Drug Policy Alliance

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Keri Blakinger has worked for years as a journalist (currently at The Marshall Project) covering the criminal justice system and exposing the abuses within it. She comes with experience that most reporters dont -- in 2010, she was arrested for drug possession and spent two years in the system herself. Matt Sutton, DPA's Director of Media Relations, who also has first-hand experience of the system due to a drug charge, sat down to talk with her. In their discussion, they reflect on the obstacles they have faced in their lives as a result of having a record, how it affects Keris reporting, and what changes are needed in a system that still prioritizes punitive measures over anything else.

You can follow Keri @keribla on Twitter. To learn more about DPAs work on these issues, visit drugpolicy.org/criminaljustice.

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(Jazzy intro music in)

Welcome to Drugs and Stuff, a podcast from the Drug Policy Alliance.

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Gabriella Miyares (0:08)

Hello, and welcome to Drugs and Stuff. I'm your host, Gabriella Miyares. Back in April, our colleague Mary Sylla joined us to talk about imprisonment and public health in the age of COVID-19. As we continue the fight for decarceration, today we welcome Keri Blakinger to share her story. At the start of this year, Keri joined the Marshall Project as their first formerly incarcerated reporter. She has written for years exposing abuses in the criminal justice system, while also reflecting on her own firsthand experience within it. Today, she is joined by my colleague Matt Sutton, DPA's Director of Media Relations, who also has first hand experience of the system, to talk about her personal story, how it affects her reporting, and what needs to change. Spoiler alert: a lot needs to change.

Matt Sutton (1:06)

Hi, Keri, thank you so much for joining us today on Drugs and Stuff.

Keri Blakinger (1:11)

Well, thanks for having me.

Matt Sutton (1:12)

I'm really excited to talk with you today. I'm a big fan of your work at the Houston Chronicle, and really excited that you're at the Marshall Project now. Congrats on that.

Keri Blakinger (1:22)

Thank you. It's been great.

Matt Sutton (1:24)

You know, I feel like we have a lot in common aside from being fellow Texans, you know, we both have been through the criminal justice system for drug charges, both had dogs that somewhat saved us. So, so touched to read that story. And now you're trying to communicate these injustices to the public. You know, this has obviously given you a very unique perspective on the challenges that incarcerated people face. And more specifically, the limitations of being able to deal with a crisis of the nature that we have going on right now, when confined to jail or prison. How has your personal experience provided you with a unique perspective in covering these issues?

Keri Blakinger (2:04)

You know, I always hate this question, I always have a hard time with this one, because I feel like it's one of those things that like, you know how it helps you, if it helps you. But if you haven't been through it, right, it's a little harder to sort of explain to people how this comes to bear in my daily work. I mean, I think generally, they're sort of the things you might suspect, like, I sort of know what to look for, I have an idea of, of what is possible in this world. And when, I mean, in this world, meaning of like, you know, the prisons and jails that I cover, I think that a lot of times, people who haven't done time, you know, might hear a story and think this is just ridiculous, there's no way this happened. Or, conversely, they might hear a thing and be like, Oh my God, that's terrible. But I think that having been through it, like it gives you a little more sense of what the realm of possibilities are. And, obviously, in a place like Texas, I'm continually shocked and horrified about the new and terrible things that, you know, that come up. But you know, also I think that for me, it means that I end up connecting with my sources a lot more deeply than I think you do in a lot of other beats you cover. Like, I've covered other beats and, you know, maybe didn't see quite as much of myself in my sources. And now I'm, when I'm covering prisons, you know, I, I know so well what these people are going through. I mean, not just the prisoners, but you know, people that work there, like I've spent enough time inside like I've, I know what they're going through. Which can make it better to tell their stories and to understand, you know, what are the important points that people really need to get to know what's going on in this system. But you know, it also makes it a lot harder in that it's a lot more personal. And I think for someone who's done time, it's probably a little more difficult to deal with the sort of what feels currently like an endless tidal wave of suffering. And, you know, just descriptions of terrible conditions. I mean, I get dozens of calls, emails, texts, Facebook messages a week from different prisoners, from their families, from their lawyers, and it's just varying degrees of desperate and fearful. And I think that, having been through that I can connect with that better and sort of pull out the big stories that people need to know. But it also makes it more personal in a way that can be really challenging, mentally in a time like this.

Matt Sutton (4:51)

Totally. Yeah, I get that because at DPA too. I mean, especially, you know, being the Director of Media Relations, like my contact info is like so out there, that I'm constantly getting emails too from families, and you know, sometimes even getting letters from, you know, people that are incarcerated, and you want to be able to help them all, but it's like, there's only so much that we can do. Obviously, we're trying to change things, but it's like, I just want to go and save them. And I'm like, how can I do that? And also like, even, how can I even respond to you in a way that I can, you know, try to address this and like, help you, when the system is so screwed up?

Keri Blakinger (5:39)

Yeah. And, you know, the other thing is, so many times, like, you're the first person that's listening to them. You know, they've tried all the administrators, they've tried the prison officials, they've tried the courts, they tried all these other things. And by the time they get to advocates or to the media, and someone actually takes their call and has a conversation with them, it's just a tidal wave because it's, this is I think oftentimes the first person who's really been willing to hear them out.

Matt Sutton (6:08)

Yeah. And you know, and going back to your story, again is really incredible. After being released from prison, I know you worked in a couple different news outlets and ended up at the Houston Chronicle. Tell me how that happened. As you and I are both aware of, it's not easy to get a job with a record, much less a respected Texas newspaper.

Keri Blakinger (6:32)

Well, I guess we should start with a little bit of background and tell your readers -- listeners (I said readers!) what I was in prison for. So I ended up being addicted to drugs, mostly heroin, but pretty much anything for close to 10 years. I'd been a competitive figure skater growing up, competed at Nationals, when my skating career fell apart. I started doing drugs at like 17 and did that for the next like nine years and then when I got arrested I had a decent amount of heroin on me and I did a little under two years in New York state prisons. When I got out, there was an editor at a local alt weekly, who, in Ithaca, who interviewed me for a story about jail conditions. And afterwards, you know, I guess she googled me and like, looked up some of the stuff I'd written before I got locked up, like for the student newspaper and shit. And she came out and interviewed me and she was like, hey, by the way, you want to try writing for us some? And so I did. And I started covering small towns in upstate New York with like, 5000 people and like one stoplight and all the meetings were about, you know, arguments over backyard chickens and things. And I did that for a couple years and I, I loved it. And then I ended up moving to the New York Daily News and doing like breaking news. So I wasn't really doing any sort of meaningful criminal justice coverage. I did some of that, but my primary job was like national breaking news. But I wanted to do more on the ground reporting. And I wanted to make the jump from tabloids to you know, broadsheets to like, you know, traditional newspapers. Right? And I figured that could be a difficult transition because I didn't have a lot of background in that sort of reporting. And I applied for a fellowship with Hearst, which owns the Houston Chronicle. And I, it was a two year fellowship, and I got it. I was waitlisted initially, and then someone dropped, so I got it. And the first year was in Houston, and then I just stayed. So the first year here in Houston, I covered just general assignments, breaking news. And then at the end of that first year, when I got hired permanently, they were like, hey, by the way, our death penalty reporter has retired, so you want to take over that? So that was actually how I got into doing criminal justice reporting full time, was just being the death row reporter. And that was not a full time job -- that was like on the side of my main beat was covering, you know, general assignment and breaking news. And then it was like, well just do some execution stuff on the side. And I, you know, did that but like when I started writing with these men on death row, then they would tell me these things about the conditions. And one of the things they told me was how one of the guys had been trying to get teeth for years, like he has very few teeth, still has very few teeth, and they wouldn't give him dentures. And this was appalling to me, because I knew that in New York, they gave people dentures, and it never occurred to me that if you were toothless, they wouldn't give you teeth. It just seems so basic. But it turns out, like I started poking into that, and you know, there was a lot of other people, not just people on death row, and was, you know, broadly a problem across the system. And, you know, they apparently had a policy that they would just put your food in a blender and puree it and give it to you in a cup. And that was, you know, that that was their approach to dealing with toothlessness. And from the course of sort of investigating that, and hearing about these other conditions, it became that my full time beat was criminal justice, prisons, jails, juvenile detention, sort of criminal justice, broadly. But I think also, you know, tangentially I guess, sort of tying it back to the first question, I

think that issue with the teeth also sort of demonstrates why my own background was helpful, because I'm not sure that this is something that a lot of other reporters would have necessarily focused on or sort of, you know, known to ask about or realize that it was anything outside of norm. But, you know, having been there and having dealt with dental issues in prison myself, as soon as I heard that, I knew that specifically seemed quite horrifying. So that's an answer to both questions at once, I guess.

Matt Sutton (10:56)

Yeah, no, it's incredibly appalling and I definitely see how your own personal experience can definitely like play into that, to kind of have a better understanding and just be able to, pick at the thing like, "oh, this this actually is not okay." You know, this is not right. And this is not standard. People deserve to have basic things like teeth. But unfortunately, maybe the Texas criminal justice system doesn't agree with that.

Keri Blakinger (11:28)

Well, after I wrote my story, they did say that we're going to start giving out more dentures. And then they actually got a 3d printer to start 3d printing dentures on site at one of the units. Now, of course, I would imagine that's not really happening during the pandemic, because they stopped transfers, and that did require taking people to a central unit where they would have these dentures made.

Matt Sutton (11:54)

Well, it is cool to see how like, you know, your writing can at least make some change. You know, it's like -- I think it's obviously a little bit easier for them to get away with these kind of injustices if nobody's aware of it. But you know, the moment that you're writing about it, you know, I think just as shocked as I am actually hearing this right now, I'm sure, other people are even more shocked. To your knowledge, were you the first formerly incarcerated person employed by the Chronicle?

Keri Blakinger (12:20)

You know, I've never asked around about that. But I mean, I've never heard of anyone else who had been formerly incarcerated. I guess that was one thing I sort of didn't address that well in the last question was sort of how, how that played a role in getting hired there or not. And I don't know what the sort of behind the scenes discussions were. I sort of heard whispers after the fact that that had been a hesitation in accepting me for the fellowship. But I don't know that. I mean, I'm sure out of the 10 people or 12 people or whatever who made that decision, that I would be surprised if some of them didn't have hesitations over a criminal record. That'd be quite extraordinary if they didn't, but, you know, I wonder to what extent knowing that a fellowship is not permanent might make it an easier entry point because people don't have to worry that they're sort of permanently hiring someone whose past, you know, gives them pause. But in any case, the decision to initially bring me on was, was Hearst, like it was several editors, several different publications. And then the first who actually hired me was Nancy Barnes at the Houston Chronicle, after I'd been there a year and you know, she agreed to hire me and keep me on and you know, she was really great about not being bothered at all by my background. You know, I think that she's not someone that you would look at and be like, oh, she's gonna be really progressive on this issue. Like she just looks very proper. And I'm not sure that she's someone I would have picked out as an ally, but she hired me, she let me cover prisons, she, you know, let me cover criminal justice. So, she really did prove to be more sort of forward thinking on that issue than most media seems to be, and it was great. I mean, Houston's been a great place to be able to cover these issues.

Matt Sutton (14:21)

That's incredible. Yeah, I mean, I just asked you because like, I, I remember years ago, I got a job offer rescinded at a call center, actually, of all places, you know, where they were gonna pay me like $7 an hour, $8 an hour, because once they found out I had a record, we have government contracts, so we actually can't hire you.

Keri Blakinger (14:45)

That's so crazy, because now they have prisoners staffing so many call centers.

Matt Sutton (14:51)

Okay? The government is the one that gave me the criminal record, and now they're also preventing me from getting a job. I mean, one of the terms of like, probation and stuff is that, you know, you have to have a job. So I'm like, you're literally preventing me from getting a job. And now you're gonna penalize me for not having a job, it's just crazy. And that's always been like, something that has always terrified me, when searching for jobs or anything, it's like, I'm going to get this job offer and then it's going to come back and be rescinded.

Keri Blakinger (15:28)

I've definitely been worried about that. I mean, I knew when I came to Hearst, and when I came to the Chronicle, I knew because they had a background check. And I think I asked them up front, like if they would, in general, hire someone with a felony. But when I was at the New York Daily News before that, it was such a quick interview process and the person who was interviewing me, Bob Shields, who, you know, was a fabulous guy and was a great editor. He never asked anything about my arrest or felony or anything. I had no idea for sure, if he knew. Like in the clips I had sent, I'd sent one in which one of them was a personal essay, so I mentioned it. So I was like, if he read all my clips, he would know, but he was hiring like 30 people at once for this, you know, they were starting a new operation in the Jersey City office, and he has to hire 30 people in like a week or some shit, right? So I didn't know like how much he was really vetting these people. And I was like, I don't know if he really saw my clips. I don't know if he even googled me, that was like a 20 minute Skype interview, and then he just hired me. So I was terrified that he really didn't know. And I kept being like, I quit my last job and I'm moving there to start this new job, and I still didn't know and I was afraid to ask. And it didn't matter, obviously. They had me fill out a thing eventually saying if I had a criminal background or not, and then the HR lady, when I filled out that I did, came back and she was like, I'm so sorry, we weren't supposed to ask that. I'm just gonna throw this out. So they were actually great about it. And they

had other formerly incarcerated people working there. I don't know if it was a lot, but I know there's one guy that at least had some felonies. It's also nerve wracking with housing, especially in the south, I have found this is more of an issue here. I never got a background check for housing in the Northeast, but here, it's difficult to move.

Matt Sutton (17:28)

You know, these are all I think, all the collateral consequences of a drug conviction or even just an arrest, that I think that people don't take into account and there's so much talk about, like, oh, people need to get arrested, people need to be incarcerated to get the help that they need. But then, like, they forget that this is gonna, like carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Keri Blakinger (17:58)

Yeah. In covering prisons, especially in covering prisons at a time like this, I mean, it's just not that people are getting help. I feel like that whole idea that you need to be arrested and go to prison to, you know, get sober, is based on this just fundamentally wrongheaded understanding of what actually happens in jail and prison. You know, I mean, I get, I could get heroin delivered to my bedside in prison. I was actually talking with a corrections officer here in Texas the other day, who was telling me about, like, multiple inmates that she knew of that had become addicted to meth while they were in prison. You know, I mean, that's not the idea that the incarceration in any way forces sobriety is not uniformly true. I mean, I think there's certain situations in which you know, maybe it's easier to stay sober in prison, and you know, certain situations in which like, there are some jails in which I'm sure it is nearly impossible to, you know, get high on a regular basis. But I mean, if the idea is to just create an environment where it's slightly harder to get high, it does seem that there would be a number of better ways to do that.

Matt Sutton (19:16)

Totally. And, you know, and that, that brings me to a good point, you know, now with COVID. I mean, obviously, there's a lot more harm, you know, I mean, obviously, we've known all along that there's, you know, public health risks to being incarcerated. But now more so than ever, according to the New York Times, you know, there's been over 100,000 people that have been infected with the virus in jails and prisons throughout the United States and over 800 people incarcerated and correctional officers have died, and I'm sure it's much, much higher than that, you know, that's just the information that is available. How do you think that that argument has changed now?

Keri Blakinger (19:59)

Well, you know, I think I think the other thing aside from the fact that COVID means that a prison or jail sentence can be more physically dangerous. Also when we're talking about, like, oh, they'll get treatment or whatever, you know, a lot of places aren't doing programming. Or if they are, they're just sending written packets to people in their cells and acting like that's drug treatment. I mean, drug treatment behind bars is like, you know, mediocre at best, pre pandemic, and now you add a pandemic, and people in many prison systems have been locked in their cells for months at this point, and if they're even attempting to say that they're doing programming, then in many cases, all they're going to be doing is simply giving out workbooks. So I mean, I think that's one important way in which it sort of changes the relationship between drug crime and treatment in prison. But you know, as you sort of hinted at the other way is, is that now the stakes are higher. This isn't just timeout, which I don't think it ever was. But I do think some people have viewed it that way, some sort of like timeout for bad behavior. It should be obvious that it really changes the calculus, when that timeout can now be deadly and not just deadly to the people doing time. If they get sick, you know, and it becomes sort of a petri dish and all the diseases circulating in these prisons, it's gonna spread among the officers and it's gonna get spread to their families. In Texas, for instance, when one unit is understaffed, they will force officers from other units to go work at that unit. And I mean, all the prisons are understaffed. So it's really just sort of shifting chairs on the Titanic at this point, moving people from understaffed units to more severely understaffed units. But in the process of doing that, you can end up forcing people to go from units with no infections to units with an outbreak and then back to a unit with no infections. And this is a complaint that's been on my mind, cuz I'm hearing that a lot right now from corrections officers. But you know, what that means is that if you want to lock up a bunch of people, you have so many that they can't socially distance, you know, they're vulnerable population, you're not providing them adequate medical care, it's not just them that are going to suffer like it's going to be corrections officers that are going to end up getting sick as it continues to circulate among the prisoners. And in some cases, they'll end up bringing it back to whatever city they live in, which may be halfway across the state because that might be where they actually live and they've just been forced to go work two weeks of overtime at some place that's a hotspot. So, when when we talk about the impacts of incarcerating someone during this pandemic, it's not just that they're not getting help, and we're putting them at risk, you can also potentially be putting other people near the prison and in completely different cities at risk.

Matt Sutton (23:21)

Yeah, I mean, that's exactly the argument that, you know, DPA just made on, you know, with the Senate's COVID stimulus package, because it really didn't allocate any funding or it really didn't address like the plight of, you know, people that are incarcerated, and, our biggest, argument with that, too, it's like, you're not only neglecting the people that are stuck in jails and prisons. But, there's like, there's no way that we can eradicate COVID in general if we're not addressing these, like huge hotspots within the prisons there, there's no way of keeping it contained inside the jails and prisons. The correction officers are going to spread it outside of it as well. So it's just it's really, it's really shocking that there is that disconnect I think. And, you know, obviously, this, has led to widespread calls for decarceration. What have you seen as, like the biggest obstacles to replacing people with drug convictions and other low level offenses at this time?

Keri Blakinger (24:25)

Well, you know, I think it I mean, I think there's a few things going on. I think that since there's already been some push towards reform, in some places before this, I think that in some areas, you've seen that the people that everyone could agree on maybe releasing or not having to as much time, had already been sort of dealt with before this. And by the time we came to this pandemic, in some places, you know, you just had a lot of a lot of people that no one was going to be willing to concede any ground on time or not. At least that I think is sort of my big picture thoughts on Texas anyways. But, you know, the other thing is, when you're talking about sort of releasing

anyone, I mean, it's one thing to do it in jails. I think there's, you know, jails have a much quicker return. And you can deal with it on the front end, obviously, bail reform, you know, you can deal with it in terms of just releasing more people ROR, or, you know, on lower bonds. But, I mean, a lot of people that are in drug crimes are going to also be in prison, and some of them are so frequently in for things that are not an actual drug conviction, like it is some other crime, you know, forgery check fraud, like, burglary, things that are driven by drugs, but not an actual drug conviction. And you know, when someone's in prison, the whole discussion around letting them out completely changes. Because this isn't about like, what do we sentence them to this is about like, in so many states, it comes down to what does the parole board want to do? And most states don't put a bunch of, you know, for lack of a better word soft on crime people on their parole boards, right? This is not the sort of demographic that tends to be on parole boards. So in Texas, we haven't seen any real change in who's getting in how many people are getting released, like the population has gone down in Texas prisons, but thats only because they stopped intakes. So I think that the obstacles in terms of like this, these are not courts. These people are not sort of subject to the arguments of lawyers, like, can't appeal the decisions in some cases. Like this is basically just private individuals making these decisions and they don't have to give you their reasoning, you don't necessarily get a great chance to present yourself to them, they have to go through a ton of cases really quickly. And, depending on the state, like you may or may not get a meaningful hearing on it. And this makes it harder to change as a policy because that's generally not how a lot of parole boards are set up. And then you have the BOP, you know, the federal prisons, which is, has been told to release people, you know, Barr told them to send people home, on home confinement. And you know, the first stop in the home confinement request is the wardens of the individual prisons. And, you know, we haven't seen a lot of people getting released, like, I mean, it's a few thousand but given the size of the federal prison system, it has not been some huge amount of releases. And, you know, obviously that's not just drug crimes. There are people that are doing a lot of time for drug crimes and in federal prison, as we all know, but there's a lot of other crimes that this includes as well. So I think that some of the challenges we see about like, parole boards and home confinement releases, apply in very much the same way to drug crimes as they do to other crimes.

Matt Sutton (28:16)

Totally. And in the lucky cases, you know, probably mostly outside of Texas, when people with drug charges are released, what do you think are the biggest challenges for them reintegrating into society, like during this unprecedented time? And, also like, what kind of reentry services do you think policymakers should be investing in right now?

Keri Blakinger (28:40)

I mean, I don't even know where to start in terms of you know, what reentry services. I mean, I feel like Housing First always needs to be what we think about when we're thinking about reentry. Because if you don't have a safe and stable place to stay, like you really can't build anything else from there. I think that's especially true in a pandemic, obviously, like you ideally don't want to be releasing people to other congregate environments, like it is better if you don't have to have them in, you know, homeless shelters or other kinds of group homes. And that's especially the case in a pandemic. But, you know, some of the sort of support services that you would want for people who've been released are just sort of not a thing right now. Like, it's not going to be safe to do you know, sort of in person, like outpatient. A lot of places to do an online only for 12 step meetings, and this can just be I mean, I think this is just really challenging for someone who's trying to use those tools for early free world sobriety. You know, I think obviously, everyone is struggling right now. And, you know, reentry is a difficult time without a pandemic. You know, I don't really know what the answer is for successful reentry. And I think at this point, like, so many people have just been focused on that the idea of just getting people released in the first place.

Matt Sutton (30:15)

Talking about collateral consequences, when somebody is released, like, how do you feel that these consequences are counterproductive to a person's ability to, actually get help for substance use issues and be able to, you know, have a productive life?

Keri Blakinger (30:37)

Well, I think that a lot of the conversations that we have sort of abstractly about recovering from substance use issues is so often focused around simply getting treatment as if that is enough. And, you know, I don't think that treatment is universally necessary, first of all. Although, I mean, I'm not saying it's not beneficial, it's clearly beneficial for many people, I just want to be clear, I don't think that's necessarily the only path. But, a huge part of it is like, if you've gotten rid of your drug life and you've, you know, done treatment, like you need a new life, and this is where collateral consequences can be really, you know, really problematic because, you know, you need meaningful things to put in that place like you, you want a job that, you know, hopefully brings you some sort of meaning or satisfaction, but at the least provides you enough money for some sense of security, you know, you need housing you need you know, you need transportation, like, you need all these things that it many steps along the way. Collateral consequences can really impede, you know, just in terms of, as we said before, you know, getting a job, finding a house. But there's all these other little things along the way. And I just think that putting up roadblocks and also continually reminding people that in certain scenarios, you are no better than your worst mistake like nobody's going to, like, there's certain situations in which you, you're just not going to be forgiven for that ever. Like, I don't think that is fundamentally an attitude that is helpful to long term successful reentry.

Matt Sutton (32:34)

Yeah, and I guess that, you know, brings us to the next point. From your perspective of covering these issues and stuff, how do you feel like that people could be better served by health services, you know, from the beginning, instead of being put through this like carceral system or you know, or even you know, probation? What are your thoughts on that?

Keri Blakinger (33:02)

So you know, I feel it to some extent that's not, like, I'm not the expert for that. Like, I am not actually sort of the addiction expert. I know more what I see that doesn't seem to be working. And, you know, I'm sure that somebody like, you know, Maia Szalavitz can tell you what, better what does. You know, I think that the one thing that's really clear is that prisons as a whole don't serve this purpose. Well, they don't fulfill this purpose like, and, you know, maybe for some people, that was never a concern about prisons, maybe some people don't care that prisons don't effectively rehabilitate substance use disorders. But, we see it, I feel like this continues to be a

narrative that we sort of mentioned before, the idea that when someone is incarcerated, that they can get help, and I feel like prison can actually just sort of exacerbate this in a number of ways. Prison and jail, any sort of incarceration is traumatic, like you're adding to, you're taking someone who's probably not coping well with existing trauma that may have contributed to their decisions to start using drugs in the first place. And, you're adding additional trauma. And I'm not saying this to be like, oh, I feel sorry for the, you know, quote, "poor criminals" or whatever. But just this is the reality of incarceration like, not, in just an entirely neutral, like unbiased way, it is incontrovertible that prisons are traumatic experience and in some situations, obviously, we as a society have decided we're cool with that. But, you know, I'm not agreeing with that. I'm just saying this is sort of how things have unfolded, right. And when we talk about this in terms of, you know, putting people who use drugs behind bars, like, we need to remember this, they did, there are many scenarios, many factors that are likely to actually compound the problem, they're not going to get help, they're probably going to get worse, they're going to meet a bunch of other people who have other connections and, you know, can tell them about other things they did to try to get high and pay for their addictions. I mean, there's a lot of that happening in prisons, where you're sort of trading tips on how to be a drug addict. Like I sat around and like heard these conversations, not, you know, not sort of talking to some imaginary abstract way. Like these are things that people talk about, and that's not helpful to building a life that is not involved or revolving around drugs.

Matt Sutton (36:09)

Right. Yeah. And so, you from your personal and professional perspective, what is your view on decriminalization of all drugs? And how do you think that, you know, said decriminalization policy would impact the criminal justice carceral system?

Keri Blakinger (36:26)

Well, I mean, I think that clearly, if you decriminalize, you would have fewer people in prison. You know, I'm, I feel like as a reporter, I probably, you know, probably shouldn't take a stand on like, where I would stand on where the line is on sort of decriminalizing, but, I mean, I think it's safe to say that, you know, what we're currently doing is clearly not working. It's costing a lot of money. It doesn't seem to be helping people to recover and if we don't help people to recover, you know that's not good for anyone, that's not good for, you know, for people who are addicted, it's not good for their families, it's not good for people who could potentially be victimized from crimes, you know, that people are carrying out as a result of their addictions. So, you know, I mean, I, I think that by number of metrics, everyone agrees what we're doing isn't working. And I mean, we do, it seems that we should all want to explore alternatives that do work.

Matt Sutton (37:36)

I'm not sure how familiar you are, but DPA is actually, we're backing a campaign in Oregon right now. Where we're essentially trying to do is we're trying to find addiction recovery centers throughout the state, and with that parent with the decriminalization model, so if somebody were to get arrested for drugs, they would either pay a $100 fine, or they could get a referral to one of these addiction recovery centers where they could get a health assessment. And of course, the, you know, it would be completely non coercive, so they wouldn't be forced into any kind of treatment. But the idea is very much like, you know, how they've done in Portugal and other places that, you know, potentially, that this would obviously reduce the amount of people that were being criminalized for jobs, while also increasing the amount of people that were being able to access health services.

Keri Blakinger (38:37)

Yeah, I think having it you know, in a non coercive setting is so key. I mean, I understand, I get it, people have this impulse that if you force people into treatment, they'll get help, and it'll work, but you know, I feel like people don't understand you can't punish someone into sobriety. We haven't understood that for decades. And we, you know, continue to be missing the point in just a different array of ways, like the way in which we missed that point has changed over time, but we still seem to be missing out.

Matt Sutton (39:13)

Right? Yeah. I'm, uh, I'm also a product of a drug court, we'll save that conversation for another day.

Keri Blakinger (39:20)

I wasn't even eligible for drug court. I had too many, too many drugs, I couldnt get into drug court...actually, which was fine, because honestly, in the end, doing my prison time and parole was shorter than if I had done drug court.

Matt Sutton (39:35)

Right?

Keri Blakinger (39:36)

Which is like, kind of wild.

Matt Sutton (39:38)

That's what I say, you know, drug court is a nightmare. And it's like most people do not successfully complete it, you know, you end up doing harder time because, you know, the stakes are so high in it. So...

Keri Blakinger (39:51)

I feel like...I don't do drugs and I don't think I can pass drug court now.

Matt Sutton (39:56)

No.

Keri Blakinger (39:56)

You can't have a job that is like a sort of an intense job, like reporting, like, you can't do that kind of thing. You know, there's all these sort of curfews and check-ins, and you have to be able to drop anything whenever to go do a piss test in the middle of the day. You know, I think that people don't, I think the judges don't understand how difficult it really truly is to live like that.

Matt Sutton (40:19)

Right. And as we said, It's hard enough to get a job with a record, then having to actually keep a job, you know, under these conditions, and then if you lose your job, then, you know, that puts you in a whole other mess, and that, you know, completely violates the terms of the drug court. You know, it's just, you know, the criminal justice system. It's, it's, it's, there's a lot of things that are just not well thought out.

Keri Blakinger (40:45)

Yeah, right.

Matt Sutton (40:47)

Or it's, or it's purposely meant to trap people. I don't know, probably a little bit of both. But yeah, okay, well, you know, this has been awesome Keri. Thank you so much for joining us today. You know, before we end, you also have a book coming out, right?

Keri Blakinger (41:03)

Yes, I am working on a book. It is due in January. So we don't know the publication date. But I guess that means it'll be out next year, with St. Martin's Press. So yeah, look for that.

Matt Sutton (41:15)

Awesome. We will stay tuned for that. Well, thanks. Thanks again for joining us today.

Keri Blakinger (41:20)

Thanks for having me.

Gabriella Miyares (41:26)

A huge thanks again to Keri and Matt for sharing their stories, and also to DPA's amazing Digital Communications interns, Sarah and Jessica, for pitching the idea behind this episode. To learn more about Keri's work, follow her on Twitter @keribla. We hope today's episode has inspired you to take action to make decarceration a reality, especially now in the midst of a pandemic. Visit drugpolicy.org/freethemnow to see all that DPA is currently working on and join us in urging legislators to make change. It only takes a few minutes of your time and has the power to save lives. Thank you so much for joining us. If you have suggestions for guests, feedback, or any other things to share with us, tweet us at @drugsnstuffDPA. Until next time, stay safe and stay well.

Outro (42:20)

Drugs and stuff is brought to you by the Drug Policy Alliance. If you like what you hear in the podcast, do us a favor and rate the show on iTunes. Give it five stars and a nice review. Also, we'd love to hear from you tweet at us at @drugsnstuffDPA. Use the hashtag #drugsandstuff. And check out our website drugpolicy.org to see the other work we do, sign up for our emails, and donate. Special thanks to our producer Katharine Heller and to the hard working staff of the Drug Policy Alliance for all of their work. Thanks for listening.

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