

Testimony of Coss Marte and Owner of CONBODY
U.S. Senate Committee on Small Business
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Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Paul, and members of the committee, I really appreciate you inviting me to share my journey as a Small Business owner with a criminal record. I'm born and raised in the Lower East Side of NYC where as a child there were limited opportunities to succeed legally. The individuals that I saw succeed were usually the drug dealers that stood on the street corner where I grew up, who wore big chains and rode in luxury vehicles. As a kid, school teachers would ask me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and I would tell them I wanted to be rich.

I wanted to be rich so badly because my mom immigrated from the Dominican Republic with limited resources and me in her belly. I grew up in a heavily drug infested neighborhood at the time and I hated the fact that my mom would deny me things because she had no money.

This led me to the streets at a very early age where I began selling drugs and eventually created a multi-million dollar drug empire. By the age of 19 I was making over \$2M in profit a year but this all ended when I was arrested by the DEA and ended up being sentenced to 7 years in prison.

As I entered the prison system I developed a workout routine that saved my life and I lost over 70lbs in 6 months then after doctors told me I could die in prison of a heart attack because my cholesterol levels were so high. I then helped over 20 inmates lose over a thousand pounds combined. This led me to develop a business plan while I was sitting in solitary confinement with the idea of launching CONBODY, a prison style fitness bootcamp that hires formerly incarcerated individuals to teach fitness classes. Today we've trained over 70,000 people worldwide.

As I came home from my prison sentence I was released with \$40, a bus ticket and my prison net bag where I held my business plan and believed CONBODY was a great business idea. However, I was faced with many barriers such as insurance, real estate, capital, and policy regulations against hiring employees who have been formerly incarcerated. Even finding a job was difficult as I was denied over 100 times because of my past.

Thanks to programs like Defy Ventures, who believe that formerly incarcerated and incarcerated individuals have the entrepreneurial skills to start their own businesses, I was able to utilize their resources to navigate running a small business.

However, even with the help of Defy I was rejected business insurance multiple times or quoted an absurd rate of \$30,000 a month to launch a small business because of my criminal record and regulations that were placed on a legislated level.

Then capital came into play as banks had those questions in their applications, "Have ever been convicted of a criminal charge?" I literally sold my collection of over 300 pairs of Jordan sneakers to use as my start up capital. In addition, real estate locations rejected me because of the same factors. It took me three years of showing up every single day, twice a day, through rain, sleet, and snow to train my clients in the public park.

It was truly not an easy task but I was fortunate enough to catch the ear of a landlord of a Buddhist Temple who let me rent their basement to operate my small business, where we were able to create a safe space for myself and employees who all have been in the system. We truly thought it was going to be a safe haven for my employees who have gone through so many biases in the workforce due to their past criminal record but we were faced with fraternizing, a rule that's stated in parole and probation, where formerly incarcerated individuals are not allowed to be in the same place at any given time. Our goal was to create a space where our employees had each other's back and make sure that we were able to keep each one of us from returning back into the system, which has worked so far.

However, fraternizing has blocked us from employing formerly incarcerated individuals due to their parole and probation officers denying them from being in a space that has other returning citizens. For example, we had one individual who was about to be violated on parole and sentenced to two years in prison for working with us but thankfully we were able to create a petition with our community of client's and employees to prevent this from happening. We also brought this issue up to the regional supervisors in the parole system to stop one of our employees from being reincarcerated because he was working with us. Our efforts worked and were able to get him out of the situation but today there are so many individuals that come out of the system that face this issue but don't have a community that can support them through these barriers.

I've been a strong advocate for criminal justice reform for the last 9+ years and a true believer that if given the tools that we need we can show that we cannot only bring the recidivism rate down but demonstrate that we can be real untapped talent in the entrepreneurial space.

According to the Harvard Political Review currently our national recidivism rate is 76% but if we employ our returning citizens the recidivism rate drops down to 31% and at CONBODY the stat I'm proudest of is that we've hired over 50 formerly incarcerated individuals and have maintained a zero recidivism rate.

I believe what New York State is doing in the cannabis space has been extremely innovative with giving the first licenses to people that have been justice impacted by the war on drugs and have a successful business. I believe this is a great example of legislators working together with formerly incarcerated individuals to demonstrate their talents that will not only help our communities but the economy as well.

For example, I've recently launched CONBUD, a potential dispensary in New York State, where we will be hiring formerly incarcerated individuals to work with us and will give back a portion of our proceeds to the communities that have been affected most by the war.

I'd like to end by leaving you with these questions, " What if you were judged for the worst thing you've ever done for the rest of your life? Or what if you were known for taking those negative situations and turning them into a legacy that can impact our future? What would you want?

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions and answers.