

Guest Post: Justice Dept. agency to alter its terminology for released convicts, to ease reentry

By **Tom Jackman** May 4 at 5:00 AM

The Justice Department is taking a number of steps to reintegrate those released from prisons and jails into society, most notably during the recent National Reentry Week, such as asking states to provide identification to convicts who have served their sentences and creating a council to remove barriers to their assimilation into every day life. Here, Assistant Attorney General Karol Mason, who has headed the Office of Justice Programs since 2013, announces in a guest post that her agency will no longer use words such as “felon” or “convict” to refer to released prisoners.

By **Karol Mason**

During National Reentry Week last week, federal prisons and prosecutors’ offices and local organizations held job fairs, community town hall meetings, special mentoring sessions, and outreach events aimed at raising public awareness of the obstacles facing those who leave our prisons, jails, and juvenile justice facilities each year. The American Bar Association has documented more than 46,000 collateral consequences of criminal convictions, penalties such as disenfranchisement and employment prohibitions that follow individuals long after their release. These legal and regulatory barriers are formidable, but many of the formerly incarcerated men, women, and young people I talk with say that no punishment is harsher than being permanently branded a “felon” or “offender.”

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In my role as head of the division of the Justice Department that funds and supports hundreds of reentry programs throughout the country, I have come to believe that we have a responsibility to reduce not only the physical but also the psychological barriers to reintegration. The labels we affix to those who have served time can drain their sense of self-worth and perpetuate a

cycle of crime, the very thing reentry programs are designed to prevent. In an effort to solidify the principles of individual redemption and second chances that our society stands for, I recently issued an agency-wide policy directing our employees to consider how the language we use affects reentry success.

This new policy statement replaces unnecessarily disparaging labels with terms like “person who committed a crime” and “individual who was incarcerated,” decoupling past actions from the person being described and anticipating the contributions we expect them to make when they return. We will be using the new terminology in speeches, solicitations, website content, and social media posts, and I am hopeful that other agencies and organizations will consider doing the same.

Adjusting language in no way means condoning criminal or delinquent behavior. Those who commit crimes must be held accountable. But accountability requires making amends, an objective that is much harder to achieve when a person is denied the chance to move forward. The people who leave our correctional facilities every year have paid their debts. They deserve a chance to rebuild their lives. We, all of us, can help them by dispensing with useless and demeaning labels that freeze people in a single moment of time.

Our words have power. They shape and color our estimations and judgments. They can build up or tear down. The hundreds of thousands of people who come out of our prisons on an annual basis and the millions more who cycle through local jails need to hear that they are capable of making a change for the better. And with that message of inclusion, that we are holding them to the expectation that they become productive contributors to our communities’ safety and success.

Note: This post has been updated to clarify that Mason’s directive applies only to the Office of Justice Programs, not the entire Justice Department.

Tom Jackman has been covering criminal justice for The Post since 1998, and now anchors the new "True Crime" blog. [Follow @TomJackmanWP](#)

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