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CHDS alumnus' prison radicalization thesis is backbone of congressional testimony

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When he applied to the master's degree program at the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, Tony Parker wrote in his essay on the link between prisons and radicalization, a topic that would evolve into his thesis, ["Establishing a Deradicalization/Disengagement Model for America's Correctional Facilities: Recommendations for Countering Prison Radicalization."](#)

The next iteration of that subject for Parker, who is Assistant Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of

Correction, came in the form of testimony before the [House Committee on Homeland Security](#) on October 28. From gangs for protection to religious firebrands, prisons are often seen as incubators for various forms of radical behavior.

"After working in corrections for 32 years I was interested in prison radicalization and, what were the contributing factors within the correctional environment," Parker said during a recent interview. "An incarcerated individual who may become radicalized in prison presents a homeland security concern. We have to realize that 95 percent of these people are going to return to our communities at some point."

Drawing from programs in Saudi Arabia and Singapore as well as reviewing literature on prison environments, Parker suggested 10 recommendations aimed to combat prison radicalization efforts in the United States.

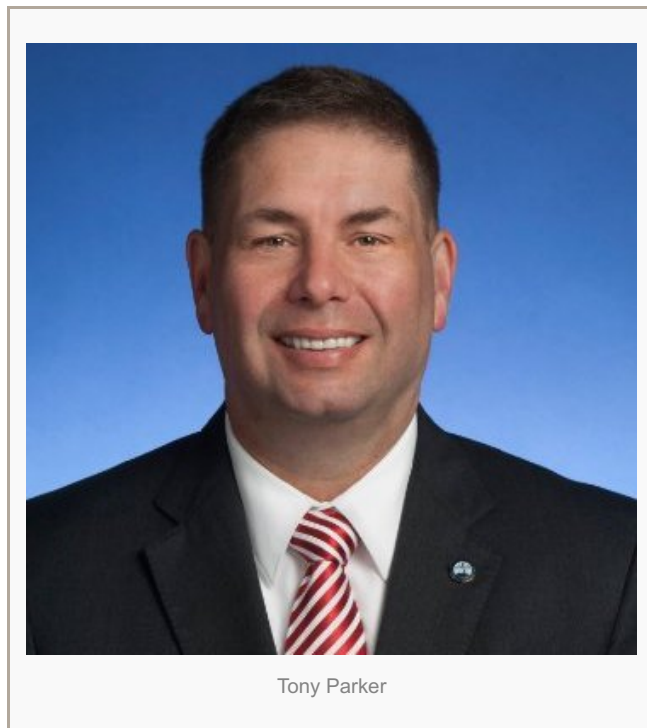
Those include:

Correctional Environmental Recommendations

- Productive Rehabilitation and Effective Security
- Effectively monitoring and controlling prison groups
- Greater screening and monitoring of chaplains and religious volunteers
- Encouraging inmate/family social interaction
- Develop and implement vigorous aftercare initiatives that ensure post-incarceration monitoring, supervision, counseling and social service
- Provide Adequate Staff Training and Develop Intelligence Sharing Networks with Criminal Justice Partners

Rehabilitative/Program Recommendations

- Voluntary Cognitive based Counseling
- Incentives for Participating as well as Aftercare
- Investment in Recruiting Trained and Vetted Chaplains and Counselors
- Post Incarceration Monitoring/Tracking



[Download the paper: "Establishing a Deradicalization/Disengagement Model for America's Correctional Facilities: Recommendations for Countering Prison Radicalization"](#)

Rehabilitation and security are crucial building blocks of such a program, part of what Parker referred to as a "Dual Strategy."

"Effective rehabilitation increases effective security," he said. "The focus must be multidisciplinary in nature and prisoner re-entry should be considered at all stages of the process in most cases."

Importantly, this recommended model requires a paradigm shift toward progressive monitoring of released offenders as well as providing cognitive based programs designed to help change the mindset of a radicalized offender. Tapping family influences and social influences that may help reduce the chances of an individual returning to terrorist activities is crucial, he said.

"The bottom line is, we have failed to implement policy that requires these individuals to be tracked after release and have established a reactive posture instead of a proactive posture to deal with this emergent threat," he said. "Our current policy related to prison radicalization as well as the method of incarcerating convicted terrorist in America is based exclusively on a security model and fails to recognize the critical aspect of re-entry. Some of these people will be returning to our communities."

Deradicalization programs in Saudi Arabia and Singapore provide a gauge to potential similar efforts in the United States. While conceding the two have extremely different political governance systems, Parker said there were elements of their de-radicalization programs that possibly could be applicable in the United States.

Saudi Arabia, governed by its royal family, began facing insurgent concerns beginning in the mid-1990s from al-Qaida and during the 2000s as it began reintegrating prisoners from Guantanamo Bay into its society. The Muslim nation's rehabilitation program is a mix of theology, counseling and social support. The Saudi government estimates about 5,000 people coming back to the country from trouble spots such as Iran and Afghanistan have completed the program, with about 10 percent of those who are offered the program refusing it, according to Parker's thesis.

Conversely, Singapore's government is a democratically elected parliamentary system in an area where Muslims are in the minority. In facing the group Jameeh Islamiyah, which seeks establishment of an Islamic state in South Asia, Singapore officials developed a counter-radicalization effort that uses a blend of theological reeducation and cognitive conditioning.

Parker's thesis also reviews some of the factors that lend themselves to prison radicalization, drawing on academic literature as well as his own experience as a Correctional Officer, Warden and Administrator. Gangs provide protection. Add to this self-preservation need a charismatic leader with alluring ideology, a lack of vocational training and counseling as well as the cold, raw living conditions, and the formula for extremism is ripe.

"It is an environment that makes you question your identity and beliefs," Parker wrote. "Good policies and procedures implemented by professional staff can reduce violence and enhance security. Grievances and hostile attitudes directed toward the government, which is charged with enforcing the rules and regulations, are common."

Granted, changing the prisoner's outlook begins with the individual, an unknown factor as to how he or she may react to an offer of rehabilitation. Parker believes it is worth determining.

"Can you really change the mindset of an individual? I would argue in some cases you may be able to, and the attempt is certainly better than what we're doing now," he said. "We need to understand they are eventually going home and we need to be proactive in do everything possible to increase the chances of the offenders being released as productive individuals who are not engaging in terrorism activities. We also must establish best practices that mitigate the environmental factors within the prison environment that could promote prison radicalization."

In addition to congressional testimony, Parker has pitched his recommendations to the American Corrections Association as part of the organization's standard best practices. He credits his CHDS education, with its vigorous classroom discussions, a great group of classmates and rigorous standards, for enabling him to deeply explore prison-radicalization links.

"The quality of instructors at CHDS is second to none," he said. "It was a great opportunity to participate in a program with such a high level of integrity."

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