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## D.C. Parole Violators' Stern Arbiter of Second Chances

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The excuses run the gamut: Nobody will hire me. I'm living in a shelter. If I miss work, I'll get fired. I don't get high *all* the time.

Isaac Fulwood Jr., a member of the U.S. Parole Commission, braces for explanations from men and women who have broken rules of their parole, missing appointments and curfews and testing positive for drug and alcohol use. These "technical violations" get about 1,000 District felons sent back to prison annually, for at least an extra year.

Fulwood's reprimand sanction hearings, held most Wednesdays, are an opportunity to follow the rules rather than return to prison.

The job alternately saddens and angers him. Fulwood rues that most are black, like him, and that the men waste away behind bars as their children, wives and girlfriends fend for themselves. But as a police officer with 29 years behind the badge, he tolerates no nonsense: Do right and stay free, or act a fool and get locked up.

"You're 28. You're a black male," he scolded a man who had relapsed on cocaine and cut a Global Positioning System tracking device off his ankle. "You're in the group of folks that die."

The District has 15,000 offenders living under conditions of parole or probation: confined to home detention, tethered to GPS, in training classes or drug treatment, or required to check in regularly. When things go wrong, someone must decide how to fix it.

The typical response is a trip back to prison, but states and the District are increasingly opting for cheaper alternatives, such as day- or week-long sentences. States spent \$49 billion last year on corrections and want to preserve prison space for hardened criminals, according to a report in July by the Pew Center on the States.

For the past two years, the District has tried the hearings conducted by Fulwood, a former D.C. police chief. They are a joint project of the parole commission, public defenders and the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, a federal bureau that supervises people on parole and probation in the District.

The Washington Post was allowed to attend several of these closed hearings on the condition that offenders' names and identifying characteristics not be disclosed.

Almost 200 people have appeared since the hearings began, sitting at a table across from their probation officers while Fulwood referees. All but about a dozen remain on the street, although officials say it is

too early to gauge the program's success.

Offenders are offered attorneys, if they wish. But many don't bother, because Fulwood has promised that if they come, he won't lock them up.

"You're not going to jail," Fulwood says, "at least not today."

Fulwood admonishes offenders for insolence and encourages parole officers to treat their charges more humanely. Fulwood's younger brother was a crack addict who was slain in 1992, and he believes that whatever crimes people have committed, they deserve assistance getting their lives together.

"We have to try to restore their dignity," he said. "We have to ask: Can we do something to reconnect them with their families? I feel some kinship to them."

At a hearing in June, a 60-year-old man sauntered in and smiled when he recognized Fulwood. The man had been a police captain when Fulwood was chief of police. Now, after cycling in and out of prison for cocaine use, he lives in a homeless shelter. He was contrite about using again. But his mood turned glum when Fulwood asked who he had leaned on in rough times.

Tears welled in his eyes as he mentioned his mother. She had been dead for eight years, but only the day before he had talked about her with a therapist at the Veterans Affairs hospital, and the emotion was raw. "My anchor left, and I just drifted," he said, sobbing. Fulwood, the public defender, the probation officers all fell silent. Some averted their eyes.

After a long minute elapsed, Fulwood looked at the probation officer, who said, "This never came up." Fulwood urged the probation officer to dig deeper and find out what problems lie beneath the surface. Fulwood ordered a psychiatric evaluation. Later, Fulwood said more prison would be a "waste of damn time."

The hearings are designed to determine who needs to be in jail and who does not, said Paul Quander, who heads the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. Like Fulwood, Quander contends that locking everyone up for breaking rules doesn't keep the community safe in the long run. Money is better spent, he said, on jobs, housing, and drug and mental health treatment.

"If you get people drug treatment and employment, they don't commit crimes," Quander said.

Phil Fornaci, director of the D.C. Prisoners' Project, which advocates on behalf of offenders, said he hopes the hearings will make parole officers think less like police. "They think they need to catch people in the act of doing something wrong," he said. "What people need is help getting integrated back into society."

At a recent hearing, a 38-year-old man blamed his parole officer for getting him fired. The man, a heroin addict, said he was laid off after he missed a meeting with his parole officer and she called his boss. He had argued with the parole officer, he said, which reminded him of a woman he was involved with.

"At that moment," he said he later told a colleague of the parole officer, "I saw my hands around her neck."

"It was a poor choice of words," he told Fulwood.

Fulwood agreed and reminded him that he should never threaten or hit a parole officer.

A new case plan was drawn up. Fulwood advised the supervisors to have the person arrested when they feel threatened and not wait to file a complaint.

But he asked why the offender had been given daily doses of methadone for three years. "We've just got him addicted to another drug," Fulwood said.

Fulwood said parole officers, although overworked from heavy, difficult caseloads, have to be more fully engaged with offenders or the system doesn't work. Often, he said, what's in the report doesn't reflect the complexity and enormity of needs he sees.

At one hearing this summer, a probation officer filled in for a colleague. The case involved an offender, 38, who had been taken from his mother at age 7 because of abuse. Twenty years later, he was convicted of robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. Now, he was drinking, which was prohibited under his parole terms. He also had been arrested on charges of domestic abuse, which were dropped.

Fulwood listened to his explanation: The woman had been upset when he refused to marry her; she made a false report to the police. Fulwood warned him that at any hint of violence, he would be sent back to prison.

Then he asked the fill-in probation officer for the case plan. She did not have one, nor any recommendations. He closed the hearing.

"We have to supervise these people," Fulwood said, in a tone of exasperation. "Otherwise, why are we here?"

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