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## The Probation and Parole System Needs Our Help to Succeed

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Last summer, Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) took the U.S. Senate floor and gave a short speech on probation and parole. During his speech, he stated that in his view, “the No. 1 problem in our criminal justice system today is the early release system — sometimes called probation, sometimes parole, sometimes intensive supervision. But whatever you call it, it doesn’t work. It is overburdened, understaffed, inconsistent and almost completely unsuccessful.”

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there are about 4.5 million people on probation or parole today. Edwards was correct when he stated that a majority of these individuals will break the law again and end up back in our nation’s prisons. In fact, according to BJS, two out of three inmates released from prison in 1994 were arrested again within three years. Statistics also tell us that individuals on parole make up less than 1 percent of the American population but account for more than 35 percent of the people entering prison each year. Based on these statistics, it is difficult to argue with the senator’s claims that our probation and parole systems are “almost completely unsuccessful.”

After years of tough-on-crime policies mandating that offenders serve long minimum sentences and remain ineligible for probation or parole until they have served at least 85 percent of their sentence, our society is now exploring ways to reduce the number of those incarcerated. We are sentencing more individuals, especially nonvio-

lent offenders, to probation. Additionally, as sentencing laws move away from the tough-on-crime policies of the past 20 years, it is likely that parole will also become an even greater part of our societal response to crime. This will place an increasing burden on a segment of our criminal justice system that is already, “overburdened and understaffed.”

This burden will occur at a time when the average probation officer has more than five times as many cases as someone in a similar position in the early 1970s. In some situations, a probation officer is responsible for more than 200 cases. Even the most dedicated public servant could not effectively do his or her job under these conditions.

The public recognizes the importance of enabling offenders to reintegrate into and become valuable members of our communities. We also assert that these individuals, who are leaving our prisons or who are sentenced to probation, have a responsibility to obey the law, stay off drugs and stop victimizing their communities. They have another responsibility as well — to become productive members of society who work, pay taxes and support their children. We in corrections also have a responsibility — to provide them with the support they need to meet these obligations.

We cannot be content to simply release offenders after they have served their time in our institutions. We must promote educational programs and job training. We must work

to ensure that each offender receives the care — for drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems and physical problems — he or she needs to return to society. In short, we must provide these individuals with the support they need to become productive and valuable members of our communities. This support must begin within our institutions and continue throughout an individual’s term of probation or parole.

The dedicated individuals who work in probation and parole systems across America need help. They are often held accountable for the failures of other elements of the criminal justice community. Therefore, all of us in corrections must help them by doing our own jobs better, to escape the perception that they are ineffective. We must work together to ensure that all elements of the criminal justice system receive adequate funding and that all elements of the criminal justice system work closer together to provide offenders with the services they require.

I believe that those in positions of power, such as Edwards, would welcome the stories about the many successes those on probation and parole have experienced. The American Correctional Association will also continue to educate those in positions to enact change and will continue to tell the stories of your many successes to ensure that the entire criminal justice community works together to provide offenders with the ability to return to society as active and valued citizens. ♦