

# In Their Own Words: Organizing Legislative Testimony from People in Prisons

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Panelists:

Anthony Blankenship, Senior Organizer, Civil Survival

Christopher Blackwell, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Look 2 Justice

Jesse White, Legislative Director, Prisoners' Legal Services-Massachusetts

Hosted by:

Prison Policy Initiative

# Welcome and Introductions

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# Overview

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- In this Webinar, we will:
  - Discuss why this is important and why now.
  - Legislative Testimony toolkit walkthrough.
  - Panelist discussion.
  - Q & A.

# Incarcerated Voices Matter

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- Why is this important?
- Why now?
- What are the Steps?
  - Coordinate
  - Educate
  - Facilitate




*Corey "AL Ameen" Patterson was incarcerated at MCI-Norfolk in Massachusetts when he testified before the Joint Committee on the Judiciary. Photo credit: Jean Trounstine*

# Coordinate: Identifying Partners and Roles

- Incarcerated People
- Community-based Organizations
- Legal-aid Allies
- Allies within the Legislature
- Getting DOC Buy-in

# Educate: Getting People in Prisons Ready to Testify

- Means and methods of communication.
- What should they know?
  - Overview of the legislative process
  - Summaries of Bills on the table
  - Legislative updates
  - Overview of the testimony process
  - Best practices



PRISONERS' LEGAL SERVICES OF MASSACHUSETTS

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www.plsma.org  
its.prisonerslegalservices@plsma.org  
Male: 617-482-2773 Fax: 617-451-6383  
State prisoner speed dial: 9004 • County prisoner collect calls: 617-482-4124

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**General Tips for Oral and Written Testimony:**

Here is a list of general tips borrowed from the ACLU and based on our experience on how to structure your testimony:

- **Opening:**
  - Begin your testimony by thanking the members of the committee.
  - State your name and any groups you are affiliated with (for example, Restorative Justice Working Group).
  - State which bill(s) you are speaking about and whether you are speaking in support of or against the bill. In most cases, you will likely be speaking in support of the bill.
- **Argument:**
  - Describe your personal connection to the issue. Personal stories can be incredibly valuable and help make the issue feel more real and urgent to legislators.
  - Outline the problem more broadly and identify statistics or arguments as to why the legislature should consider reform.
  - Discuss a few, or each, of the bill provisions and why your personal experience and/or the statistics and arguments you raised demonstrate a need for these provisions.
- **Closing:**
  - Thank the committee and ask the committee to consider reporting out the bill favorably.
  - You can also summarize your arguments here.

# Risk, Power, and the Importance of Informed Consent

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- Opposing testimony from victim's advocacy groups
- Opposition from correctional officers' unions
- Opposition from prison administration
- Retaliation from prison systems
- Potential impact on open cases

# Facilitate: The Importance of Following Incarcerated Leadership

- Facilitation is Following
- Consensus Across Demographics





# Common Arguments and Useful Responses

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- *“The tech doesn’t exist.”*
- *“Scheduling is too difficult.”*
- *“We can’t let EVERYONE speak!”*
- *“You can’t speak with people in SOLITARY!”*

# Discussion

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Q&A

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# Get in Touch with our Panelists

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# Prison Policy Initiative Resources

- **Organizing Legislative Testimony Toolkit**— includes the counterarguments talked about in this presentation in one easy-to-use document.
  
- **Sign up for Prison Policy Initiative's Newsletter:**  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/subscribe/>
  
- **Follow us on Social Media:**
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