



## **N.J. must do more to help people after they leave prison, new report says**

By Blake Nelson

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Haywood Gandy was arrested exactly 21 years ago.

He spent two decades in prison for robbery and other charges, according to court records, before his release last year. Freedom came as a shock.

“The world has changed so dramatically, it’s unrecognizable,” he said Tuesday.

Stepping out of prison can be akin to competing on a survival TV show, especially if the person doesn’t have a home, job or support network, according to a report released Tuesday by the New Jersey Reentry Services Commission.

The group, formed last year by the Legislature and co-chaired by former Gov. Jim McGreevey, recommended 100 changes to New Jersey’s criminal justice system to ease the path out of prison.

Although the report applauded New Jersey for lowering recidivism rates overall, it slammed the state for its extraordinarily high racial disparity in prison, noting that African-American adults were 12 times more likely than whites to end up behind bars.

“America, unfortunately, has a distorted love affair with incarceration,” McGreevey said.

State Sen. Sandra Cunningham, D-Hudson, another co-chair, said the changes were the right thing to do.

“When you fall down,” she said, “you have a right to believe that someone will reach down, and help you up.”

Citing a New England Journal of Medicine report, the commission also noted that people in prison who struggled with addiction were 129 times more likely to overdose within weeks after their release than the general population.

The authors wrote that the state should expand treatment for hepatitis B and C in prison, reduce the amount of wages that can be taken for child support and make it easier for the formerly incarcerated to get jobs, especially in government. Longstanding municipal fines, which initially prevented Gandy from getting a job, should be reduced. (Gandy is now a student at Rutgers.)

To make housing more affordable, the commission recommended doubling the budget for the state's rental assistance program, from \$40 million to \$80 million.

When asked what the total cost of all the reforms might be, McGreevey said many of the healthcare costs could be covered by enrolling inmates in Medicaid, which is federally funded. The commission recommended signing people up at least 60 days before their sentence ended, so they could receive a physical Medicaid card upon their release.

McGreevey also pointed to research that found that money spent on job training, for example, could ultimately be less than what states would otherwise spend keeping someone in prison.

The commission threw its support behind several bills that would reform the state's expungement system and mandate that all incarcerated women receive free feminine hygiene products, among other proposals.

Many Democratic lawmakers, whose support will be crucial to any legislative changes, spoke out or released statements in support, including Senate President Steve Sweeney, D-Gloucester.

A spokeswoman for Gov. Phil Murphy said the governor looked forward to reviewing the report, and that Murphy will continue working "to ensure people returning home are equipped with the tools and resources necessary to be successful."

Matthew Schuman, a spokesman for the state's Department of Corrections, said the department is still reviewing the commission's recommendations.

More than 9,000 people were released from the corrections department last year, according to the report. More than 30,000 are behind bars today.

Renault McCord, another man who spent years in prison, said existing reentry programs were the only reason he had a steady job as a chef at a Shop Rite. "I live such a great life now," he said.

The commission plans to release more reports, including one focusing specifically on sex offenders.