

Gift of Voice

903 North Second Street
Edwardsville, IL 62025

August 16, 2017

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To Decision Makers in Cook County, Illinois:

My name is AJ French and I serve as Director for Gift of Voice, an organization devoted to training, empowerment and advocacy for the health and wellness of individuals across the globe. About half of our board leadership is from Chicago.

I'm writing to you today because we must do everything within our power to insure that people have access to quality mental healthcare. Sometimes people portray mental health challenges as criminal, but the real transgression is when we have it within our power to underwrite the mental wellness of individuals and communities, yet choose not to do so.

You cannot address mental health if:

- 1) The people you're seeking to assist don't trust you; and,
- 2) You don't affirmatively provide opportunities to help people see and realize a better version of themselves.

Trauma informed and recovery oriented services provided through this lens is required to successfully reintegrate as many people as possible. This fact is why I felt compelled for Gift of Voice to join hundreds of other leaders in supporting Social Change's #OpportunitiesNotScams campaign ("Campaign") to:

1. No longer permit added fees, hidden fees or other extraneous costs to be added to services we allow others to provide;
2. Ensure costs are fair by having some community members be part of the process of determining prices for such services; and,
3. No longer accept commissions or any financial incentives to provide these services beyond the cost of any additional staffing required to make the opportunity available; and,
4. Make educational services and resources received inside available to people for at least a month upon release to ensure people can continue to build upon the progress they make while incarcerated.

I know the Campaign has multiple bills that received significant bi-partisan support, including one which was recently signed by Governor Rauner to lower video visitation costs. As we continue to push to have the other Campaign bills become law, I wanted to write to support the effort to bring the jails in line with these principles, also.

As you know, far more people cycle through jails than prisons. And if we don't remove the barriers to trust and affirmatively make efforts to provide free access to the life-changing opportunities needed, things will continue to get worse not better. Our communities need and deserve better. Please adopt the principles of the Campaign when you consider which proposals best provide needed services to individuals who are incarcerated.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "AJ French". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "A" and "J".

AJ French, President

cc: Illinois Mental Health Planning & Advisory Council (IMHPAC)