



Seek justice. Love mercy. Restore hope.

Testimony of Prison Fellowship
Before the Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance and Subcommittee on
Oversight of the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary
Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons
May 6, 2025

Dear Chairman Biggs, Chairman Van Drew, Ranking Member McBath, Ranking Member Crockett, and Members of the Subcommittees,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for this hearing on “Federal Corrections in Focus: Oversight of the Bureau of Prisons”.

Prison Fellowship is the nation’s largest Christian nonprofit equipping the Church to serve currently and formerly incarcerated people and their families, and to advocate for justice and human dignity. Established on the belief that all people are created in God’s image and that no life is beyond His reach, Prison Fellowship takes a restorative approach to those affected by incarceration. Prison Fellowship was founded in 1976 by Charles Colson, a former aide to President Nixon who served seven months in federal prison for a Watergate-related crime. Today, we strive to make prisons safer and more rehabilitative, advance criminal justice reforms, and support incarcerated people, their families, and their communities.

Issues Impacting Rehabilitation in Federal Prisons

At Prison Fellowship, we believe that a robust programming offering, including faith-informed and volunteer-led initiatives, is essential to cultivating a safe and rehabilitative correctional environment. Access to these programs is not only critical to the well-being of incarcerated men and women but also supports their successful reintegration upon release. Research has shown that individuals who participate in educational or vocational programming while incarcerated are 43% less likely to recidivate.¹

Many state departments of corrections have successfully partnered with external non-profit organizations to supplement their own funded or contracted program delivery. This emphasis on partnership with non-government organizations has not historically been reflected in the Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Congress recognized the value of greater collaboration and included provisions in the First Step Act (FSA) to encourage the BOP to engage with qualified external providers, including community and faith-based organizations.² The FSA emphasizes the value of Evidence-Based Recidivism Reduction (EBRR) programs and Productive Activities (PA), highlighting services such as job training, cognitive behavioral programming, and family development often delivered by third-party groups.

However, despite these intentions, proof of expanded partnerships has been limited. The BOP has implemented an evidentiary review process for external programs that goes beyond what the statute requires, which has made it more difficult for outside organizations to participate. In contrast, BOP-operated programs funded by taxpayer dollars are not subject to the same evidentiary standards. For

¹ Lois M. Davis, *Higher Education Programs in Prison: What We Know Now and What We Should Focus on Going Forward*, RAND Corporation, (August 2019), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE342/RAND_PE342.pdf; Robert Bozick, et. al., *Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Post-Release Outcomes?*, RAND Corporation (July 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP67650.html.

² FIRST STEP ACT of 2018, S. 756, 115th Cong. § 102(5)(A) (2018).

example, Prison Fellowship's in-prison program, The Prison Fellowship Academy, was not approved as an EBBR or PA, based on concerns about the resource requirements for implementation and determination that comparable programming was already available internally. This outcome highlights a missed opportunity to leverage a proven, no-cost resource that aligns with the goals of the FSA and supports rehabilitation efforts. Amid evolving federal funding priorities, it is more important than ever to leverage partnerships with external providers that support rehabilitation and public safety and reflect statutory intent. The incoming BOP Director has an opportunity to remove unnecessary barriers and realize the full intent of the FSA by welcoming qualified partners who can expand in-prison programming.

The conversation about program access must also be understood within the broader challenges currently facing correctional systems nationwide, including persistent staffing shortages. In 2022, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that state prison staffing had fallen to its lowest level in over two decades, with a 10% decline since 2019 alone.³ As staffing levels decrease while prison populations remain high, facilities face operational strain, safety concerns, and disruptions to rehabilitative programs and visitation.⁴

Correctional officers serve an essential public safety role, yet they experience higher rates of PTSD, suicide, and reduced life expectancy compared to other law enforcement sectors.⁵ Many officers are required to work extensive overtime, sometimes serving seven consecutive days with 16-hour shifts, contributing to burnout and safety risks for both staff and incarcerated individuals.⁶ Supporting correctional staff through fair compensation, mental health resources, and comprehensive training is critical to maintaining safe facilities. Recruitment efforts should not only focus on filling vacancies but also prioritize selecting individuals with the aptitude, resilience, and values needed to foster a rehabilitative environment. Regular training and clear professional standards further strengthen operations and workplace culture.

Beyond frontline staffing, strong leadership is essential for meaningful cultural transformation. Correctional leaders, particularly wardens, shape institutional culture, implement policy, and drive reform. Yet leadership development often overlooks the cultivation of a positive organizational culture. Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange program addresses this need, however, despite multiple invitations, no BOP correctional leaders have participated. At a time when the agency faces funding pressures and operational challenges, investing in leadership development is a critical step toward building more resilient, rehabilitative institutions.

Solutions to Strengthen Rehabilitation and Correctional Culture

Amid these challenges, proven, faith-informed models that can foster a more constructive prison culture exist. Prison Fellowship has developed several innovative programs that address both individual transformation and institutional leadership. For nearly 50 years, our staff and volunteers have been going

³ Shannon Heffernan & Weihua Li, *New Data Shows How Dire the Prison Staffing Shortage Really Is*, The Marshall Project (Jan. 2024), <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/01/10/prison-correctional-officer-shortage-overtime-data>.

⁴ Erica Bryant, *Corrections Staffing Shortages Offer Chance to Rethink Prison*, Vera Institute of Justice (Nov. 2024), <https://www.vera.org/news/corrections-staffing-shortages-offer-chance-to-rethink-prison>; Amanda Hernandez, *State prisons turn to extended lockdowns amid staffing shortages, overcrowding*, Stateline (Dec. 2024), <https://stateline.org/2024/12/03/prison-lockdowns/>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Vera, *The Prison Experience of Corrections Staff*, Vera Institute of Justice, <https://www.vera.org/reimagining-prison-web-report/examining-prisons-today/the-prison-experience-for-corrections-staff> (last visited April 2025).

into correctional facilities, sharing the Gospel, helping forge community, and offering the hope of true transformation. Through intensive in-prison programming, we nurture incarcerated individuals' spiritual growth with Bible studies and a wide range of biblically based curriculum. Our goal is for incarcerated men and women to experience the life-changing love of Christ and to prepare them to be leaders in their communities, whether inside or outside of prison. This work is funded entirely through the generosity of private donors and foundations, never by government funds.

Starting with Prison Fellowship Grow, a cohort-based, year-long program rooted in Christian principles of human flourishing. While faith is not required for participation, the program is designed for those who are curious about or open to learning more about Christianity. Courses are held twice a week and led by trained volunteers from local churches, under the oversight of Prison Fellowship's Prison Ministry Managers. Grow cultivates personal growth, moral development, and renewed purpose—foundations that support successful reentry.

The Prison Fellowship Academy is our most intensive in-prison program, offering men and women a voluntary, holistic journey of life transformation. For a year, participants are mentored by staff and volunteers as they develop and practice the biblically based Values of Good Citizenship: community, affirmation, productivity, responsibility, restoration, and integrity. Through targeted curriculum, compassionate coaching, and restorative community, participants replace criminal thinking with renewed life principles. Academy graduates emerge as change agents, prepared to contribute positively to both prison and society. The public safety results of this offering are clear - a recent study in Texas showed a 53.8% reduction in recidivism among Academy graduates compared to a similar group.

At the leadership level, Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange equips correctional executives with the vision and tools to build restorative environments. Grounded in four key areas—Restorative Mindset, Strategic Planning, Implementation Skills, and Transformational Leadership -- the program has trained over 680 leaders from 47 states, with an additional 149 currently enrolled. Participants report measurable improvements in safety, staff morale, and rehabilitative outcomes in their respective correctional environments.

Finally, Prison Fellowship Angel Tree recognizes the vital role of parents in a child's life, even during incarceration. Through partnerships with local churches, Angel Tree strengthens relationships between incarcerated parents and their children, offering year-round support to families. Today, approximately 1.5 million—or 1 in 49—children in America have a parent in prison, and 5.2 million have experienced parental incarceration at some point.⁷ Angel Tree provides hope, fosters reconciliation, and helps build bridges that promote healing for families impacted by incarceration.

Conclusion

Our prison events, classes, and programs reach more than 600,000 prisoners each year in over 1,200 prisons across all 50 states. We have 7,600 Prison Fellowship volunteers across the United States who

⁷ G.E.M, *Love Beyond Bars*, Girls Embracing Mothers (Dec. 2022), https://girlsembracingmothers.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Love-Beyond-Bars-GEM-Report_v5.pdf; Laura M. Maruschak, et. al., *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, Bureau of Justice Statistics (March 2021), <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmcsp16st.pdf>.



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make it possible to serve people in prison and more than 271,000 children of incarcerated parents annually.

By combining in-prison curriculum for incarcerated individuals with leadership development for correctional staff, Prison Fellowship helps lay the foundation for a safer and more rehabilitative federal prison system. Our mission is to encounter Jesus with those impacted by incarceration and we have witnessed firsthand how faith-based programming offers hope and a pathway to transformation for our brothers and sisters behind bars. We stand ready to partner with the BOP to expand access to proven initiatives and help create a more restorative and effective federal prison system.

Sincerely,

Cody Wilde
Senior Vice President, Correctional Programs
Prison Fellowship