. It should also be noted that one of the first groups to be investigated and discriminated against after 9-11 were ex-felons. The backlash and fear of "terrorists" translated into more employers doing background checks that deny us jobs and the chance to start over after coming out of prison.

Nationally, there have been a number of former prisoners who have managed to involve themselves in organizations, agencies and on boards of directors in an effort to engage the policy makers, foundations, and society at large. For the most part we are invited as minority voices, we sit on panels to give them the appearance of legitimacy, and we are invited not to set the agenda but to respond to it. Even if that agenda is about our life and our families, we remain the subject and not the solution. When formerly-incarcerated persons gather in massive numbers we usually take on some other identity: addicts, alcoholics, the homeless, diseased, or the hungry. We are disappearing under these identities, and the strength of our commonness ignored.

History indicates that our lack of an organized response to the suppression of our civil rights and our outright oppression is no accident. Parole requirements in many instances prohibit former prisoners from associating with each other. Prison administrations have too often pitted prisoner against prisoner and one race against another. Time, education and common interest make these obstacles something that can be overcome. Many former prisoners have been discharged off parole and are now free to meet together. Many of us have learned to overcome the racism that being in prison often intensifies. Our suppression in a free society makes our common interests obvious.

There are those among us who have had the privilege of meeting in rooms and discussing the problems that face us as former prisoners and felons. The atmosphere was electric and we walked away not committed to crime but to changing society. We were able to see that in spite of all odds many of us had changed our lives. We could see the common scars of incarceration. We could recognize that our experiences made us the best kind of experts. We could see the absence of a national plan that could reintegrate us back into society. We could see the financial profits that drive the prison building boom and could see the absolute need to organize ourselves to resist the oppression.

To fail to organize is to tacitly agree that it is okay to discriminate against us, that we should surrender our young to this oppressive system, and accept what the system does to us, our families and community. It is shameful that we have not spoken out about the criminalization of our youth and the over-reliance on juvenile detention facilities as if those places were not jails and prisons. We absolutely must publicly challenge the policies that have allowed the sharp increase in the number of women being imprisoned and the direct impact this has on the lives of children and the life of our community.

Proposed: A National Strategy Session for ex-prisoners and felons

All of Us or None will be a national meeting to unite and strengthen the voices of people most directly affected by U.S. prison policies – felons and former prisoners.

Whenever ex-prisoners and felons have had the opportunity to meet together at larger national gatherings, we have discovered that we encounter common problems and are working on similar campaigns. We recognize that we face discrimination, and we search for our common voice. Unfortunately these opportunities have been limited to just a few of us, without sufficient time to consolidate a collective approach to achieving solutions. We need to strengthen our voices so we can at least object to our oppression. We will strategize on:

- 1) How do we stop or reduce the collateral consequences of convictions?**
- 2) How do we engage local, state and federal government to develop policies and make resources and services available to formerly incarcerated persons to insure the greatest likelihood of success upon release?**
- 3) How do we change the public perception of who we are, and how do we show our success instead of continuing to allow the media and others to focus only on our failures?**
- 4) How do we stop profiteers and governmental agencies from gouging innocent families and friends (surcharges on collect telephone calls and other service) while their loved ones are incarcerated?**
- 5) How do we overcome the fear and heal the shame associated with being a convicted felon or for being formerly incarcerated?**
- 6) How do we advocate for alternatives to incarceration?**
- 7) How do we change the over-reliance on incarceration and stop the expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex?**
- 8) How do we stop politicians and others from using crime rates and parole to advance their careers?**
- 9) How do we advocate against human rights abuses for our sisters and brothers left behind the walls?**
- 10) How do we develop a national body of formerly incarcerated persons and felons so that our voices will continue to reverberate after the strategy session?**

This proposed strategy session will be the first national gathering of felons and former prisoners. We have never before had the opportunity to meet nationally, even though we are the group most directly affected by the prison-industrial complex and the criminal justice system. We believe a strategy session that is national in scope is necessary so we can consolidate and expand existing working relationships and ongoing work. A national gathering will enable us to unite in inter-state coalitions to defeat specific aspects of discrimination that occur in every state. It will allow us to share successful strategies and lessons learned. We hope the conference will be a step toward a platform for action that criminal justice, service provision, and advocacy organizations will unite behind. After this national conference, state-level meetings of felons and former prisoners, family members and advocates may convene in various states, with the goal of planning actions and campaigns on a local level that are part of a national strategy.

Organizing for All of Us or None has already begun because the need for such a strategy session has been identified by ex-prisoner leaders in the criminal justice movement. Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in San Francisco is an initial sponsor of the conference. Additional sponsors and endorsers will be organizations that do criminal justice advocacy, service provision, and grassroots organizing.

An Exploratory Committee of 20 former prisoners/organizers from around the U.S. is being formed. To insure the maximum degree of participation from former prisoners and felons we propose that the Exploratory Committee should be formed entirely of former prisoners and felons. The Exploratory Committee will be responsible for determining the interest in a national strategy session, identifying other former prisoners and felons who should be invited onto an Organizing Committee, potential allies that could assist the effort, identifying resources and the kind of skills needed to conduct a nation strategy session. This committee will further define outreach strategies and conference format. A meeting of the Exploratory Committee will be held during the week before Critical Resistance South, a conference that will be held April 4-6, 2003, in New Orleans. There will be a caucus for felons and ex-prisoners at Critical Resistance South which will be a forum to organize support for the national strategy session, All of Us or None.

We further propose that the Organizing Committee be comprised only of former prisoners and felons. The role of the Organizing Committee will be to further identify resources and funding, establish outreach strategies, promote the event, assist in program development, develop advisory boards, to provide guidance to national organizers. National Organizers will be responsible for doing the day-to-day work to make the “All of Us or None: A National Strategy session” happen. This structure does not preclude people who have never been incarcerated or who haven’t been convicted of a felony from participating on advisory boards nor does it stop us from seeking the advice of people with special experience and skills.

The strategy session will be a working conference, not a conference for public education. It will emphasize the participation of felons, former prisoners, and prisoners’ families in order to maximize discussion of the priorities for action in the communities most

affected by mass incarceration. We are the ones who have directly experienced many of the problems we will be discussing; there is no need for basic awareness-building sessions.

At the conference, we will emphasize future joint work and structures that will facilitate and expand continued contact between participants. To accomplish this goal, conference planning will include survey materials to solicit specific responses from participants about ongoing campaigns and priorities. This may be the first time that a large number of former prisoners and felons have been surveyed about the needs they can identify in the criminal justice field. We will focus discussions from the very beginning of the conference by presenting proposals for work and follow-up structures as part of the registration packet. Additionally, women may meet an additional day before the conference, in order to maximize women's participation and to ensure the inclusion of issues concerning women and the children of incarcerated parents.

Many former prisoners and felons are already involved in campaigns against the collateral consequences of imprisonment – the welfare ban, one-strike evictions, felon disenfranchisement, increased prison construction and worsening conditions, restrictions on education assistance and other benefits, increasing incarceration of women and youth, regaining custody of children after incarceration, and many others. The majority of panelists, speakers, and workshop leaders will be felons, former prisoners, and family members to ensure that our voices lead the conference. Workshops will promote building coalitions and working relationships among people active in these campaigns, defining strategies to expand support for these struggles. The conference format will encourage frank discussion, and evaluation of the lessons we have learned in our agencies and local organizing efforts, so we can share successful programs and practices. We will share media strategies, skills, and contacts, and discuss how to change public perceptions about crime and prisoners both nationally and in our local areas. Efforts will be made to unite around how to change specific policies and timetables for work, in order to maximize our collective effectiveness.

A primary goal of the strategy session is to build lasting, action-oriented connections between former prisoners who are activists in our communities. Another specific goal of the conference is grassroots mobilization to turn around the discrimination we face, and to fight for the civil rights of our community. We hope to define long-term strategic priorities – a unified program of action. The conference will be successful if people walk away realizing that they are not just victims of the system, that we can unite to change it. Success will be defined as a pro-active rather than a reactive strategy for our work against the current criminal justice system. Success will be to develop a national organization that represents the interests of former prisoners and felons, where we look among ourselves for expertise, for strength, and to develop a common voice. Success will mean that more felons can disclose their status and fight against the discrimination we all face.

Thirty thousand dollars has already been raised toward making this strategy session a reality. Over \$10,000 has already been donated by former prisoners. The Organizing Committee will draft a budget for the conference, which we expect to exceed \$150,000

because a large number of participants will need subsidies for travel. While we recognize that travel costs to any national gathering may limit the number of people able to participate, we will seek local funding and community support so people from every state can attend. We anticipate broad outreach to criminal justice organizations, service provision agencies, and advocates so they will subsidize their own members' participation.

It should be noted this effort is not being undertaken to replace or supplant any other effort to strengthen the voices and change the images of formerly incarcerated persons and felons. Hopefully this current effort can be seen as a mechanism to supplement other efforts such as those of the NuLeadership Policy Group, so we can unite around a platform of priorities and a program of action. The process of organizing such a strategy session will mobilize many former prisoners around the issues that directly concern our communities. We need to organize a base of conscious people, and from that base more leaders will emerge. We need a platform of action so we can combine our efforts. Careful preparatory work will ensure that strategy discussions will be the first priority rather than an afterthought on the last day. The temporary structures put in place to organize for this strategy session will be used to strengthen our long-term working relationships. Our goal is to ensure that ex-prisoners can unite so our civil and human rights are regained – for “All of Us or None.”