

January 2010

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program and Lanae Erickson, Policy Counsel  
**RE:** Creating a 40-Hour Work Week for Incarcerated Individuals

In 1988, there were 700,000 people in state and federal prisons. In 2010, 700,000 people will be released from prison. Based on past projections, nearly two-thirds of these formerly incarcerated people will be rearrested within 3 years of their release. The time to start addressing this “revolving door” problem is during incarceration. Yet most incarcerated people, instead of being held accountable for gaining the skills they need to be productive upon release, spend their time in idleness.

To stop the revolving door, Congress should pass legislation creating a 40-Hour Work Week pilot program for incarcerated individuals. The 40-Hour Work Week program would allow state and local corrections officials to require participants to address their educational, mental health, substance use, family, and social deficits, and it would instill a strict work ethic that emphasizes personal responsibility. In addition to making our communities safer, this program would also create a safer environment for corrections officers, volunteers, and other incarcerated individuals—encouraging community and faith-based organizations to help provide and administer programs within their local corrections facilities.

Below are some key attributes of the legislation:

- **Purpose:** The bill would create a pilot program to help state and local corrections agencies finance the development of a 40-Hour Work Week curriculum of activities for incarcerated individuals that promotes *responsibility, education, family, work, and parenthood*.
- **Individualized Assessment and Curriculum:** The program would require participating corrections facilities to conduct an individualized assessment of an incarcerated individual’s education, skills, and history. Based on that assessment, corrections facilities would develop an *individualized curriculum* for each participant, made up of education, counseling, substance use treatment, anger management, skills and job training, and other responsible activities.
- **40-Hour Work Week:** State and local corrections officials could require participants to spend as much time on their curriculum as most people do at work—*40 hours a week*. This requirement would both cut down on the amount of time participants spend idle and prepare participants to undertake a productive and responsible routine when they return to their communities.
- **Required—Not Optional:** For individuals within three years of their release date, corrections officials may make participation in the 40-Hour Work Week program *mandatory*. Because the 40-Hour Work Week program can make participation a requirement rather than an option, it would force incarcerated individuals to take personal responsibility for their own future.
- **Targeted Population:** The program would force incarcerated individuals to begin their reentry *while they are still behind bars*—transforming idleness into productivity and working every day towards their successful release into the community.