



Library podcast

Beyond the Wall: Panel Discussion

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[00:00:30] Hi everybody welcome to our viewing tonight of the documentary Beyond the wall.

[00:00:36] Seattle Public Library in partnership with Pioneer Human Services is pleased to bring this film to the Seattle area and host this evening to raise awareness around the barriers facing those re-entering society from incarceration today. One of the library's focal points in our community engagement this year has been taking a closer look at the issues surrounding reentry. We've been meeting and hearing from a lot of individuals and agencies in this area that work in this field and are dedicated to helping our men and women who are returning from incarceration into the community. Our goal has been seeking ways that we can possibly better align our library services and programs with this kind of critical effort for our community. During the early phase of this work we were fortunate to meet with Pioneer Human Services and the idea for this evening program was born. We'll be starting tonight by viewing the film followed by a moderated panel discussion and hopefully with time afterward for community comments or questions before I turn the evening over to the moderator. I also want to take a special moment and thank our very special Seattle Public Library Foundation for making this and other free library programs available to you all. Their support enriches our community and our understanding of the world. Tonight joining us we're pleased to have is our moderator Steve Mullen president of the Washington Roundtable a nonprofit organization comprised of senior executives of major private sector employers in Washington state. He also happens to serve on the board at Pioneer Human Services. Prior to joining the roundtable Steve was the founding executive director of Partnership for learning. He's also worked for several local public affairs consulting firms as a U.S. Senate staff member in Washington D.C. and as a legislative staff member in Olympia. He's a graduate of Middlebury College and the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs. In addition to serving on the board for Pioneer Human Services he's on the board for the Washington State Charter Schools Association the Washington Health Alliance and the Washington Research Council and the Western Governors University of Washington advisory board. Please join me in welcoming Steve Mullen. Thank you.

[00:03:03] Good evening everyone. It's really great to see such a terrific turnout for this event. I'd like to begin by thanking the library and the library foundation for providing this opportunity to discuss an issue near and dear to the hearts of the staff the board and and the clients of pioneer human services. For those of you who don't know pioneer is a nonprofit here in the state the mission of helping incarcerated previously incarcerated individuals transition successfully and go on to lead fulfilling happy productive lives. Unfortunately there are nearly seven hundred thousand people estimated to be released from state and federal prisons every year in the United States a population equal to that of Seattle or Boston. That number does not include the hundreds of thousands more who are released from local jails in Washington State. Around 8000 per year are reenter as re-entering society when individuals have a successful reintegration back into the community. We all win. And fortunately many are not prepared to navigate the barriers confronting them as they re-enter society which is why recidivism is most common and the highest rates in the first year after being released beyond the wall follows five formerly incarcerated men who are attempting to rebuild their lives on the outside with little support from our criminal justice system.

[00:04:37] Their stories resolve are on one central figure a former prisoner name Louie diaz who works with each man to help him maintain his sobriety and his freedom. I hope the film will give you some insight into the struggles individuals face as they leave the prison system and how that impacts society. I hope you all enjoy the film

[00:04:58] As tonight we have great opportunity to speak with a number of well qualified folks from our community to talk about the issues that were raised in the film.

[00:05:14] I'd like to ask our panelists to step forward please. I'm pleased to introduce you to who

[00:05:22] First Saudia Abdullah. She is the director of community correction of the community corrections division at the King County Department of adult and juvenile detention.

[00:05:32] He most recently served as the director of federal reentry operations at Pioneer human services here in Seattle. She previously served as a policy analyst at the Council of State Governments Justice Center in New York City. Next. We have Lynette Mello who works for Pioneer industries is a Boeing tactician and is attending classes after work to gain her journeyman card through the Ajax apprenticeship program as a sheet metal fabricator. Rona Taylor works for Columbia Legal Services as the institution's project directing attorney and currently heads the Washington State reentry task force. Throughout her legal career she has worked to increase access to justice for all. Whether as a member of the institution's project. Or in her prior role as an assistant federal public defender in Michigan finally Keith Whiteman.

[00:06:24] Keith was born and raised by a single mother in Tacoma. He struggled with addictions since youth. He was incarcerated at 18 and served 15 years in prison. He met Ari Cohn of the post prison education project in 2008 and was introduced to the idea of getting an education.

[00:06:41] He received his AA degree at Washington State Penitentiary through the Walla Walla Community College. Currently Keith is attending the Evergreen State College and working on the post prison education program. Please help me in welcoming our families. We'd like to start by getting the panelists reflections on the film we just watched

[00:07:06] In the film.

[00:07:07] We see some real life struggles of individuals leaving the prison system in Massachusetts curious how those experiences that were included in the film represent your experiences here in our community. How did they reflect the challenges that our returning citizens face. What are some of the great challenges our community faces when it comes to support for people who are re-entering re-entering our community from jail prisons or other institutions.

[00:07:34] Some of our panelists as I said have themselves experienced incarceration or reentry and we'd love for them to speak about areas that they may have wished for more or different support from the community.

[00:07:45] I don't have any particular order. Anyone volunteer to kick us off.

[00:07:50] Yeah I'll pick someone I'll kick it off. It was a really difficult film for me to watch because I've experienced I've walked through. My life since you know the age of 13 using drugs and alcohol and my my own father before he passed when I was at 13 years old. And. The struggle that these guys these guys all these guys faced are similar to my own and that hopelessness, that fear

[00:08:23] Those struggles are real for guys like us. And. Unfortunately I didn't meet Louis until I met an Ari and unfortunately you know it took 34 years before I met Ari but I met him and. It's working. I got next month I'll have five years clean and sober

[00:08:51] I have a life today. I'm a college student. I'm the father. I have a family. I have a wonderful girlfriend. I have. A life. I have a job. The hardest part. Was the end of that film where. You saw the reality of the situation and guys getting out and that reality is

[00:09:16] Out of five guys. One was sober. One was dead. The other three were back in prison or hadn't.

[00:09:24] So it was hard to watch. And speaking from the perspective of someone who works as individuals that are returning

[00:09:32] To our community oftentimes we don't understand those nuances don't understand that this individual had a mother who sold drugs and a mother who was a drug addict and all of those things all we see is you know a sheet of paper in front of us that says you are reduced to be 6 9 3 7 you committed this particular act you did this thing while you were in prison and never talks about the struggles that you're going to face when you return home. It doesn't talk about the fact that you have

a bunch of tattoos and no one is gonna really hire you in corporate America to sit behind a desk and make the kind of money that you're going to need in order to sustain a true lifestyle and as you saw most of them had four or five six children. So what do I do. What many of them did and I do what comes what came natural what came the easiest and often time. Is those of us sitting on the other side of the desk we don't recognize it and we don't acknowledge it and we say what you should do is not get in trouble. And so I think we have to do as those individuals that are working with men and women that are part of this criminal justice system. Just take a second and ask the question the same question that Diddy wanted to ask the person joining the gang. What do you need from me. Just take 36. What do you need from me. Yeah I know you want to get a job and you want to do all that. But let's talk about right here right now today what's going to keep you from thinking that you need to go out and get high. You know this seven dollar an hour job with 50 dollar an hour job is not going to sustain you. So what are we going to do during that that space where you're really trying to get something different.

[00:11:18] So I would encourage those of us that work with men these men and women is to just ask the question What can I do for you today so I feel so heavy and I'm sure a lot of you do.

[00:11:33] During that entire movie I just felt like I was like my stomach was thinking thinking thinking.

[00:11:38] Because despite working with the same community on a daily basis you only gain a piece of the story.

[00:11:49] And so one thing that just reminded me is I know most of you probably know Bryan Stevenson. And one thing that he said was. That hopelessness is the enemy of justice. And if you are hopeless. Then or if your hope was. Something like if you're hopeless and you don't think you can change the world then you become a part of the problem. And so I wanted to start off there and just say you know I I hope we don't. We're not hopeless. There is something that could be done. What we saw in this movie are. All of these collateral consequences that flow from entering into the criminal justice system. But we didn't see exactly what was happening prior to someone's introduction to the criminal justice system. So there are all these isms that could have affected their lives. There is also poverty. There's classes and there's all these things that brought them into this criminal justice system. Well we also heard over and over again is that a lot of them were were introduced at a very young age. So juvenile justice reform is so important.

[00:13:06] Kids once they go through this detention system it's then a spiral that makes them go through system after system after system. But you know in that movie we're identifying housing issues employment issues we were identifying issues with respect to where a person is released in our state. You know you go back to the place of last Origin so wherever that last conviction took place that's where you actually have to go back to which oftentimes isn't the place people need to go back to. We also saw. You know drug issues and mental health treatment and what we do see and especially with Columbia Legal Services is that. People are going in most often times are having a mental health issue but instead they're convicted for some type of crime when they go into the jail or prison they're not getting the adequate medical or mental health treatment that they need to address

their issues and then they're released and oftentimes their Medicaid is terminated. So then they have to go and try to figure out how to deal with their issues and get the medications or whatever it is that they need. And we don't have adequate reentry services. We were talking earlier today you know in the federal system people go through a halfway house for a significant amount of time that doesn't happen in this state. And so there are a number of issues and I can go on and on. This was this was deep. And really sad. Lynette some initial comments. Like. With the whole hopelessness feeling

[00:14:44] Me growing up I grew up in a decent family I had a good life growing up it was just personal issues later self-esteem issues that got me into using drugs and stuff it made me feel like I fit in a lot more so coming out of incarceration.

[00:15:02] That support is a huge thing. I mean that the way these guys. Really like they never gave up on them. That's the kind of people that I try and support myself or surround myself with now. But housing and a job is a major thing. Being released. And like you were saying with them dealing with the problems not just getting out and getting work but some people that's what they need they need that accountability. And so to me it's like that was the important thing for me. Coming out of prison.

[00:15:37] And here the rest of you have thoughts about how you would envision a community support system that would keep our communities most vulnerable out of jails prisons and other institutions. I could see. Like a legion of former prisoners

[00:15:52] And people that have been trained and educated and social work coming into the community and because quite frankly talking heads don't get the job done you know and I don't know about everybody but for me I wasn't gonna listen that I couldn't take you seriously if you unless you've been through what I've been through and I think that that's going to be the most influential force is going to be guys that been there.

[00:16:20] Guys have done time. Women have done time and people who have done time going out into the community in positions becoming available for people in those situations who have been educated and know now and that have some time under their belt like Louis. There's gonna be failures there's gonna be success though there's going to be success and to be taken seriously by the majority of these people you're gonna have to understand what they've been through. And if you don't understand it you're not going to solve it you're not going to be you're not going to actually solve anything that people that have the problems or the individuals who are gonna solve them but. That's that's what I see. I see a workforce of people who've been there influencing the people who are fighting the fight.

[00:17:04] Lynette does that ring true to you. Yeah but you're talking about people that. Been through the same thing

[00:17:11] Being in that to help other people yeah. Because when I've gone through treatment facilities this is just my own opinion. When people become drug and alcohol counselors there was a lot easier for me to relate to someone that's already been there than to somebody that's just came

from school. I mean I'm not saying that's a bad thing but. I know I can relate a lot better to someone that has been through what I've been through and to understand what I'm going through a lot better. About from a system perspective Rona and Saudia thoughts about

[00:17:44] How to structure a system. So I think we talk about the communities most vulnerable first where I think we have to become a community again. You know our teachers our police our doctors don't live in our communities anymore. And so what often happens is you know my window gets broken out I call nine one one and it was little Johnny down the street and instead of just going to Johnny's mother and saying hey he broke my window. Can he you know mow my life for the next six months. He now gets arrested. He goes through the process. And so one thing we've got to become a community again and figure out a way. To really have those conversations and so for instance you know in the south King County in federal way. You have the boys and girls club. It's called the EX3 which is the teen center. And then you have the Federal Way community center the federal community centers about two hundred and thirty dollars a month right. So I got a pretty good job. I can go there and I can receive all the services they have the workout pool and things like that. But the vulnerable population is that that the teen center. There's only thirty six dollars a month. And if you are poor or you can show that you're receiving any type of assistance they'll waive your fee ksometimes these these are not necessarily these are kids that are are not always the best looked after and they do things like they see a pair of shoes and they steal shoes.

[00:19:07] So what the director and I have this that is we're not calling the police for a pair of stolen shoes or we're gonna do is look at the camera see who it was when they come back the next day we're going to talk to them and you're gonna bring the shoes back to the dismay of a lot of people. But at some point we've got to stop using the criminal justice system for community issues. And until we do that. Things aren't going to change. You know having having having yeah having a bunch of legion I think I like that word. Having a legion of individuals that can go down and talk to people and say hey why are you here. Who know where the drug the drug usage is going on you know who can go down into some of these homeless encampments and feel comfortable enough to go in and sit and shake hands and talk to people and just treat people like human beings and engage with them. So we talk about doing that to be a community. That's how we can change.

[00:20:03] I don't think I can top that.

[00:20:06] I think she's absolutely right. And. I would just add to all of the all of that was shared. That I think a way to kind of build a support system is identifying what we actually have. And where are the gaps in services and where the gaps in providers. I also think we have to be led by the community in it.

[00:20:28] And I'm saying that those who have been formerly justice involved make certain that they are a part of the discussions. A lot of times people say nothing without us. And that's absolutely right. You know we have here in our state now the certificate for restoration of opportunity called is crop. And one of the interns in our office is a woman who received the first crop in the state. Right. And we have her going out to the community whether it's pioneer Human Services or DSE or you know

Olympia wherever it is and really talk to people you know as someone who's formerly justice involved and her influence is magical because she's been there she's done that and she has a success story and she still has struggles. She still goes through things on a daily basis but she's fighting it every day and she's pushing hard. I also think that we need policy change. You know when you're hearing about things that are happening your local community you know they say politics is local.

[00:21:36] Arrests are local. You know mass incarceration is local. All that is local reform is local.

[00:21:43] And we can do it we can make that change here in our community. And so I think we need to start looking at policy we need to start determining you know why it is that people. Are having struggles and what we can do to change policy to to help them and then not just with respect to policy we have to remember that we have to push harder to make certain that the criminal justice system does not have a lifetime jurisdiction or a hold on people. And what I mean by that. Is

[00:22:14] They paid their dues. You say this is retribution you deserve this amount of time forever. Whatever crime you committed. Fine. This is a retribution you decided that this person deserves.

[00:22:28] Then let them go. They shouldn't have these legal financial obligations that are not going to allow them to be employed or have housing they shouldn't have all these barriers after paying dues paying the dues that they that a court has decided is what's fair for their for their activity. One of the many painful parts of the movie was the impact on children and families

[00:23:00] Interested panel's thoughts about how we can best support the families of folks that are involved in the justice in the criminal justice system.

[00:23:10] I think we have to remember reentry begins that arrest from the moment that person is arrested their entire family begins to serve time with them. So if they have a wife or girlfriend children

[00:23:21] And really think about what that looks like and that's the thing about it they're coming home. All right. Ninety two percent of all people centers are at some point in time. Going to come back to the community. We have a couple of choices we can you know kind of just let them come back. Hope they figure it out which is in many respects what we're doing now or we can begin to support them in their family so they have something come back to one a couple of the young men in the film talked about. They went back to the exact same spot where they were arrested they can see I was arrested right over there I was shot right over there. There is a sense of figuring out a way to remove yourself you go to prison and you you have served my time and I try to take these classes and I've done really great things but I mean how how successful can I be if the same crack dealers living across the street from me he knows my addictions are he knows my weaknesses are. Or I go back home and I used to as a parole officer many moons ago I would explode. We all say we're taught to act the family can so-and-so come home. The answer is most of the time yes. Right. You can't go the way you want to come.

[00:24:33] I changed the question and I said How long can he stay here without paying rent without contributing financially. He said I'm gonna need you to give him a bus pass to get back to all these programs that don't have bus pass from get to. That's a different question. And I think we've got to start involving the family prior to release. Don't just in the person home we can come here. What support can you afford for them to be here. I think I'll be sleeping in the bed and I go to sleep on the sofa

[00:25:02] You know. Are they only gonna be here until the next family member gets out and then they get kicked out. Is this gonna be a clean and sober house. Are you committed to not having alcohol and drugs in the house. Are you committed to these children that are going to be in the home. How are they going to re-engage with them. We remove individuals from the home and then they get out. We say Here you go. Kids that have seen these kids in five years I don't know how to engage. Very rarely do we actually incarcerate people near where they live. So now things have changed. I've had people get out of prison after 20 years. Call me from the gas station crime Mr Dillon a car ran out of gas. I don't know where the gas tank is because when they went home it was behind the license plate. You know when they left and now it's the little button in the car. And so we. So they can't work a car. How they deal with their children how they deal with their wife their girlfriend. Do they know how to have a relationship outside of an institutional relationship so you know as soon as that person is arrested that whole family needs some sort of support and some sort of treatment everything that person is getting inside. We need to be figuring out a way to offer it to that family in that community.

[00:26:19] Anyone else. I'll just say when. When I was listening it just sound like the family. There's so many burdens that are placed on the family. And I just you know. With folks who are inside who are confined in families are coming to visit. There are so many barriers to that. So there is a there is a dismantling of the family. And I would go even further for families of color because oftentimes or those who have. Or there could be a complexity here with respect to poverty. So I won I think we have to have that programming for people who are left behind.

[00:26:58] We also have to stop these barriers with respect to them continuing to strengthen their relationship with their family member that encourages people to be successful inside because even inside people have. I mean depending on how they're classify they may not have access to certain program. They may not have access to a certain job opportunities. But if you have family that you're connected to oftentimes that keeps you can keeps you lifted it encourages that success that we need from people who are leaving so you know there are barriers with respect to you know people have to pay a lot of money for video visitation. I mean sometimes some jails will only allow you to do video visitation. How do you afford that. Well no no. When the family member who is inside is no longer there to buy them with that extra income or you know people have to you know pay money just for the call you know is extremely expensive. So I mean those are some. We need support in that area. And that seems minor but it's so real because his day today for families we also need help as as shared before with respect to when people are leaving and what type you know the services that people need to be able to to support their family members because oftentimes you know is beyond monetary. You know there's a lot of trauma and you know is. Mental health and other types of issues that are that make the issue more complex

[00:28:24] And I think that we could carry on this conversation for another hour or two at least. But unfortunately we only have about five minutes left so I'd like each of you to briefly if you can think about the consequences to our community of not doing a better job of returning citizens. We don't find a better way to support successful reentry or any other final comment that you choose to make

[00:28:50] I think. I think I'd like to say that. Yeah I've done 15 years but I've done it in six different sentences. And when I got out and I'm sure it's for the majority of guys when they get out they feel

[00:29:06] Immense shame and guilt and some stuff I can't even put a name to. And. If. You want to make a difference. Let somebody know whether it's your cousin or your uncle or your brother or whoever. I think everybody has one of those people in prison in their life. They know somebody in prison don't hide the love Don't. Don't be shy with the with the kind words. Let somebody know that you care. And and it makes a huge difference when when I found out that somebody cared that didn't have to care. It changed my life. It changed my life. So if you got somebody in your life you work somewhere with somebody. Let them know.

[00:29:55] Give them a pat on the back. Say I'm proud of you. Just do it. I mean it. It makes a difference. And it and I think that sometimes that difference can be life or death. So if you have a chance. Like let it start with you let it start with us. And that's where it begins. Because people see that and they go on and they do that. And then it changes. It starts to change. And that's my that's my final. Thing. Well said

[00:30:25] If the question is about what are the consequences the consequences are dire. Dead bodies in the street more heroin overdose. Less money for education more money for prisons. I guess more people go into law school to defend or prosecute and more judges. I mean that's. That's the reality that that's the consequence.

[00:30:46] And if we're if if what we're saying is we're willing to lose the next several generations because we don't have the money to educate them because those are the choices we can we can figure out a remedy or we can just make the decision that we're going to sit back and not do anything. Or or worse keep doing what we do. There I guess there is a word but if we don't start having real and honest conversations and what we can't do is everyone in this room there's been a reentry center or a drug treatment center or methadone clinic if someone has tried to build in your community. And you all. Some people probably in this room have gone to community meetings and said not in my backyard. So the question is What can you do. Let it come to your backyard. It's better for it to come to your backyard.

[00:31:39] You never need it. Therefore you didn't need it and not be. Because if you think that your 12 year old or your 13 year old then know what heroin is. There's a 13 year old girl in my son's classes on an ankle monitor.

[00:31:53] So we don't figure out a way out of this. We could knock. We could not incarcerate our way out of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 80s of the late 80s and early 90s. We will not incarcerate our way out of this heroin epidemic. So the consequences of not doing something.

[00:32:09] Dead bodies in the street less education and more prisoners. I agree with everything that's being said and I just say one thing that we I think would be a consequences that continuous mass incarceration instead of mass employment

[00:32:29] Which is what we really want because that's when people feel like they're able to be you know that to contribute to society in a way that empowers them and their families.

[00:32:40] I'll also say that you know as I said homelessness is an enemy of justice. So is apathy. So to sit here and watch this movie and not do something. Is not going to be OK. That apathy. Don't just sit here talk about these issues at your dinner table with family members who don't think like you.

[00:33:04] You're here for a reason. So we're probably preaching to the choir. Right. But talk to the people who don't think like you. You know encouraged them to think beyond themselves. And to you know to look at everyone as a human being because we all make mistakes. Somebody just might not know about yours. But if we were to take some type of you know survey in here I bet everybody here has Jay walked right or committed some type of vehicular offense. You know I mean. Sir many of us have that ticket has run out. When we parked. I mean we in all seriousness you know.

[00:33:48] Some people are caught and some people are not. Some people are over policed and some people are not. So we need to remember. That there is more that we can do than just watch this movie

[00:34:02] We can make a change. And it starts with us and in the city of Seattle because nationally things might be crazy. But here. We can do something. We can do something right here.

[00:34:20] From what I've seen in my personal experience with coming out of prison. I

[00:34:25] got a lot of friends that have come out of prison and they're major barrier. Like I said was employment. I just wish I was there would be more companies and more opportunities for people with the past instead of being judged by what they look like on paper. You know for what we're what we want to do. I mean I work with a bunch of people that I've they work hard. They work really hard because we've been. Already to the bottom and we don't want to go back there so it just makes us want to work that much more. So I just wish there was more opportunity for jobs.

[00:35:03] And housing.

[00:35:05] Housing. Our friends at the library have said that we can. If you would all like go a few more minutes.

[00:35:11] Are you willing to take a question or two from the audience. Absolutely. Any questions sir. So what the gentleman said is that we need to make certain that we help the children because children who have incarcerated parents oftentimes deal with

[00:35:28] you know pressures to either not do well or they're embarrassed. There's a lack of. So you're right. Yeah. That children and families definitely need to be supported. I'm a I'm a product of that. I both of my parents were incarcerated. My brothers I have a brother in prison for life now and a brother who's always been a drug dealer. But I had support from family and friends and teachers. I also had this fire in me you know and there were things that could have happened to me but it didn't. I slipped through the cracks. But that's not every child. Some children are forced into foster care and then that creates all of these other collateral consequences. So we do need to be more mindful like you're saying of all the things that happen to children in and take accountability for that

[00:36:17] We still probably could manage one more question if someone has a burning just so I can summarize for the microphone.

[00:36:25] The basic question was how are we doing with programs like the post prison education project.

[00:36:30] And are we making improvements in terms of the outcomes. We have excellent success rate on the people that we are able to help which is close to. We actually get to financially help about 10 percent

[00:36:43] Of the people that come to us for help. And we have a 92 percent success rate on helping guys stay out of prison. It's excellent. But the funding simply isn't there to. Help everybody and it's heartbreaking. If the funding were there. I imagine that it would be about the same in the end in the low low to mid 90 percent. And I think that's a direct result of the of the mentorship that goes on. And I think. You know exactly what I'm talking about Franklin. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Yeah

[00:37:22] Great question Franklin. So we're going to conclude tonight. I hope you take a second to maybe chat with your neighbor and share some thoughts. Thanks for coming. Also I want to thank Steve Mullen for his moderation. And thank you to our panelists. Saudia, Lynette and Keith. Thank you so much for your thoughts. Before you go we just have a quick shot. Did anybody learn anything tonight. They didn't know. Just maybe one thing. Just so we can know how effective this was.

[00:37:58] So and like everybody said I just want to encourage everybody to please try to help in your own way whether you're telling this stories you could share on the hashtags we put up on social media. Try to read some more about this material. You could read the New Jim Crow Just mercy or just not the New Black. We'll be showing the documentary The 13th here next month on April 13. If you're interested in some of the agencies working locally they have information on the front table. Helps somebody hire a person with a criminal history and have a good evening.

[00:38:36] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.