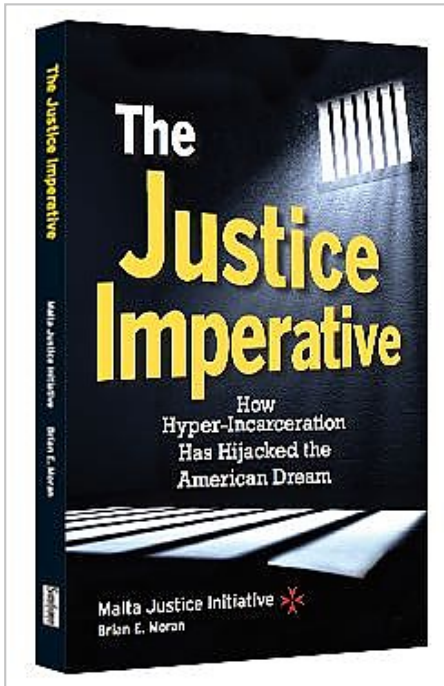


Can “Second-Chance Society” Compete With Big (Prison) Business?

by BRIAN SLATTERY | Feb 16, 2015 1:51 pm

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Gov. Dannel Malloy may have called for a [second-chance society](#). But the people who make money off the prison system have no interest in second chances. They just want to make money. And nothing will change until that does.

That was the message from the audience at the New Haven Public Library Saturday to Rev. Marilyn B. Kendrix. She was there as co-author of [The Justice Imperative: How Hyper-Incarceration Has Hijacked the American Dream](#), which makes the case for criminal justice reform in Connecticut. The talk was sponsored by the library and the [Long Wharf Theatre](#), in anticipation of [brownsville song \(b-side for tray\)](#), which will run Mar. 25 to Apr. 19.

In an effort to make the play more accessible to more people, some tickets can be had for \$5.

The argument in *The Justice Imperative*, which centers on Connecticut’s state prison system, is familiar to those following criminal justice issues. The state’s prison population has exploded. In 1980, there were under 4,000 people in prison. Now there are over 16,000, at a total yearly cost of about \$1 billion. Most of the inmates are nonviolent offenders, and over 95 percent of them are released.

Except that far too many of them return to prison, 75 percent of them for technical violations of parole: failing to report for a visit with the parole officer, missing a curfew—or lack of employment or education.

Kendrix.

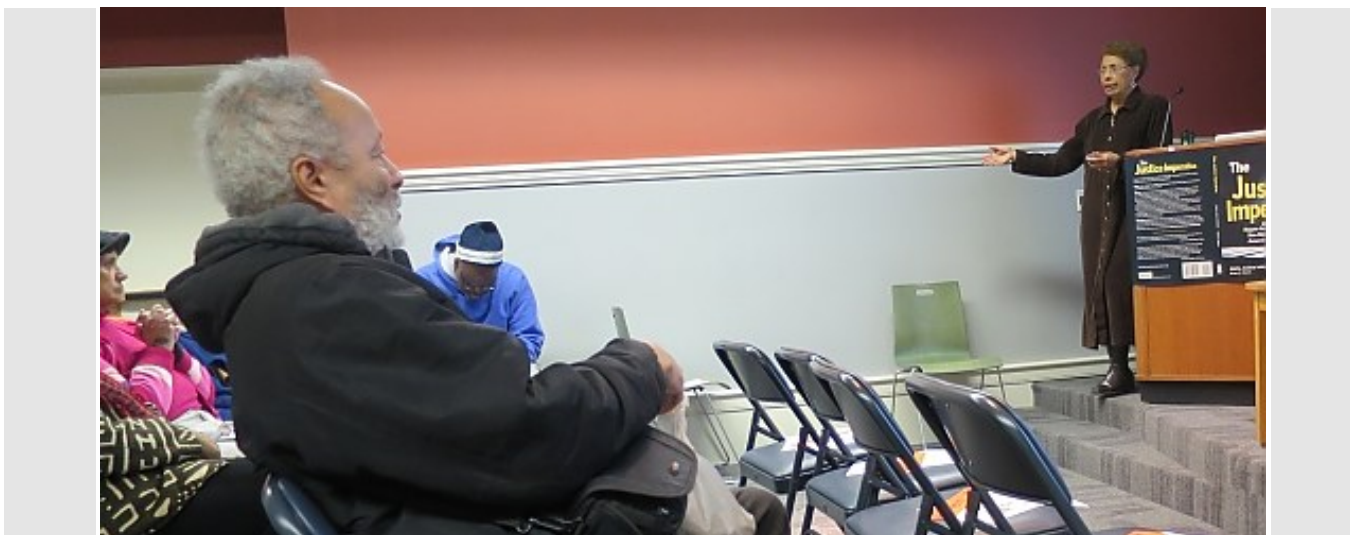
BRIAN SLATTERY PHOTO

Those last two were the key to Kendrix's talk, as she described the vicious circle that parole conditions set up. Ex-offenders can't get student loans; it's "not allowed by statute." They find that "many, if not most, employees will not hire them," even if the conviction was decades ago. Ex-offenders who do get jobs often get fired when employers find out they did time.

So even though most people on parole are desperately trying to stay out of prison, "the most rational thing for them to do is to return to crime," Kendrix said. "And then we are dismayed."

It's a familiar story. [Malloy's new initiative calling for a "second-chance society." unveiled Feb. 3 at Yale Law School.](#) represents a possible break from it, Kendrix said. It offers an opportunity for political action, a chance to get involved and change policies to lower the number of people in prison, and improve their chances of staying out and getting on their feet. [The Malta Justice Initiative](#), which published *The Justice Initiative*, had already started talking to legislators about Malloy's plan.

Audience members listened patiently throughout Kendrix's talk. When it was their turn, though, they spoke almost with one voice: What about the money?

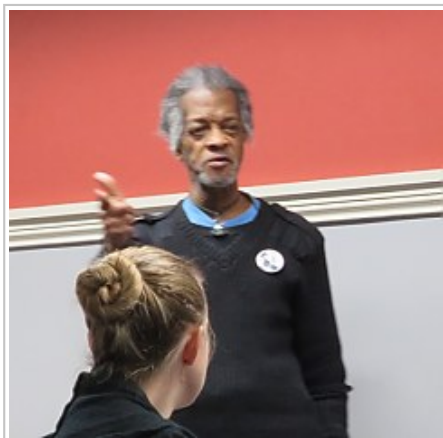


"Prisons won't close because they're big business," said one audience member. Legislators really listen only to people with money, said another.



What is Malloy’s motivation for prison reform? asked another skeptical audience member. What is in it for him? He said he suspects Malloy is just looking for ways to trim the budget.

“I don’t care what your motivation is,” Kendrix replied, “as long as we’re moving toward the same thing.”



Longtime Black Panther George Edwards told a harrowing story of a run-in with the police decades ago, in which, he said, he was unsure he would make it out of jail alive. He spoke about the connections of money and power between government and business that keep the prison system the way it is.

“If the legislators got us up in this jam in the first place, what are they going to do to change it?” said another audience member.

Kendrix didn’t disagree with any of this, but reiterated the need for political action. The audience remained skeptical.

“There aren’t enough organizations that are cohesive enough to have an impact,” Edwards said. At the end of the Q&A,

though, he commended Kendrix and the Malta Justice Initiative for trying.

Everyone in the room wanted the same thing. They just disagreed on what the chances really were of getting it.

brownsville song (b-side for tray) *will run Mar. 25 to Apr. 19 at the Long Wharf Theater.*



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posted by: fedupinNH on February 16, 2015 6:34pm

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