

Testimony to the New York City Council

December 11, 2007

The Rev. Dr. Earl Kooperkamp, Rector, St. May's Episcopal Church

My dear Sisters and Brothers:

Today is a day I have long prayed for and anticipated, for the New York City Council is on the verge of helping thousands of men and women in New York by investing in their future. By investing a relatively small amount in their future, we will not only see benefits in their lives, but also in the lives of the families they will support, the local businesses in which they will spend their time and in strengthening the communities throughout New York that make our city the great city we all love.

I come to you today to urge your kind consideration and positive vote for Intro 574. I come to speak on behalf of ICARE, Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Re-Entry, an organization that gathered letters of support for Intro 574 from dozens of congregations and religious bodies throughout New York City. Our fellow religious leaders know the importance of Intro 574 and the difference it will make in the lives of tens of thousands in New Yorkers in the years to come. Most importantly, however, our religious leaders are motivated to press for Intro 574 not simply because it is good public policy, but because it meets our deeply held values of working for the benefit of those who are all too often least in our society.

Each year, thousands of men and women return to New York City after finishing their prison sentences with the New York State Department of Corrections. Thousands more return after finishing their sentences on Rikers Island. They return to a city full of jobs and a vibrant economy, yet they lack one of the most basic requirements for getting a job: proper identification. One fundamental document necessary for obtaining proper identification is a Birth Certificate. Because the Birth Certificate fee is \$15.00 and recently released inmates have only \$40.00 when they re-enter New York City, this fee for a Birth Certificate is inordinately high. Intro 574 changes this; it will mandate that all inmates from New York city will receive a copy of their Birth Certificate on their release from custody. This will give these men and women the first foundational document for establishing proper identification as they head out into the city in search of employment.

The people of the member organizations of ICARE know through their work with recently released inmates just how many hurdles and barriers they face during the process of re-entry. Owning a piece of proper identification must not be one of them. We must integrate our brothers and sisters who return to us from the prison system as quickly and as thoroughly as we can so that we can break the seemingly unending cycle of crime, arrest and incarceration that is trapping so many of our young, energetic and talented young people. The passage of Intro 574 is a step in that direction. By helping to insure that from the initial moments of re-entry, a person is looking to get the right papers and identification to begin their job search, Intro 574 starts this process off in the right way.

On behalf of ICARE, I want to take a moment to thank Councilmember Palma for introducing this important legislation and for showing us that elected officials can make a positive change for our city. I also wish to thank City Council Speaker Quinn for her support. The entire ICARE community urges each of you now to support Intro 574 as one simple means for starting re-entering inmates off on the right track. Responding to this plea, taking just a minute to reach out a hand to sisters and brothers who are ready to start a new life if they are given the means and opportunity, might well be the most important thing you do today, and this simple act can have beneficial consequences for our city for years to come, a legacy of which we all can be proud.



Interfaith
Coalition
of
Advocates
for
Reentry
and
Employment

3041 Broadway
Mailbox 37
New York, NY 10027
212.280.1386

info@nyicare.org
www.nyicare.org

**Testimony of the Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for
Reentry & Employment (ICARE)
Re. Int. No. 574
Committee on Fire and Criminal Justice Services
June 6, 2007
Presented by Rima Vesely-Flad, Director of ICARE**

Director
Rima Vesely-Flad

Deputy Director
Susan Mareneck

My name is Rima Vesely-Flad and I am the Founder and Director of the Interfaith Coalition of Advocates for Reentry and Employment, also known as "ICARE." ICARE engages communities of faith in advocating for the Restoration of Rights of formerly incarcerated people, while assisting congregations in the development of prison and reentry ministries.

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Policy Committee
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Empire Justice

Annette Warren Dickerson
Center for Constitutional Rights

The member congregations and organizations of the ICARE coalition are pleased that the Fire and Criminal Justice Services Committee is considering Int. No. 574, which would provide birth certificates free of charge to individuals coming home from state prison and Riker's Island after 90 days. Congregations and organizations that have signed letters of support for this advocacy effort include: St. Mary's Church, St. Bartholomew's Church, St. David's Church, Bridgestreet A.W.M.E. Church, the Riverside Church Prison Ministry, the Women's Prison Association, the Center for Employment Opportunities, the National H.I.R.E. Network, the Center for Community Alternatives, the Fortune Society, and the Bronx Defenders, amongst many others.

Glenn E. Martin
National H.I.R.E. Network

Damaris McGuire
NYS Council of Churches

Rev. Vivian Nixon
College and Community Fellowship

Susan K. Porter
Judicial Process Commission

As elected representatives, you have wide grassroots support for passing Int. No. 574. As the director of ICARE, I educate communities of faith throughout New York State about the high costs of incarceration and recidivism in impoverished communities of color. The response to the plight of people with criminal convictions is always the same: outrage at the failure of criminal justice public policies, and empathy for the individuals and their families who are subjected to these policies.

Alan Rosenthal
Center for Community Alternatives

Kate Rubin
Reentry Net

McGregor Smyth
The Bronx Defenders

Men and women returning home need basic opportunities for housing, employment, health care, and obtaining identification cards. Abolishing the fees for certified birth certificates will remove great obstacles in the reentry process: the cost of getting them is prohibitive to many individuals, and yet they are often required by employers and government agencies. For example, in order to receive a non-driver's identification card, the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles stipulates the following rules.

Grant Zanker
Homeless and Traveler's Aid Society

A prison ID alone has no points towards a NY ID.

An applicant must present all of the following documents to be approved for a NYS non-driver identification card:

1. U.S. Birth Certificate issued by a Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, or U.S. State Department. Birth certificate must be an original document or a document certified by the issuing agency.

2. Temporary Photo Identification Card issued by the (DOC) Department of Correctional Services. Card cannot be expired.

3. Parole papers issued in the same name as the DOC temporary Photo Identification Card.

4. Social Security Card issued in the same name as the DOC temporary Photo Identification Card.

*** The DOC temporary Photo Identification Card and/or Parole papers are NOT acceptable proof of name if used independently and they cannot be combined with any proofs of identification other than those listed above.**

The vast majority of individuals released from state prisons and New York City jails seek to obtain a non-driver's state ID soon after returning to the community. The office of transitional services in state facilities assists in preparing individuals to apply for state identification; however, men and women face unnecessary barriers in obtaining official birth certificates. Ironically, the current practice of New York City's Bureau of Vital Statistics of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is to provide state correctional facilities with "Government File Copy: Not for Personal Use" stamped birth certificates [See appendix A]. These unofficial birth certificates are not supposed to be distributed to incarcerated men and women due to the fact that Vital Statistics is a revenue-generating agency and does not provide free birth certificates to individuals [See Appendix B, letter from Assistant Commissioner Steven Schwartz].

However, a birth certificate is a necessary document for formerly incarcerated men and women seeking a non-drivers identification card upon their release from prison or jail, enrollment into health care and benefits programs, and employment. An official birth certificate is a necessary document for all stages of the reentry process.

The cost for birth certificates is \$15. However, because people in prison are allocated only \$40 upon release, this cost is prohibitive.

Often individuals will seek assistance from New York City direct service providers, which receive funding from the City of New York to assist formerly incarcerated persons. The length of time it takes a staff member to go to the Office of Vital Records with a client, as well as to pay the \$15 cost of the birth certificate, results in the City of New

York unnecessarily compensating for a process that can be eliminated with Int. No. 574. This bill, in abolishing fees for official birth certificates, allows the time and resources of direct service staff and formerly incarcerating individuals to be used more efficiently while removing unnecessary barriers to reentry.

Therefore, we stand in strong support of Int. No. 574.

The benefits of this bill far outweigh the costs - a small amount in the face of enormous obstacles faced by reentering individuals and the significant, unnecessary, expenses of service providers' resources, which are ultimately the expenses of the City of New York.

Thus, abolishing the fees for official birth certificates is a pragmatic step that would facilitate a better use of everyone's resources and time while facilitating a smoother reentry process. As a coalition in support of individuals who are leaving state prisons and Riker's Island, we seek for each person to have all the necessary documents to apply for a non-driver's state ID card, gain employment, and enroll in necessary programs, thereby enabling individuals to succeed after returning home.

(abridged 12/10/07)

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
VITAL RECORDS CERTIFICATE

CERTIFICATION OF BIRTH

This is a certification of name and birth facts on file in the Office of Vital Records, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, City of New York.

DATE OF BIRTH: OCTOBER 02, 1954
BOROUGH: MANHATTAN
DATE FILED: 10-05-54
CERTIFICATE No.: 156-54-139727
DATE ISSUED: 08-02-05

NAME: WILLIE THOMAS JR. ***
SEX: MALE

MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME: MARIE MURRAY
FATHER'S NAME: WILLIE THOMAS

Government File Copy
Not for Personal Use
Steven P. Schwartz, Ph.D.
City Registrar

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13154454 Doc. No. L010145

ANY ALTERATION OR ERASURE VOIDS THIS CERTIFICATE





THE CITY OF NEW YORK

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE

Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor

Thomas R. Frieden, M.D., M.P.H.
Commissioner

Bureau of Vital Statistics 125 Worth Street- CN7 New York, New York 10013

nyc.gov/health

August 16, 2006

The Rev. Dr. Earl Kooperkamp, Rector
St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Manhattanville
6 Sylvan Court
New York, New York 10035

Dear Reverend Kooperkamp:

This is in response to your letter to Commissioner Frieden in which you request that New York City's Bureau of Vital Statistics provide official copies of birth certificates to incarcerated persons at no charge.

As you know, New York City Vital Statistics currently provides "for government use only" copies to the New York State Department of Correctional Services. They are intended for use by Correctional Services and not for distribution to inmates. We understand the need of individuals leaving state prisons to have official birth certificates upon their release. And we agree that correctional facilities are logical agents to provide the birth certificates to the formerly incarcerated individuals. However, New York City Vital Statistics does not subsidize any city or state agencies with free copies of birth certificates for their clients. The clients of other city and state agencies pay for official copies of birth certificates, and the social benefits of their programs are as important as the ones you describe.

The New York City Bureau of Vital Statistics is a fee-for-service program. A decrease in revenue will directly affect our ability to operate our program, provide customer service and essential public health data and analyses. We would be pleased to work with the Department of Correctional Services on a payment transfer system so that they may be able to include official birth certificates in each person's release package.

Sincerely,

Steven Schwartz, PhD, Registrar and
Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Vital Statistics



Interfaith
Coalition
of
Advocates
for
Reentry
and
Employment

Home Who We Are Advocacy Ministry Resources Contact Us

Supportive Congregations

- Attica Quaker Worship Group
- Bridgestreet A.W.M.E.
www.bridgestreetAWME.org
- Citizens for Restorative Justice
- Church of the Holy Trinity
www.holytrinity-nyc.org
- Christ Episcopal Church
www.christchurchpok.org
- Council for Witness to Society and the World
Presbytery of New York City
www.nycpresbytery.org
- Downtown United Presbyterian Church
www.DowntownPresbyterian.org
- Faith @ Work Christian Church
- Grace Episcopal Church, City Island
www.gracecityisland.org
- Grace Episcopal Church, New York City
www.gracechurchnyc.org
- Grace Church, Rochester
- Greater Zion Hill Community Action Network
- Judson Memorial Church
www.judson.org
- Lake Avenue Memorial Baptist Church
www.lakeavebaptist.org
- Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit
www.HolySpiritAlbany.com
- Mission San Juan Bautista
- Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church
- New York State Council of Churches
www.nyscommunityofchurches.org
- Racial Justice Program
General Board of Global Ministries
United Methodist Church
www.GBGH-UMC.org
- Religious Society of Friends, Rochester
- Springfield Garden United Methodist Church
www.sgumcny.org
- St Bartholomew's Church
http://www.stbarts.org
- St. David's Church



WHO WE ARE

Graduate of the Certificate in Ministry and Human Services Program at Sing Sing Prison (with daughter).

- Staff
- Board of Directors
- Policy Committee
- Supportive Faith Communities and Organizations
- Serving Another Sentence

St. Mary's, Manhattanville
www.stmarysny.diocesenys.org

St. Paul's, Poughkeepsie

The Riverside Church Prison Ministry
www.riversidechurch.org

The Church of St. Luke & St. Cyrene
www.twosaints.org

Unitarian Universalist Church of Albany
www.fuusalbany.org

United Methodist Men

University Heights Presbyterian Church

The Worship Center of St. Albans, Inc.

Zion Episcopal Church

Supportive Organizations

Break The Chains
www.breakchains.org

Brennan Center for Justice
www.brennancenter.org

Center for Community Alternatives
www.communityalternatives.org

Center for Constitutional Rights
www.ccr-ny.org

Center for Employment Opportunities
www.ceoworks.org

College Community & Fellowship
www.collegeandcommunity.org

F.E.G.S.
www.fegs.org

Homeless and Traveler's Aid Society

Housing Works
www.housingworks.org

Interfaith Impact of New York State

Judicial Process Commission
www.communitywishbook.com/JudicialProcessCommission.html

National H.I.R.E. Network
www.hlrenetwork.org

NuLeadership Policy Group

The Bronx Defenders
www.bronxdefenders.org

The Fortune Society
www.fortunesociety.org

Wildcat Service Corporation
www.wildcatatwork.org

Women's Prison Association
www.wpaonline.org

ICARE is grateful to the Council for Witness to Society and the World, Episcopal Charities, the Fund for the City of New York, the Fund for Nonviolence, the Riverside Church, Trinity Church, Wall Street, and the United Methodist Church for financial support for our programs.

Office of the Appellate Defender

11 Park Place
Suite 1601
New York, NY 10007

Tel: (212) 402-4100
Fax: (212) 402-4199
www.appellatedefender.org

The Office of the Appellate Defender (OAD) is a not-for-profit organization, established in 1988 that provides high client-centered quality appellate and post-conviction representation to indigent clients. OAD is unique among appellate offices in that it has a long-standing Social Work/Re-Entry Program to assist our clients in the reentry transition. The social work program provides a continuum of care for clients in the preparation stage of the reentry process through release and into aftercare upon release. Our social work staff works to reach out to our clients within a year of their earliest release dates and works with them throughout that time planning and preparing for their release. The assistance, support, and resources that are provided do not end once the individual is released. We continue to assist our clients until they are no longer in need. This enhances our clients' re-entry process by providing maintenance assistance as well as crisis intervention at any point during their reentry transition. This continuum of care in a client-centered manner provides the best service to individuals who are coming home from correctional facilities.

There are many things that need to be done when an individual is released from a correctional facility. There are steps that can be taken that will greatly assist the individual, as well as society, in a successful reentry process. Providing individuals with certified birth certificates upon their release is one such step to aid in the successful reentry process.


Often when a person comes home, he/she is in need of many basic human needs: food, shelter, clothing, and medical assistance. Without the proper identification the gaining of these necessities can be nearly impossible. The following is a case example of a client who was released from a NYS correctional facility without his birth certificate and social security card:

Mr. X is a 70 year old man who was released from a NYS prison in April of this year with only a released inmate identification card. Mr. X was referred to receive residential treatment at a treatment facility in NYC, but upon his arrival at this facility he was denied admittance. Mr. X was then forced to go into the hospital emergency room due to his weakened health. Mr. X had been hospitalized periodically throughout his incarceration, and shortly before his release in April he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Thus, upon his release Mr. X went to the hospital to receive care for his worsening bladder cancer condition. But since Mr. X did not have any of the required identification, i.e., birth certificate or social security card, no medicaid or medicare application could be filed on Mr. X's behalf. As a result very soon after Mr. X's admission he was discharged without the proper services. And due to his lack of medical insurance of any type, no proper guideline applied to Mr. X's discharge. Mr. X was then forced to reside in the NYC shelter system-- an elderly man with an advancing stage of bladder cancer who was unable to receive the proper medical services to treat his cancer. After many months, Mr. X finally did receive his medicaid benefits through the assistance of this office. Mr. X is now approaching a drastic surgery--the removal of his bladder. Due to the time wasted in getting his medial assistance activated, this surgery is more invasive then once planned.

Not having the proper identification can lead to many difficulties in the reentry process. The above is only one example of how not being provided the proper identification upon release can greatly adversely affect an individual's reentry transition. Many needed services are delayed, causing the state to pay more in emergency care and resulting in a much greater risk of re-incarceration.

The Office of the Appellate Defender strongly supports the proposed amendment 574-A to the Administrative Code of the City of New York, to provide certified birth certificates to those being released from both NYS and NYC correctional facilities.

Submitted: December 11, 2007



JACQUELINE J. KELLY, M.S.W.
SOCIAL WORKER

OFFICE OF THE APPELLATE DEFENDER
11 PARK PLACE SUITE 1601
NEW YORK, NY 10007