

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Charles Worpek, and I came through the Hampshire County Sheriff's Office prerelease system, including the Bridge House, work release, and the parole transition program. I want to share what that experience meant for me, and why programs like these matter.

When I entered prerelease, I needed structure, accountability, and a real chance to rebuild. I was struggling with severe addiction and mental health issues, and I was a menace to my community. The staff treated me like someone with potential, and that changed how I showed up every day.

While I was at the Bridge House in prerelease, I was given the opportunity to take the Holyoke Community College Culinary Arts Line Cook program. That program opened real doors for me. I earned my ServSafe Manager, Alcohol, and Allergen certifications — credentials employers actually look for. It was a direct pipeline to employment, and it gave me the confidence and qualifications to step into a professional kitchen the day I got out. I was also given work release, where I worked in a real kitchen in the community. That experience was huge. It allowed me to practice the skills I was learning, build a work history, and start saving money before I was even released. That financial stability is something most people coming out of incarceration never get, and it made a massive difference in my transition.

Alongside the job training, I took multiple courses focused on cognitive-behavioral therapy and self-improvement. Those classes helped me understand my own patterns, build healthier decision-making skills, and stay grounded. Between the practical skills and the personal development work, I did a lot of growing during that time.

Another important part of my prerelease experience was being introduced to the Northampton Recovery Center. That connection started while I was still at the Bridge House, and it became a major part of my support system. Today, I'm proud to say I'm involved with the Recovery Center, giving back to the same community that supported me during my transition.

There's also a financial and housing reality that people don't always talk about. Without the parole house, I would have had no housing. Having a safe, stable place to land made it possible for me to keep my job, stay focused, and keep moving forward. Those two factors alone — savings and housing — are what keep a lot of people, including myself, from returning to addiction and crime.

Today, I'm living the outcome these programs are designed to create. I have stable housing. I'm working part-time as a line cook, using the skills and certifications I earned in prerelease and work release. I also started a photography business on the side, and I stay connected to my community through the Northampton Recovery Center, supporting others who are rebuilding their lives just like I did. None of that would have been possible without the foundation I got through prerelease, the Bridge House, work release, and the parole program.

As conversations happen about consolidation or restructuring, I think it's important to remember that prerelease, work release, and the Bridge House aren't extras. They're essential. They're the programs that actually reduce recidivism and help people rebuild their lives. I'm standing here as proof of that.

Thank you for letting me share my experience.