

United States of America
White House Faith-Based and Community Initiative
Innovations in Effective Compassion Conference

MS. HUGHES: Good morning, everyone. My name is Laura Hughes. I am one of the thousands of lives that have been transformed through the Prison Reentry Initiative at the U.S. Department of Labor. I was raised in an abusive home and by nine years old I was numbing the pain with alcohol and marijuana. I attempted suicide at age 11 and was placed in foster care. I married my abusive foster brother at 16 and soon gave birth to two daughters. One night he nearly killed me and that's when I left. After that I began using more drugs, committing crimes, and I was eventually sentenced to five years in prison. I turned to Arizona Women's Education and Employment or AWEE, a prison re-entry initiative site. They assisted me in building a better life for my daughters and myself. AWEE helped me find a good job, get life necessities, and regain custody of my youngest daughter, Ariel. I've been out of prison for over two years now and thanks to AWEE's help I am a 40-year-old professional woman, a mother, and a grandmother. (Applause.)

I now serve with my oldest daughter Amber on a mother-daughter domestic violence impact panel to help other women regain control of their lives and to show their children how to live a better life. My life has been transformed through AWEE, the Faith-Based and Community Initiative, the Prison Reentry Initiative, and the leadership of Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao without which my daughters might have grown up without me. I would like to personally thank Secretary Chao for her leadership. With great personal admiration, I introduce Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao. (Applause.)

SECRETARY CHAO: Thank you, Laura. Wasn't she terrific? You've got to give her another round of applause. (Applause.) Laura, we all want to congratulate you for your hard work, for your determination, and your commitment to turning your life around. It's not easy. You're a very positive role model for others to follow. Before I begin, I want to also recognize all of you in the audience who have a commitment to increasing the impact of faith-based and community organizations. Over the last seven and a half years, you've put into action the President's vision of launching a nationwide effort to better the lives of others. Community and faith-based groups possess unique and invaluable strengths and often it is the personal concern and caring touch that groups like this provide that make the critical difference for those who are at risk: the father, who has lost his job and his hope; the ex-offender wanting a fresh start; the struggling, single mom.

Empowering the faith-based and community organizations throughout America is something that you know that President Bush and the First Lady Laura Bush care deeply about. Their strategy is to reach those most in need. We've just got to enlist and include every single willing partner. Now in the past, a lot of

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the organizations, some in this room, worked in total isolation from government, even when we were working towards similar goals and I saw that when I was President of United Way or Director of the Peace Corps. Today, the Department of Labor and other federal agencies are working with faith-based and community organizations toward these shared goals, benefitting our country and our communities. As a result of the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative, hundreds of dedicated organizations have stepped forward to work side by side with in my case the Department of Labor, to help the unemployed, the underemployed and the never employed.

Like Laura Hughes, more than 150,000 men, women, and at-risk young people here in the United States have been helped by faith-based and community organizations funded by the Department. Isn't that great? (Laughter.) And in fact, since 2002, the Department has awarded more than 1300 grants worth over \$742 million, that's real dollars, to help more Americans overcome hurdles to employment, find jobs and stay employed through the unique partnership and work of faith-based and community organizations. Now I've got here a report of the final report that we're releasing today. This is what it looks like. I think all of you have it. It highlights the Department's success in creating access to new opportunities through public/private partnerships with faith-based and community organizations.

Together, we are transforming the lives of thousands of individuals and their families. So today, let me share with you some results of the Department of Labor's efforts to further the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative, especially in the area of prisoner reentry. The reality is and we all know this, the reality is that most of the men and women who are incarcerated today will return home. Unfortunately, history has shown that in the absence of intervention, a majority of them will relapse and be reincarcerated. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, two out of three inmates released will be rearrested within three years and more than half will be reincarcerated. That's unacceptable. Our efforts are aimed at giving hope and a second chance to those who have paid their debt to society.

In 2004, the Department of Labor launched a three-year, \$20 million program called Ready for Work. Eleven sites were chosen to participate in the pilot program and provide services to adult ex-offenders. Ready for Work was designed to leverage the trust and leadership of faith-based and community organizations to help ex-offenders build new lives and the program offers job training, job placement, mentoring and other transitional services to help these men and women transition successfully back into their communities. We know there are about 650,000 offenders who are released every year and helping this population is a major challenge for our society. Ready for Work helped ex-offenders access stable

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employment and develop strong social bonds so that they can access hope and opportunity. And the positive results were that Ready for Work participants had a 50 percent lower rate of reincarceration. Reincarceration too, for a new life. (Applause.) After six months, that's incredible. Then Justice Department benchmarks. They had a 34 percent lower rate after one year. Isn't that terrific? That is real results.

As the President has said many times, our nation is great because of the compassion of our citizens and in response to the historical cycle of crime and reincarceration, I'm going to say that very carefully now, the President announced the Prisoner Reentry Initiative or PRI in his 2004 State of the Union Address. PRI builds upon the strong foundation laid by the Ready for Work program, providing returning prisoners with a positive, productive link to the communities to which they are returning.

Let me just share a quick story. In January of this year, the President and I visited the Jericho Program in Baltimore, Maryland, one of more than 30 PRI sites funded by the Department of Labor to help ex-offenders. Jericho is run by the Episcopal Community Services of Maryland and serves nonviolent adult male offenders who have been released from prison within the last six months. And when I was there I met a gentleman named Thomas. Thomas has spent more than 20 years of his life in and out of prison and finally he made a decision to turn his life around. So three days after his last release, Thomas enrolled himself in the Jericho Program and he completed the initial two weeks of training. He learned how to search for a job, how to budget his money, and how to address barriers to employment. And after his training, with the help of those who helped him, Thomas created a resume and received coaching on how to interview for a job. And the practice paid off. Thomas was offered a position as a security guard and he's doing a wonderful job. (Applause.)

It was so inspiring to meet him, hear him tell his story, tell about his family has benefitted and see the tremendous confidence that he now has. And Thomas is not alone. That's the wonderful part about what I'm telling you. Through the first 25 months, the Department's Prisoner Reentry Initiative program has helped more than 13,000 ex-prisoners. Isn't that great? (Applause.) And over 8,000 have been placed into jobs. And after one year, the reincarceration rate is about one third the national average, one third. (Applause.) That's a tremendous accomplishment. But you and I know that much more remains to be done. But these results give us hope that with the proper help those most at risk in our society can turn their lives around. Congress recognizes the success of the Prisoner Reentry Initiative and included it in a Second Chance Act which the President signed earlier this spring.

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While these results are just a beginning, the successful models developed under Ready for Work and Prisoner Reentry has helped thousands of ex-offenders and they're the entrepreneurial ideas that are becoming tomorrow's solutions. And I know that you're going to hear more about how the Administration is addressing other challenges facing ex-offenders later today and tomorrow, programs like the Justice Department's Serious and Violent Offender Reentry and Anti Gang Initiative and the Department of Health and Human Services' access to recovery and mentoring children of prisoners program. These programs are making a real difference.

So I want to thank you like the other speakers have before me. Thank you for everything that you are doing to bring hope and opportunity to those who need it most. Thank you for spending the day with us and investing your time and yourself in finding out how we can better help those at risk in our communities because working together we can continue to ensure that everyone in our society has a second chance. America is a land of second chances. We all need second chances. (Applause.)

And we need to give those who need those second chances the tools that they need to build lives and independence and dignity for the benefit of themselves, their families, the communities and for our country. So thank you so much. Have a great conference. (Applause.)