

TESTIMONY OF DONALD TAYLOR

Chairman, Watts, Vice Chair Mollohan, and members of this distinguished Task Force, I am Donald Taylor and it is a great honor to appear before you today. Until December of last year I was involved in the federal corrections system for more than twenty years, and it is my goal for you to find my story to be one of hope and redemption.

I was born in Southern Illinois, one of nine children in my family. My father died of a heart attack when I was very young. My mother raised us in a strict and proper home, where we did not get in trouble. I graduated from high school in 1984, and immediately enlisted in the U.S. Army. I enjoyed serving my country while in the Armed Services, and it became my goal make the Army my career. I received numerous promotions, and eventually became a Corporal E-4.

My life changed when an inattentive driver wrecked into me near Fort Rucker, Alabama. I was seriously injured, and continue to deal with these injuries

today. Because of my health issues, I was honorably discharged from the Army in 1990.

Upon returning home, against my better judgment and in spite of the way my mother raised me, I became involved with people I knew from high school who were selling drugs. I followed this lead and began selling cocaine myself. This resulted in an arrest in 1991, where I eventually received three years probation for selling less than one gram of powder cocaine.

I was not deterred by this conviction, and continued my involvement with selling cocaine. In 1994 I was again arrested, and eventually my case became federal. Because of my prior conviction involving the one gram of powder cocaine, the government enhanced my sentence. In January 1995, I was sentenced to a 20 year mandatory minimum term of imprisonment.

While in the Bureau of Prisons, I was moved on five occasions as my security level was reduced. It became my goal to use my time in BOP to prepare me for my release. I spent more time in the library than I did in recreation

facilities. My programing included such things as the Bureau of Prisons 500 hour Residential Drug Abuse Program otherwise known as RDAP and various job skills training. It is my belief that if incentives were given for completion of programs like is done in the RDAP program, inmates would better respond to job training and educational opportunities and would be more likely to succeed when released to their home communities.

Eventually it became my goal to graduate from college upon my release. A chance meeting with an inmate who had knowledge of the Veterans Administration helped me reach out to the VA so that I could receive benefits due to my disability. The VA informed me that I would receive benefits, and I was accepted into a university two years before I was discharged from prison.

Six months before my full release, I transitioned to a halfway house. While in some ways the halfway house was beneficial, I believe that there is not a need to keep people who have stable and supportive families to be placed in a halfway house for a full six months. There are returning inmates who do not have stable homes to return to, and these people are appropriate for longer stays in halfway

houses. However, I had a wonderful family to return to and did everything right while in BOP. I could have been discharged to my home many months prior to when I actually was able to go home. Staying longer in a halfway house also postponed my eventual admission to college.

While in the halfway house I met officials from probation who explained my conditions of release. I shared with them that attending college was a realistic goal for me. I was released to home in July 2010, and one month later I was enrolled in college. A probation officer approached me about attending a Veterans Court, where I would be monitored by a Judge. I was immediately against this, for my last involvement with a federal judge resulted in a 20 year sentence. However, I was told of an incentive where I could be released from supervision early if I successfully completed the Veterans Court Program. I eventually agreed to enter this program.

My initial conception of having a probation officer was completely different than what I actually experienced. I thought that probation officers were there to catch you messing up so they could send you back to prison. In reality, probation officers become a major component of your success. They become a safety net,

existing not to send you back to prison, but to help lead you to a path where you do not go back to prison. They become one of your greatest supporters in doing right.

I began attending Veterans Court every three weeks. In addition to the Judge and probation officer, team members include a representative from the VA, a public defender, and a U.S. Attorney. The Judge made it clear to all of the participants that this program was there to help us succeed, and was done in honor of the sacrifices we made serving our country in the Armed Services.

I became an informal leader in the Veterans Court, and the team members and participants looked up to me, and looked out for me. Because of the hope and help I received, on December 15, 2014, I graduated from the Veterans Court. One week later, I graduated from college and received my bachelor's degree. I was also discharged from supervision six years early. While waiting for the graduation ceremony, I was called back into a private room. In the room I met the President of the University, and also saw the Judge and my probation officer. All were there to be a part of my success.

While in college I had interned at a residential youth center. It became my greatest goal to become a counselor at this facility, where I could work to keep adolescents away from the path I went down. My felony conviction appeared to keep me from obtaining a position with this state program. However, at my graduation, my Judge, United States District Judge Stephen Limbaugh, Jr., handed me information that I would start the job I wanted that January. I was later advised that Judge Limbaugh had contacted officials at the Governor's Office, advocating for me to get this job.

I am proud of where I am now. The path has not always been smooth. For example, in spite of being a model inmate, my request to attend my mother's funeral in 2007 was denied. However, along the way I had people who did help me in my journey through the federal corrections system. This includes people in the VA, people at Southeast Missouri State University, my probation officer, and Judge Limbaugh. Above all else, I thank my family for their support.

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