

Keynote Speech at Rewriting the Sentence II Summit



COLETTE PETERS

Director, Federal Bureau of Prisons

Editors' Note: Lightly edited for clarity in print.

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for that kind welcome. I'm glad you're not wanting to get rid of me yet! It has only been one year, but it has been a fast and furious year. I think that I received a request to join all of you almost a year ago in hopes that we would be able to come together during this time. So, I'm thrilled to be here. It's also fun that it's here at GW. I have three kids, two are seniors in high school, and they were here this summer. We did a whole bunch of whirlwind college tours and GW was one of them. So, it was fun walking into the front hall, there. Essays are due this week, so we'll see where they end up. So really, thank you.

I am thrilled to be a part of this summit, especially with its profound content and intent to confront the complex challenges of incarceration and its harmful consequences, while working to find alternatives to imprisonment and a more effective way to do this work. These are issues at the core of my work. And so, I'm so honored to be in the room with all of you to hear your voices. I'm going to talk more about what the Federal Bureau of Prisons is doing to hear those voices and to hear those stories. Some of you who do not know me may not believe this thought. That, really, the Federal Bureau of Prisons director would like to find alternatives to imprisonment and a more effective approach of safety and justice? And the answer is a resounding yes. So, thank you for the opportunity to spend some time with you today. I'd like to tell you why this summit is so relevant to me and why the theme of this summit resonates with me so deeply, as well as to share with you what we are doing at the Federal Bureau of Prisons that aligns with your good work.

So much of my work is grounded in Benedictine principles. You'll hear me say these principles a few times this morning: love of neighbor, service, stewardship, justice, and peace. I learned these Benedictine principles really early on in my life. I grew up in a small town—Millbank, South Dakota—where we lived next to a local abbey, Blue Cloud Abbey. It was a Benedictine abbey, and that exposure later drew me to an all-women's liberal arts Catholic college, the College of Saint Benedict. I inherently believed in human potential and that people can change, and I think that's what really drew me to a vast liberal arts education and my degree in psychology.

That was then my bridge to my graduate work and career in criminal justice and public safety and law enforcement. Because it all helped me to understand that important link between public safety and social

responsibility. I've worked on all parts of the criminal justice system. I started in juvenile corrections. I was a victim advocate and crisis mediator for the Denver Police Department. I was the inspector general, the director of the Oregon Youth Authority, and as you mentioned, director of the Oregon Department of Corrections.

So, [after] more than thirty years of doing this work, I was asked to lead the Federal Bureau of Prisons, just one year ago, and I was encouraged to take on that role by many of you in this room. And then, subsequently, I was welcomed so kindly by so many of you in this room. And I appreciate the welcome, and I appreciate the prayers and the support. And I think, given my background, I was as ready as anyone might have been to step into this role, but I truly believe that it was my background and experience, what I had been given by my family, grounded in those Benedictine principles, as we grew up in that small town on the plains of South Dakota. Certainly, [it] is what my husband and I learned along the way in our thirty-two years together, and what Saint Bens had taught me so long ago: to think critically, lead courageously, and advocate for those in need, passionately.

At my investiture to become the twelfth director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, being sworn in by Attorney General Merrick Garland, I took my oath of office that day with my hand on my family Bible, which was being held by my sweet husband—and I was so grateful to have him at my side and have my three children supporting that. As I placed my hand on my family Bible, I was reminded of those Benedictine principles that have now been the foundation of my life and my thirty years in public safety and law enforcement. So, they're worth repeating again: love of neighbor, service, stewardship, justice, and peace. Today, I think Saint Benedict would be pretty proud and, quite frankly, probably a little shocked, to know that research confirms that his values, and those principles like normalcy and humanity inside our prisons improve public safety, create safer prisons, fewer victims, healthier correctional professionals, and—my motto—"better neighbors."

And what a historic time to be joining the Federal Bureau of Prisons, as apparent by this room of thoughtful individuals. The community now cares about our work and has a voice, and a voice we are listening to, especially the difficult and negative feedback that we need to hear. We also have a president, an attorney general, and a deputy attorney general who [are all] supporting this reform work—and Congress cares. The First Step Act is an historic

Federal Sentencing Reporter, Vol. 36, No. 3, pp. 138–140, ISSN 1053-9867, electronic ISSN 1533-8363.
© 2024 The Ohio State University. All rights reserved. Please direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/fsr.2024.36.3.138>.

moment in time, reflecting on how the Federal Bureau of Prisons should do their business. And we welcome that advancement, that accountability, and that oversight. So I believe we, and I mean all of us in this room, have a historic opportunity and a time to show the world how to really do corrections. So, how are we going to do that? I think that's why we're all here.

We know so much more about what works in corrections today than we did when I became the director of the Oregon Department of Corrections twelve years ago. Certainly more than what we knew when I started my career thirty years ago. We now know that these principles, like normalcy and humanity inside our prisons, improve public safety. And what that means for me is safer prisons, healthier corrections professionals, fewer victims, and better outcomes for those in our care and custody—and their families and loved ones. Our mission of corrections is clear. It's twofold: ensure safe prisons, and prepare those in our care to reenter society. I firmly believe our job is not to make good inmates—it is to make good neighbors.

So, I would like to publicly thank and hold up our corrections professionals across this country, so many of them proudly serving their nation. That work is not for the faint of heart. It is one of the most challenging jobs in public safety, and they perform that essential, but often unrecognized, service to our nation. The supermajority of them coming to work every day wanting to do the right thing, in line with our mission and our vision. So, I ask that we all please keep them, their wellness, and their selfless dedication to this very difficult work in mind as we talk about transformational change to our criminal justice system. And, with their important work in mind, this past year we engaged in strategic planning. We modernized our mission, our vision, and our core values.

We are now using language that's not common in corrections. Words like “normalcy” and “humanity” and “compassion.” These are words that reflect the actions and principles of the individuals here today, in this room. And [they] reflect the core of what I want our work at the Federal Bureau of Prisons to be. But it's not always easy. These are not easy words to live by. I'll use compassion as an example. As Sister Dennis Frandrup, a college professor of mine, reminded me recently, and I quote her, “rock solid strength is demanded of one who lives compassion.”

So, inside our work in this past year, we're focusing on seven different areas. First is, speaking of those corrections professionals, recruitment, and retention. I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with justice-involved individuals who are sick and tired of our facility lockdowns because [of] our staffing shortages. Individuals driving miles and miles to visit their loved ones to find that our doors are closed. Programs and treatment that are delayed or stalled because of our staffing crisis. So this is our number one priority. We have to figure out how to retain the good staff that we have, and recruit good people coming in our doors, so that we can serve those in our care.

We have to create better environments. We've learned so much from organizations like the corrections system in Norway, and I've spent a lot of time visiting how they do their work there. I saw firsthand that a better environment is better for our employees and those in our care; a more normal, more humane environment. They truly believe that the environment inside our prisons should reflect what the community environment looks like. And so that work is already underway at the Federal Bureau of Prisons. When I travel to our institutions, our teams are excited to show me even the little things. They're including plants on units. They're allowing dogs on units. They're painting murals. We have even included some fish tanks at some of our institutions. And those are just little things that I think, one, show an effort on behalf of front-line employees who want to do the right thing, but it also is reflective of our bigger, broader work.

Covid taught us many things. Some of them good. Some of them tough. But it did teach the world that we are a health care organization, something that corrections professionals have known for decades. But it took a pandemic for the world to understand that we have 157,000 patients. And so my hope is that we pivot out of this pandemic, forever seeing ourselves as a health care organization. Because if every policy and every action is about creating healthy minds and healthy bodies, we will then have those better neighbors.

Restrictive housing: we have a lot of work to do in this area. We have a lot of work to do in this area because despite our efforts to address restrictive housing numbers, our numbers have increased. And we know what restrictive housing does to individuals. It's not an effective deterrent, and it actually can increase their future criminality and affect their physical and mental well-being.

So, as my husband likes to say, I have a short-term plan and a long-term plan. In the short term, on a very serious note, we shut down our special management unit at Thomson. As many of you know, we uncovered abuse and misconduct, and so we swiftly shut that unit down. We are holding those people accountable. We are rebuilding that culture. And we have redesigned their mission to be a low-security institution. We also launched a workgroup internally that first looked at all the other studies that had happened at the Federal Bureau of Prisons on restrictive housing and ensured that those recommendations had been implemented. And now they're traveling across the country to study best practices around restrictive housing, around the globe. Long term, we have entered into a historic partnership with the National Institute of Justice to have an outside organization come and look inside the Bureau at our restrictive housing policies and practices, to help prepare us for what the future state of restrictive housing should be.

For those of you who have spent time with us or have visited our institutions, you know that infrastructure matters, and we have facilities that are falling apart across the country. And so we must address the infrastructure at the Federal

Bureau of Prisons. Many of the institutions that we now have, we've inherited or we've built more than twenty to thirty years ago. And we haven't received the funding to keep them up to date. I am told I have more roofs that need to be replaced than roofs that do not. So, we are working diligently with a contractor who's coming in to give us an assessment of what the real issue is. We say we have a \$2 billion infrastructure problem. That number is really old, and it only includes life and safety. It doesn't include the paint that's peeling or other things that need to be fixed. And so, we're having them come in to get us a true assessment so that we can come up with a five-, ten-, and fifteen-year plan to work with Congress to address this issue.

You hear us talk a lot about evidence-based recidivism reduction programs. We want to continue to talk about that and to talk about how to create evidence-based decisions at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, because that's a little bit different from what we've done in the past. We want to rely on data and research to tell us where to go. As an example, the CARES Act ended, and the question was posed, "should those individuals who are safely being housed in the community [be] brought back to prison?" So we looked at the data, and the data were very clear. We had released about 13,000 individuals through the CARES Act and less than half a percent came back to prison on a new crime. So, the data were clear—those individuals would be better served in the community.

When we look at restrictive housing, we want to do the same thing. We're looking at the baseline of how we're using restrictive housing now, and then using research to help drive us to our future straight.

And last but not least, we have to improve our partnerships. We truly want to be a transparent and open agency. And to do that, we've engaged in proactive conversations with Congress, members of the media, advocacy groups, organizations, and justice-involved individuals, many of whom are in this room today. Myself and members of my executive team have hosted many listening sessions, including one with justice-involved individuals before all of our wardens at our National Wardens Conference. And the feedback I received from all of those listening sessions was quite profound. Long-term Federal Bureau of Prisons

employees came to me and said, "I wish that would have happened at the beginning of my career. It would have changed my career trajectory, and my thinking and my thoughts." There were tears in people's eyes at the Wardens' conference as individuals shared their positive and negative stories of their time with us at the Federal Bureau of Prisons. And we're not just listening, we're tracking the feedback. We're taking it to account into our strategic planning and the direction that we're driving the agency. So those listening sessions will continue under my tenure, and please know that we're taking that feedback very seriously.

So, are we making change? Are we moving fast enough? Those are questions I ask myself daily and questions you might be asking yourself as you sit in this audience. As far as the first question: are we producing change? It's beginning. We're getting good feedback from individuals, like you, who are sometimes more keyed in and tuned in to what's happening in our institutions. I'm getting positive feedback from individuals who are in our care and custody as I walk the halls of our institutions. And we are nowhere near proclaiming success and crossing the finish line. I see a big boulder being pushed up a mountain, but we're pushing it.

As for the second question, are we moving fast enough? I ask myself that, as I said, every day. As I stand in a room before people like you, the answer is, of course, no, I don't think we can move fast enough. And as a woman who would love to have a magic wand (we're Harry Potter fans at our house) and whisk ourselves into that future state, I also know that culture change takes time. So I ask for your patience. We want to make change not just for tomorrow but for generations to come. So, to do that, as my mother always said, we need to measure twice and cut once. We need to ensure that we are bringing our employees along. We can't lose them in this process. We need to ensure that we're not taking tools away from them without replacing those tools with other tools and training. So, I remind myself of the old adage: to go slow is to go fast. But opportunities to spend time with people like you are my inspiration. And so, I thank you so much for your time today, and I look forward to engaging in our collective work. Thank you.