

Transcript of “In Their Own Words: Organizing Legislative Testimony from Incarcerated People.”

Prison Policy Initiative Webinar, presented August 5, 2024

Sarah Staudt: All right, let's get started. Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Staudt and I'm the Director of Policy and Advocacy here at the Prison Policy Initiative. Prison Policy Initiative is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that produces cutting edge research to expose the broad harms of mass criminalization and mass incarceration. We work with advocates to create a more just society. I am delighted today to welcome you to our webinar, In Their Own Words: Organizing Legislative Testimony from Incarcerated People. I'm so excited that we have such a big crowd to learn from the amazing advocates we have with us on our call, and these are advocates who have successfully gotten the voices of incarcerated people heard directly by legislators.

In a minute, I'll turn this over to Emmett Sanders, our policy and advocacy associate who will be moderating the panel. But first, I wanted to let you know about the best ways to stay up to date on our latest work and resources. The best way to stay in touch with us is to subscribe to our newsletters. I'm going to put the subscription link in the chat as soon as I finish talking. Usually about once a week, we send research and data to help advocates, lawmakers, and journalists better highlight and end the harms of mass incarceration.

Also, if you are an advocate or an elected official working on the ground to address mass incarceration in your state, Prison Policy Initiative's advocacy department would love to hear from you. Our advocacy department works directly with on-the-ground organizations to provide custom research, all for free and legislative testimony on criminal legal system matters. The best way to reach us is through the contact form on our website. I promise, we really do check it. We'd love to hear from you.

Just some housekeeping. Please use the Q&A function and not the chat to ask questions. We'll look at those questions. If they're really short, I may answer them in the Q&A, but if they're more detailed, we'll save them for the end and we'll get to as many questions as we can. Also, the webinar is being recorded and it will be emailed out later this week to everyone who is signed up. And now without further ado, I'll turn it over to Emmett Sanders to introduce himself and our panelists.

Emmett Sanders: All right. Hi. I don't know if anyone can see me. Hi, everyone. Thanks, Sarah. Hi, everyone. I'm Emmett Sanders. I am the policy and advocacy associate here at Prison Policy Initiative. I'm also formerly incarcerated myself, and as someone who has been through the system, I know how important it is for those who have been impacted by it to engage with the people who are making the laws, right? But I also know how often that those voices go unheard, even though incarcerated people have the most to say. So we'll be talking about that today about how to get people engaged and we'll be joined by our three panelists, Anthony Blankenship, who's a senior community organizer with Civil Survival, Christopher Blackwell, who's a co-founder and executive director of Look 2

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Justice in Washington, and Jesse White, the policy director in Prisoners Legal Services in Massachusetts. And we're going to talk to them about their efforts, organizing testimony from incarcerated people in Washington and Massachusetts.

So we'll hear from them shortly, but first let's just do a brief overview of our webinar. So if you can go to the next slide, please. Today we're going to discuss why it's important to ensure that incarcerated people can participate in legislative hearings and just share some methods that folks are using to make this happen. Then we're going to do a quick walkthrough of our legislative testimony toolkit, just steps necessary to coordinate, educate, and facilitate legislative testimony from people in prisons, and then we'll hear from our panelists about their advocacy efforts. We'll have a little bit of discussion, do some Q&A from the folks in the crowd, and that's it. So with that, let's go ahead and begin. Next slide please.

So why is this important? Well, system reform is on agendas all over the country, but there are more than a million people in state prisons, just in state prisons alone, who are routinely denied the right to engage with lawmakers even though these people have more at stake than probably anyone else, right? But more than that, incarcerated voices are powerful. They have changed things, they can change things and they have changed things, incarcerated people speaking about the effects of solitary confinement, juvenile, life without parole. These are not just stories, these are expert testimony that's being offered and they're crucial to making actual changes happen.

And so why now? Well, the truth is that we can, right? Since COVID-19, the tech exists to better engage people in public functions remotely, right? It's expanded dramatically. 48 states have some form of video calling, often through tablets, and at least 26 state legislatures have some processes for remote participation in one or both chambers. There are definitely problems with this expansion of technology in prisons, but there is also increased opportunity to again, coordinate, educate, and facilitate testimony from incarcerated people, and we're going to really talk about what it means to facilitate in an ethical way. Next slide please.

So coordinating partners. So first and foremost, incarcerated people are partners in this work, period. They know what needs to change and they know how the system works and more importantly, they know what doesn't work, right? They know how to recognize and navigate obstacles in the system that other partners might not even see, and they need to be partners in setting policy agendas from the very beginning, identifying how best to use the limited political capital that we have to make changes and to help educate other folks in prison, but people beyond prison, legislative allies and other people as well.

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Community-based organizations, great for establishing trust, organizing. The trust that they establish with folks who are in prison because they're working in the communities that folks come from is really important in terms of just making sure that people don't feel left out to dry if something unexpected happens, right? It's also really important to make sure that you're coordinating across different community-based organizations who are working on those kinds of things because you want to make sure that you're not accidentally hurting each other's efforts or stepping on each other's toes and that you're working to coordinate together to make something happen.

Legal aid organizations, these allies have access to people in prisons. They can facilitate conversations in ways that ... They can open up doors in ways that otherwise it's really hard to do. We'll hear with Jesse from PLS in a minute to talk more about that kind of thing. Allies within the legislature, so they can help organize and prepare people on the inside to give testimony. They help facilitate communication between partners to help overcome logistical hurdles. But allies within the legislature also bring political legitimacy and political connections, which are really important in terms of just getting buy-in from DOCs, and of course they draft the laws that incarcerated people are hoping to testify on.

So one word about getting DOC buy-in. The simple truth is that DOCs may or may very well not be partners in these efforts, but they do control access to people in prisons and they control their access to the tech they need to participate in legislative hearings. So getting buy-in is going to just make things a lot easier. And one thing about this, prison systems, generally, they follow from the top down. They're hierarchical bureaucracies and directors are usually political appointments, so support from legislative allies can be really, really key here in terms of getting buy-in. Next slide please.

So educating, getting people ready to testify in legislative hearings. So incarcerated people need to be fully armed with an understanding of how legislative processes work. They need to have all the information they need to make informed decisions about what's at stake. There are lots of ways to do this actually. We mentioned tablets earlier. They can be used to make calls and messages, but they can also be used to upload educational materials, information on civic participation, all kinds of things they can be used for. Peer-to-Peer educators like Chris and the folks at Look 2 Justice are really, really important in order to help guide folks through the legislative process. Mailing mail, you can send stuff in, educational materials, surveys, all kinds of things you can send through the mail. It's all in our toolkit. We talk about it there, and collect call blocks.

Advocates use collect call blocks where folks can call in from prison with questions they have, blocks of time. It is important I think when you're talking about that really to make sure that you're scheduling these blocks of time over

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different days, over different periods of time, accommodate scheduling in prison. So that's how we're getting in there and talking to folks, but just a few things about what they should know.

You want to make sure that people know what steps are involved in the legislative process, and it can be a little different from place to place, so you'll have to know what it is in your area, right? But how bills are drafted, how they're sponsored, how they're introduced, how legislative committees work, and what it takes to pass legislation. You want to make sure that folks know what's on the table, what's being discussed, what the bills do, how the language might change, for example, or anything during the legislative process. And you want to make sure that people are up-to-date on any kind of developments that happen, right? And that's really important to involve the legislative allies in that because they can best keep us up to date.

You also want to give them an idea of what to expect when they testify, how it's going to work. So make sure that they know how long they'll have to speak, how to address the committee, all these things. Make sure just the fundamentals are there and so they're comfortable enough to speak from the heart, speak from their experience. And finally, best practices. You need to give some advice on basically how to draft and deliver compelling testimony, give some tips, some testimony from other folks. You can see here we've shared an example of some tips that PLS Massachusetts here have shared with us and it's in our toolkit as well, and you'll find that online. Next slide please.

So one of the most important things to make sure that people know when you're putting this forward is just that there are things that they're going to have to ... You need to communicate what kind of risks that people are facing because they might not want to testify if they know what they're up against, and so people have to make an informed decision. This has to come from them. So victims advocacy groups might offer opposing testimony. That's something they might have to encounter.

You might see opposition from CO's Unions citing security, and those of us who have been incarcerated know security is often used as a blanket excuse to shut down a lot of things. Prison administration might put in restrictions about how many people can testify or who can and can't testify or limit communication or movement. And there's also a potential for impact on open cases, so incarcerated people who want to testify really need to speak with their lawyers and make sure that it's okay, that there's nothing untoward that's going to happen. And just a word on retaliation. People in prison face retaliation for speaking out about their conditions all the time, and that's a truth. And it can be really hard to prove or connect it back to testimony because a lot of that retaliation can look like just everyday prison things that we deal with in there,

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right? So it can look like shakedowns or transfers or tickets, just anything, and so that's something that we have to keep in mind as well.

The single most important thing here is to make sure that people are fully aware that these are possibilities and to be very, very clear about what you can do and what you can't do for them, right? But also getting buy-in from the Department of Corrections Administration, like I mentioned earlier, can be really useful in countering or preempting retaliation and obstruction. So make sure to keep open lines of communication with folks throughout the entire process, before, during, and especially after, so they don't feel like they're left alone and documenting retaliation that they might face. Next slide please.

So facilitation, facilitation means following, right? How can we expect lawmakers or anyone else to listen to incarcerated folks if we aren't listening to them ourselves? Advocates leverage their power to create opportunities for others to leverage theirs. This means making sure that incarcerated people are involved as much as possible from the very beginning, including when deciding what bills to actually help them submit testimony on, and it also means making sure that you're getting a comprehensive consensus across the demographics in prison. Incarcerated people are not a monolithic entity, right? We're not one person. So you need to make sure that you're talking to folks in different demographics and different prisons to get a full range of input when you're deciding what to actually pursue and how to engage. So next slide please.

So these are just a couple of things real quick. We'll touch on just common arguments that come up and a few useful responses. The tech doesn't exist. Well, actually, as we mentioned, it does, right? Video calling is expanding from 15 states in 2015 to almost every state by now. But if it doesn't, people can still submit written testimony like they did in Connecticut on bills, it was very successful, or have it read into record scheduling. Scheduling is too difficult. Ask legislative allies to push committees for accommodations like scheduling hearings earlier in the day or splitting up multiple bills and among multiple hearings or multiple days or to take testimony out of order, to be flexible enough to accommodate people who need to speak, and we can't let everyone speak. There may be restrictions on time or the number of speakers or something like that, but just make sure the potential testifiers know that this is possible so they're prepared if it happens so they're not caught off guard, and help them to develop written testimony to submit if they don't get called.

You can also do like PLS did, which was to encourage the people who don't get to testify get to sit in the room with people who do in order to support them and show support. And finally, you can't speak with people in solitary. Well, if we're not talking with people in solitary confinement about what solitary confinement is like, then we're not really doing it, right? So representation really matters here. And so advocates need to really stress to stakeholders the

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importance of representation, and that means speaking with people who are sentenced to long, long, lengthy sentences or people at high security levels and people in solitary confinement. That's important and it matters.

So that's a brief overview of our toolkit and now we're going to turn to our panel to really get into it and learn more about their work and what they do. I'm really excited about this. So Christopher Blackwell is an award-winning journalist. He's currently serving a 45-year prison sentence in Washington State. He's the co-founder and executive director of Look 2 Justice. It's a grassroots organization of systems-impacted organizers and who work to cultivate justice, fairness, and accountability in Washington State's criminal legal system. He's published well over 100 essays and articles and outlets such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, Mother Jones, and many more.

Jesse White is the policy director at Prisoners Legal Services of Massachusetts, PLS, where she's been since 2011 and has focused on policy since 2018. Jesse's policy work with PLS prioritizes community building, power shifting, decarceration and empowerment of the prison industrial complex, anti-racism and supporting directly-impacted leadership. She's dedicated to liberatory policy work and defines success not only by what we win, but also by the power that we build together.

Anthony Blankenship is a senior community organizer in Civil Survival's Policy and Advocacy department where he helps connect and empower people that have been impacted by the criminal legal system to build their collective and individual political power. After facing discrimination in both employment and housing due to his own criminal record, he began finding ways to use that experience of incarceration as a strength. And since being released from prison, Anthony has been working to undo the harms created by the criminal legal system and hold systems accountable to those that they serve. So thank you all for being here so much. Maybe Chris, we can just start with you. Can you talk a bit about your work with Look 2 Justice, how that came about and what it is y'all do?

Christopher Blackwell: Yeah, for sure. Well, one, thank you everybody for being here, and thank you for us being able to come here and talk to you guys. It's definitely a privilege to do this as we talk about the work about leading and empowering incarcerated voices. As Emmett said, I'm currently incarcerated. I've been incarcerated for 21 years. My wife and I started Look 2 Justice in 2020 as we seen a need for a way to empower incarcerated voices in a lot of the work that we were doing. We wanted to see people at the head of the table when we were talking about legislation, what that legislation looked like. What's the consent, right? Who decides where we consent on a piece of legislation? Is it someone that's at home, that is comfortable in their house and doesn't have to make that sacrifice

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or should that consent be made by the person who is currently incarcerated and ultimately has to make that sacrifice?

So because of that and because of the work we are doing, me and my wife, Dr. Chelsea Moore, decided, Hey, let's build something out that can be led by incarcerated people and people on the outside in coalition with formerly incarcerated and impacted family members and then community members that just really wanted to work and fight for the things that we wanted to see from us and our community. So we started our org, things were a little rocky at first, of course, as doing all organizational work is, and really just getting started and figuring out a nonprofit. And then we decided what we wanted to do first.

First, we wanted a newsletter. We wanted to start a newsletter in the prison that went to as many prisoners as possible to inform people what was going on. We wanted to also use that newsletter and that base to do surveys so we could see what people actually wanted and just have a better idea of not just the few voices that had a platform deciding what people wanted, but actually the larger portion of the incarcerated population. So once we started to build that out, which has been extremely successful today, we have over 20% of Washington State's prison system currently on our newsletter, which is thousands of people.

We also built out how do we build the next set of leaders and the next set of leaders was our lead organizers. So we wanted to build and get a group of people at each prison across the state in the main hub prisons, which in our state there's eight, and we wanted to empower them to essentially work closely with us so we could see as they're working on the ground with that population of individuals in their community, what was needed, what was wanted, what questions come up, how can we do better. So we set that up and currently have 12 lead organizers across the state that are also doing that work.

And then we also wanted to stay true to what we're saying, right? If we're saying we're being led by incarcerated people, then we need to put people like that in a lead. And when we're asking for funders to do this, we need to explain to them what that means, because it's not something that we see. It's not often that someone is an executive director of an organization the size of ours that's currently incarcerated, and I'm not the only one that we want to have in these kinds of positions. So we also hired a director for inside organizing, right? And then we wanted to make sure that we pay people and we treat people fairly. This is the work and the creative work and the stressful work that we do. If we were doing it on the outside, we wanted our organization treating people just like we would if they were on the outside doing this work.

So after doing that and building out our structure, we decided, aside from the information, how do we get people better engaged? So we started to do our training around things like testifying. That was one of the first things we did is

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we started to work to get people able to testify. Emmett is definitely right, it is a lot easier when the DLC is on board. Unfortunately, that is a very difficult thing to do at times, especially when you're a grassroots organization and especially when you have a lot of the people that work with your organization that are incarcerated because it's always seen as a threat. At least that's what we've experienced in our state.

So what we did is we started teaching people how to do this, how to testify. We got legislators to reach out. We built strong relationships with legislators and policy actors to reach out on our behalf to ask for certain incarcerated individuals to testify. And then when we were able to get them, we sat and worked with people on what's the best way to tell your story. In two minutes, right? You might only have a minute and a half to two minutes before you get cut off in a legislative hearing. So how do you get the most impact? How do you get what you really need to get across in that for legislators to hear before they make decisions on the policies that we want to see, and getting our voice so what we want to see is actually at the forefront?

So we felt really strong about that. We were able to do that really well and then we led that out to outside people, right? We can train people inside, but it's how do we get our families involved? How do we get our networks involved? So then we started thinking about other ways to do advocacy one-on-one training, where we would train people on the inside and do a lot of trainings on the inside with our lead organizers and large groups of the prison population, but then also mirror that out in the community with the organizers that we've hired out there to do their trainings with family members and impacted communities so they could also have the same knowledge and be able to come to the forefront of the work. Because it's important that not only those of us inside are able to do this work, but it's important that we also have that availability for our family members and that they have that knowledge and know how.

How to write a legislator, that was another thing that we really focused on. How do you connect with your legislator? Getting incarcerated people to realize that you're a constituent of a legislator from wherever it was that you fell and your crime happened, right? That you would continue to correspond or reach out to your legislator at a constituent for what you want to see. And then of course after that we started thinking, well, how do we get this on the front end, right? Myself, I entered the system at 12 years old for the first time and did my first year of incarceration at 12, and I think about the fact that I had never seen a legislator in my community. I had never seen a legislator in my schools. I didn't even know what a legislator was until I was in my late twenties.

So then we started to do work in schools, and now we're doing advocacy trainings in the schools. We're doing mock legislative sessions in the schools to teach kids and impact the communities about their voice and empowerment of



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their voice and how do they get involved in using their voice. And then of course, we do a lot of community building, right? Doing this work is hard. We're dealing with a lot of trauma in these spaces, a lot of distrust. We're coming from impacted communities that have suffered from a lot of harm. So we got to take time to build those relationships. We've got to take that time to get to know each other, and it's also important that policy actors and other people that are involved in these spaces take that time to get involved.

So we hold big community barbecues and we just had one, right? And we encourage people to bring their kids and everything. So the last one we had a couple of weeks ago, there was a bunch of superior court judges there and they all had their kids there in the same space as a whole bunch of formerly incarcerated people. They were incarcerated for serious violent crimes and they're working together, they're sharing a meal together, they're humanizing each other. And I think that that's one of the biggest things and the hurdles to this work when we do it.

We have all the data, we have all the numbers, we know the racial disparities that are going on, we know who's being targeted and harmed, but the most important thing is that we can humanize the individuals that are suffering from that so we can get policy people and legislators to start to understand the mitigating factors that lead us to cause harm and commit crimes. And also how do we get out of that? What is needed to get out of that? And then that has also spiraled into us doing a lot of writing campaigns, sharing stories, storytelling and writing, so that's a lot. I'll stop there so I can leave more for everybody else.

Emmett Sanders: Thank you so much, Chris. I just want to say that I think what you all are doing is amazing and it's just incredible to see the work that y'all have done and what you've built and continue to build and just absolutely applaud that. And I definitely want to come back to you, but I want to turn now to Anthony to give him an opportunity to engage as well. Anthony, you've been able to join these efforts in Washington. Y'all have been doing just a ton of stuff out there. You want to talk a bit about civil survival and your role there and anything else you want to share?

Anthony Blankenship: Yeah, yeah. First of all, Chris didn't leave me much to eat on. Thanks for eating the whole plate there, Chris. That's why I love this dude. So I don't actually have to do much, as you can tell. I just let him do all the work from behind bars and I do my best to support him and I'll talk a little bit more about that, but that's literally it. That's literally it because as you can see, how much, even though he fell for the first time at 12, his knowledge about this political process and what's going on behind bars as well as what's going on in the community is so vast that my job as an organizer is to be able to support Chris and support people behind bars as many ways as possible and let their voice be heard.

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Because when I was incarcerated, prior to incarceration and going through the pre-trial process, it's like you lose your voice. This whole time you're not able to ever really defend yourself or share your experience or your traumas or anything like that, right? And so the opportunity to be able to work with people like Chris and others behind bars that are politically active is both a treat as well as a blessing to do.

So yeah, my name is Anthony. I work for Civil Survival. Our organization started in 2015. We started working on providing civic engagement trainings to people and trying to pass legislation around legal financial obligations. And then from there, our organization grew. We now have a staff of 16 people. This was a movement that was started in large part by formerly incarcerated people as well as allies. And our organization now hires ... We have I think seven or eight lawyers. We have a small but mighty policy department. I know I've seen my coworker on here. She's also formerly incarcerated and part of our policy, so I had to say mighty.

And what we do is we try to work on reentry. We both do the reentry legal aid side as well as try to pass policies that allow for people to get out of prison for conditions to be better for those who are currently suffering behind bars, and then reentry, everything from background checks to LFOs to voting is a huge one. As you can see in my background, we did a mural project, and that's actually a picture of the mural that a formerly incarcerated person did. And both of those two people on my left and right are formerly incarcerated as well.

And so I do want to say, and I can't overstate this, that any win that we do is done as a community. We might have organizations that are the lead organizer on specific issues. I know Look 2 Justice was leading on the juvenile points bill that basically ... I don't know how many states, I know it's not too many states that when you commit a crime as a youth, the points count towards adult sentencing if you do something as an adult. And so we've been trying to fight as a community to make it so that those points don't count.

One of the things that happened was we weren't able to pass that retroactively, but Chris and the people at Look 2 Justice we're leading from the inside on this. And we've led on some bills, especially around reentry, but we can't take credit. Each individual organization is sharing this, and we do this all collectively. And I think people, even those that aren't connected to an organization, have a big role to play. People are spending their time, their money, their abilities to contribute to making all of these efforts work. And so when you ask how does our organization play a role, I do think the best thing that we can do is uplift others and make sure that all voices are heard.

I've been working on public policy for a long time now, but in the criminal legal system since I got out of prison in 2018, and so I think I started in 2020. And the

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biggest lesson that I learned was that prior to that, I mean prior to COVID, I would say a lot of these bills were just passed by people who have not experienced incarceration. And what that did was had a lot of unintended consequences that have lasted. The fact that you're charging youth and then charging them to again as an adult and whatever they did as a youth counted towards their adult crimes, right? That's putting a blind eye towards the school to prison pipeline, foster care to prison pipeline, all of these things that contribute to incarceration.

Whoever was writing those laws and passing those laws weren't taking into account the whole person, and so it's a beautiful thing that ... I didn't get to go to the barbecue because I was actually traveling at that time, but I think that's really important, connecting to people who are the policy makers and who are enforcing laws and people who have been on the receiving end, getting them into the same space and humanizing both sides is really important.

Emmett Sanders: That's amazing. I appreciate you jumping in there and I know Chris just does so much, but I definitely appreciate what you do and the legislation that y'all are passing, I think it's really great. I do want to turn to Jesse now, to Jesse, I do want to turn to Jesse White with the PLS. Jesse, PLS has done really amazing work organizing folks in Massachusetts to get out there and submit testimony. Your stuff is just amazing. So yeah, maybe you just want to talk a little bit about what it is y'all have done, how y'all have done it.

Jesse White: Thanks. Yeah. First of all, thanks everyone for being here. Thank you PPI for organizing this, and thanks to my fellow panelists, Anthony and Chris. I feel really honored to be on a panel with both of you. My name is Jesse White. I use she, her pronouns. As Emmett said, I'm the policy director at Prisoners Legal Services in Massachusetts. PLS is a legal services organization, so we do individual and systemic advocacy work. We do impact litigation, and we do policy work all in our toolbox at PLS, but one thing that we try to center in everything that we do is our client's leadership and our client's partnership.

So in the policy team, we're meeting regularly with incarcerated people, with authorized groups that are permitted in the Massachusetts prison system to talk about what people's priorities are, what kind of strategies people think should be being utilized to meet the goals that are being identified, and then also to help build knowledge around the legislative process more generally and about the political landscape and how it all works.

So how we came to be involved in the work of facilitating incarcerated people's testimony in these hearings is I think most of the most powerful movement work that happens, we really followed the lead of our clients, of incarcerated people and we follow the lead of grassroots organizers. So this past legislative session was the first session where incarcerated people were permitted to

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testify directly via video call technology, but it wasn't the first session that we've been advocating for that, and it wasn't the first session that incarcerated people have been advocating for that.

So I mean, incarcerated people and allied advocates and grassroots partners have been trying to facilitate incarcerated participation in these hearings for quite some time, and we've found alternative ways to do it before folks were allowed to or allowed to testify directly. So people would submit written testimony, advocates and allies would read out testimony from incarcerated people where that was permitted by the committee, and believe it or not, sometimes that was not permitted by the committee. And we worked really closely with legislative partners as well to make sure that they were meeting with incarcerated people, going into the prisons, speaking with people directly even outside of the hearing process.

But really it was the advent, or I should say the expansion of video call technology during COVID that led to us being able to successfully advocate for direct participation of incarcerated people. Prior to that, of course, the Department of Correction would say that it's not possible to bring folks to the State House, security needs, all of that, but that's a really hard position to keep when you're talking about video call technology. When these hearings are happening in a hybrid way, some of it happening fully remote during COVID and then transitioning to a hybrid system, there's really no reason why incarcerated people shouldn't be able to tap into that and why the democratic process shouldn't become more accessible, and that accessibility benefits everyone.

It benefits incarcerated people. It benefits people with disabilities that need access in alternative ways and need accommodation. It benefits people's communities who want to hear from people directly, and it benefits legislators to be able to hear from the people that are closest to the problems. So it's really a powerful thing and is really important to us to make sure that we were making it happen.

So it started really with partners successfully advocating for the participation of people incarcerated in our women's prison to testify about a prison and jail construction moratorium, and then we were able to work with those grassroots partners to build and expand on that. And at the end of the day, we ended up with around 90 incarcerated people testifying from I think seven different state prisons on over a different bills before three different legislative committees. So it was really a rousing success and we intend to continue building upon it going forward.

And I think like Anthony and Chris both touched on, the testimony is just one component. Building the knowledge, building the education, building consensus is a huge part as well. So we put together tons of informational materials to

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share with people. We met with incarcerated people and with leaders of incarcerated people's organizations throughout the session to talk about what people needed to be supported in the process and how we could try to facilitate that with our knowledge of the statehouse and the political process. And we really just tried to focus on democratizing the political process, which is supposed to be a democracy anyway, so we're really trying to get at that as we did this work.

Emmett Sanders: Thanks so much, Jesse. Again, the work that you all have done there is just really incredible. And again, PLS has been so kind to share some of the resources with us and we've incorporated them into our toolkit, and so you can find them there as well and online. Anthony, I did want to ask you a bit about what Civil Survival has been working on in terms of a bill to ensure access for civic participation for folks in state facilities in Washington. Maybe you could speak a little bit about that.

Anthony Blankenship: Yeah, absolutely. Civil Survival has been partnering with a different group. I guess Look 2 Justice is part of it, but I don't know what they decided in putting everybody who's politically active at Chris's prison. I'm sure he has some opinions on that one, both the curse and a blessing, but the Act for Civic engagement was originally written as some principles by incarcerated group. I think it was written in collaboration with a whole bunch of groups, but I think led by Concerned Lifers Organization I believe.

So during the 2024 legislative session, it was a short session starting in January, DLC started to crack down on the use of legislative testimony of incarcerated people. They also began on cracking down on any kind of form of political participation. That meant those political groups, Black Prisoners Caucus, Concerned Lifers, Nuestro, Grupo Cultural, just any kind of cultural and political group, they're both typically intertwined and doing a lot of work, and then also they denied access to coalition calls. They started infracting and putting people in solitary for being politically active, for doing opinion pieces in the newspaper or just connecting with people on the outside about political processes or about being engaged.

So this was in response to that of like, well, if we're unable to educate our people, if we're unable to educate the community at large, if we're unable to talk to legislators, what can we do? And from our perspective, this is breaking some cardinal rules as well as making it really difficult to work with people, especially because oftentimes, our leadership is typically built by people who are incarcerated. So what this bill does is affirm those rights of civic participation. They decided, people behind bars decided that it wasn't just prisons that we should be focusing on. It should be focused on youth facilities, it should be focused on mental health facilities, anybody who's in state custody.

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And so as you can imagine these efforts have a broad range and also some very historical value of connecting people who are survivors, who are unhoused, who have been through the foster care system, who are having disabilities and or mental health issues, right? And so by bringing as many people to the table as possible, I think the hope is both that we can strengthen our collective power because incarceration, intersectionality of incarceration and all of these other systems is as important to recognize, but also some of them, we've caused harm to different efforts in the processes. So being able to work together to say, Hey, what do we all have in common? What are these themes and how do we address these issues? Because people in mental health facilities, a lot of them can vote. A lot of youth in prison can vote if they're not going to DOC. There's jails, there's different types of incarceration, and so allowing people to be able to come together to be able to unite and fight for these different things is really important.

I think just the last thing of note is as an outside organization, our focus is on allowing the people who are being most impacted by this, those who are inside lead these efforts, and so they're the ones who found the prime sponsor. They're the ones who's been communicating with sponsors. When we have legislator meetings, oftentimes they're the ones in the meetings with us. This is something that's I think tried and true that we've been able to do over the course of the years, and not only just builds that political power, but affirms that they're the leaders, and what we're doing is just supporting their efforts in this. I know Chris has been on the ground floor of this, and I know that this isn't the issue he's specifically leading on, but this is an issue I know that they support. So I mean, if he has anything else he wants to add on development of this, but it's in collaboration.

Emmett Sanders: Yeah, I really appreciate the fact that y'all are looking at the system holistically because all these parts are very, very much connected. And so making sure that folks in youth detention centers and folks in mental health hospitals are all able to do this, it's really important to recognize that. And I know we're running short on time, but I did want to turn it back to Chris just real quick, just ask why is it important for incarcerated people to actually lead this work, and what do people on the outside need to know about how ... What do they need to keep in mind when they're trying to help folks who are incarcerated organize testimony?

Christopher Blackwell: Yeah. I mean, anytime we do anything, it's most important that we lead with the most impacted group that is connected to that. And I think that that's what happens here, but it's also important to remember is that we can't do this work without people like Anthony and other people that are supporting us on the outside. So how do we have those relationships, maintain those relationships in a way to where there's a symbiotic balance, right? Because it takes all of it. I mean, often we have to remind ourselves that we're fighting a system where it's

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already hard enough to change stuff, so we have to make sure that we are in sync when we're doing this work so we can actually do it in a productive and healthy way and in a way that's not too taxing, because this work is often really taxing.

And I think people have to remember, it's difficult to do this work if you're incarcerated because of the system that we're connected to. The system doesn't want us to have a big platform. The system don't want us to have a voice, and the system functions how it's meant to function. This is how the system's supposed to function. There's no way that it would function this way if they didn't want it to, where in 2025, we've seen the system break down in the most dangerous and toxic ways.

We're still using things like solitary confinement, right? Let's take that for example. It's been 200 years since the Supreme Court ruled that this was torture, but we continue to use these practices. So when we look at something like that, we understand that the system is functioning exactly like it's meant to. It's us that have to expose and take the time to teach society what's going on and get them to care, so we can put that pressure and people just have to be willing to get impacted voices involved. You have to be willing to go over the hurdles like Anthony does.

I mean, I think we've been wanting to get our organization to come back in Look 2 Justice and Civil Survival to do civic trainings and advocacy 101 trainings with the inside population on a grand scale to where we can start doing it with a lot of people, but we keep getting pushback. We've been fighting for this for over a year, even though we had already did it successfully one time, right? So it's constantly, every time you're going to get that pushback and you're going to have to re-climb a hill you might've climbed before, but that's just what the work is. And that doesn't mean that just because something's difficult that we don't have to climb that hill again. We got to climb that hill again, and that's the unfortunate thing that a lot of people on the outside and a lot of advocates in our networks that they have to deal with and tackle is, how do they find new ways to do that?

And then in the interim, we got to find ways. How do we train people on the advocacy 101? We have our lead organizers sit down with people one-on-one and teach them, and it's difficult and it takes a lot of time, but every time they do that, it's an hour or two out of their day, but it's one more trained individual that's in this space that understands this space a little bit better as we start to begin to empower people. So we just have to continue to fight that, and we have to continue to climb these hills that often seem unclimbable.

And I think that's important for us to remember that and not just succumb to that and say, well, this is just too difficult, right? And we find that on a lot of

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ways. It happens when you're trying to publish a piece with a publisher and they got to go through all the extra hurdles, and it happens when you're trying to get someone to speak in front of a legislator or a legislative committee. So I mean, it's just taking that time, but there's people committed and I think that when we have those people that are committed like Anthony and other people out there in the community, it's going to happen every time. And that's what's important, and that builds a really good connected relationship with people on community and people on the inside to know that we have that supporter.

Emmett Sanders: Wow. Thanks for that. So I'm going to go ahead and turn it over back over to Sarah for a little bit of Q&A. I know there are a bunch of questions in here. We're running short on time, but thank you all so much for engaging and just thank you all so much for being here. Bye. Thank you.

Sarah Staudt: Hi, folks. I'm not sure we're going to be able to get to every question in the chat, but I wanted to start going through some of these because we have some really great questions. The first one, I'm going to pose to Jesse because I know how much PLS has done to work with stakeholders of all kinds. The very first question we got I thought was really well put, which is, so we keep talking about how we need buy-in from legislators or from DOC or whoever. What does that actually mean? What does getting buy-in mean? What does it look like and how do you know when you have it?

Jesse White: Thanks, Sarah, and whoever wrote the question. That's a very good question. To me, and I think in our work, what we found is that buy-in can mean a lot of different things. I think at a baseline, buy-in means cooperation. It means a willingness to make it work in spite of obstacles, and I think at best, buy-in means commitment. So you can have an agency or a person who's willing to cooperate, but isn't necessarily committed to making it happen, and I think the best kind of buy-in is the kind of buy-in where we're talking about commitment.

And that's really built up through a lot of work around trust, one-on-one conversations, group conversations, making sure that people ... and pressure frankly from organizers and from people who are on the ground and making sure that we're really making it impossible to say no. Right? It's easier for legislators to say no to things. It's easier for the DOC to say no to things than it is for them to say yes. And so we have to shift those imperatives by building community together in order to turn those nos into yeses and that that's what I think of as buy-in.

Sarah Staudt: Thanks so much for that, and maybe I'll ask Anthony this question. What, if any, kinds of blowback have incarcerated people experienced for testifying or doing political education, and have your organizations been able to intervene to address any fallout?



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Anthony Blankenship: Yeah, that's a great question. I think Chris alluded to this. I think the system itself adapts just as oppression adapts. And so when you have a system of oppression adapting to everything that we do, some of it is visual. Two years ago, Chris and I were trying to pass a solitary confinement bill and we're still trying to pass this bill, but we had people who were currently in solitary confinement coming to testify. I think one of those people still in solitary as we speak to this day, he's been in and out for 27 years in solitary confinement and visually they just kept him ... First, he was onscreen begging for hope, damn near in tears asking people, asking the legislature for hope. This year, they allowed him to testify, but they kept him offscreen because something was broken, right? There's things like that that it allowed him to talk, but there was no visualization there of just what it's actually physically doing to somebody.

Another person wrote an op-ed, and they infractioned him and put him in administrative segregation, released him 30 days later with no infraction, right? They had somebody go in and upend their room and do a room search, broke somebody's religious item, and then the only thing that there was was a small talking to. The person who they upended and did all that too, they shipped them out into another facility, right? And so even though they didn't infract them then, then they tried to infract them later on. And that hurts when these people are trying to get out, when they have good time and you get an infraction, or when you are trying to do clemency or going through any kind of process. It is really rough to have to see that because people are being politically active, their whole world can be upended.

I know that it is the same with Chris. He's been in our coalition for multiple years now, and he's had to take a step back. Even though I communicate he's part of our coalition, he can't attend our coalition meetings because he's close to getting out. He doesn't want any infractions, and they've been attacking him and attacking our efforts. So things like that. And then also I think just some of that blowback is just not allowing people to testify or not giving people the opportunity to put on ... My brain's escaping me, but we were going to put on an event inside, behind bars that we were inviting legislators to, and they've nixed it now multiple times at multiple facilities. So things like this are just some of the blowback that we're getting and some of it's just untold yet, so yeah.

Sarah Staudt: Thanks so much. Yeah, it's really disturbing to see that there is this kind of blowback. I mean, I've worked in this work long enough to not be surprised by it, but it is really disturbing, and it's something that I think as an outside activist, I've really taken away from this conversation that we really have to be careful about how to protect and support our brothers and sisters on the inside who really bear the brunt of some of the retaliation that comes from this kind of activity.

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So I want to end. Unfortunately, we aren't able to get to all the questions, but I did get a message from Chris, and I'm sure this is true of our other panelists, I will try to get back to people directly who have asked questions in the chat to see if we can give you some good solid answers because I think that these questions are really important. I'm also going to put up a bunch of contact information. Just a sec. Let me get my screen share back here. It's always a little... There we go. So to start, this is how to get in touch with all of our panelists, Chris Blackwell, Anthony Blankenship, and Jesse White. Their websites are there, as well as their email addresses. We'll also include this in the follow-up email that includes the slides and the recording of this presentation.

In terms of getting in touch with Prison Policy Initiative, I just put the link to subscribe to our newsletter, and follow us on social media in the chat. It's also right here, and our Organizing Legislative Testimony Toolkit, which is basically the written version of what we've gathered from talking to people all over the country about this issue, is also on our website in [prisonpolicy.org/trainings](https://prisonpolicy.org/trainings). You'll find it there along with a bunch of other resources for advocates.

And then lastly, this is the contact information for me and Emmett. We make up the advocacy department at Prison Policy Initiative, and we would really love to talk to you if you're interested in working with us on advocacy issues. We work on everything from arrest to reentry, and we'd love to talk to you about the issues going on in your state. With that, I'll say thank you all so much for coming to our webinar, and I hope that everyone can take what they've learned here and bring it back to their communities so we can amplify the voices of incarcerated people even more. Thank you so much, and I hope you have a great day.