

## **Memorandum**

To: File

Re: Interviews with Ronnell Brown, Darnell Keys, Kenard Johnson, Earl Kenny, halfway house residents, Volunteers of America, Baltimore.

Date: March 5, 2025

From: Terrell Peters, DC Justice Lab Campaign and Advocacy Fellow.

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The following memorandum represents interviews with Ronnell Brown, Darnell Keys, Kenard Johnson, and Earl Kenny, four individuals who completed a portion of their sentences in a halfway house facility run by Volunteers of America in Baltimore, Maryland.

These interviews were conducted throughout 2024. I have represented their interviews in their words. I have received confirmation that they agree with how their experiences are characterized and presented here by email.

### **Ronnell Brown**

Ronnell Brown's stay in Baltimore's Volunteers of America (VOA) halfway house was characterized by miscommunication and the staff's lack of understanding of returning citizens' challenges. Instead of receiving guidance and support, Brown encountered a punitive system that ultimately set him back, causing him to lose his job and damage ties with his community.

In July 2023, Brown, a DC resident, was serving the remainder of his sentence in a halfway house. For a time, he found a job at Popeyes and was doing well. In November, Ronnell celebrated his freedom with a drink at a local bar. When he returned to the halfway house, he was met by staff and ordered to take a breathalyzer test. Brown failed the test and was given an incident report. He was then confined to the halfway house for two weeks. Within those two weeks, an incident occurred in his living area in which he was not involved. However, he was blamed for the incident. He was never given an incident report, but because of the incident, he was sent back to prison. To this day, he has never been given an incident report about the issue or an explanation surrounding the steps and actions that followed.

His case underscores the continuing practice of collective punishment, which is so common in federal prisons. It also highlights the need for "first warnings," reinforced by supportive counseling and drug treatment if needed, rather than sole reliance on punitive measures.

### **Darnell Keys**

Darnell Keys spent 14 years in various federal prisons before arriving at the VOA facility. One of his first priorities was to secure mental health care. He had a long history of trauma, with diagnoses of chronic PTSD, schizoaffective disorder, and depression. He is

reasonably high-functioning when on the right medication, but staying healthy was a delicate balance.

Shortly after arriving at the halfway house, Keyes became a client of a Baltimore mental health provider that contracts with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). He was assigned to group therapy and prescriptions were written. But unlike prison, he was not allowed to self-administer his medications and he became totally reliant on staff to know when to order refills and ensure they were ready when he needed them.

In December 2023, one of his medications ran out and about a month went by without his prescription being filled. He described the process of getting a refill as unnecessarily complicated: a professional at the mental health organization writes the prescription, then the VOA case manager sends it to the last prison the individual was in (in Keyes' case, this was Fairton, New Jersey) to fill, since he was still under the control of the BOP and the agency pays for his health care. Although Keyes was never given a straight answer about what happened, he assumes, once the prescription was sent off, no one followed up to ensure it was filled and delivered before his prescription ran out. Keyes said his friends noticed his paranoia and flaring temper when he was not on his medication.

Fortunately, however, he had not yet started his job-readiness program or secured a job, so his erratic behavior didn't have any significant consequences at that time.

After he started his medication again, Keyes began a job-readiness program offered by the DC government's Office of Returning Citizen Affairs (ORCA) called Project Empowerment. He refreshed his resume, practiced his interviewing skills, and learned how to use technology that was new to him. He said his graduation from the program was one of the proudest days of his life. But throughout the program, Keyes struggled to make the trek from Baltimore to DC. First, VOA either did not provide the train tickets and bus tokens District residents are promised to enable him to make the trip, and in his case, he did not have the family support or funds of his own to make the trip. Additionally, VOA did not always approve his daily itinerary. Without an official itinerary, residents cannot leave the halfway house. Keyes arrived at the program too late to participate on several days.

Keyes said that the constant uncertainty was exacerbated by the difficulty of sleeping in a dorm room where many of the other men had substance abuse issues, and frequently entered and exited the room, setting off the motion sensor that turned on the light. He often wondered why the staff were so focused on whether he had more shoes than he was allowed, and yet could not address issues around conditions in facilities that he said were negatively affecting his sleep and his health.

When Keyes secured a job in the laundry department of a prominent hotel, he was optimistic and confident for the first time in years. He had once been certified in executive housekeeping and envisioned climbing the career ladder again. One of the top personnel at the hotel recommended that Keyes pursue an associate degree. However, Keyes said

the stress of the on-and-off transportation assistance issues and lack of approval of his itinerary continued, along with the chaotic nights.

In mid-March of 2023, he ran out of his prescription again for about 20 days. Almost every day, he said he asked the staff when his prescription was coming. He asked the mental health care provider to intervene, but that did not address the issue.

On Friday, March 29, Keyes said his emotional distress peaked. When a coworker directed what he said was abusive, racist language at him, he said he got angry, paranoid, and he became afraid he might hit someone. Keyes said the noise in his head became “too loud,” and as a result of these issues, he walked off the job.

The next day, Keyes’ medication arrived, but it was too late. He received an email informing him that he did not need to come to work. His first job after 14 years, his pathway back into a field he loved, had ended in disaster.

Keyes said he put aside his desire to work in the District, where he would live upon full release, and instead, he got a job in a packing plant in Baltimore. During the orientation, management clarified that employees must be on time: anyone arriving later than 7 a.m. would be locked out and unable to work and any unapproved absences during the first two weeks would result in termination.

Four days later, the person at the front desk of the halfway house said he had not been given Keyes’ daily itinerary. Keyes eventually resolved the issue, but because of the delay, he had to take a later bus. Keyes arrived at work at 7:15 a.m., and per the company rules, he was locked out.

He returned to work the next day. But the day after that, VOA approved an itinerary that did not include Keyes’ work appointment and routine doctor’s appointment, both of which he needed. Because of the mistake in his itinerary, he never made it to his new job two days after the day he was 15 minutes late. Keyes ended up losing this job.

After he was out of money and out of a job, Keyes said he felt defeated. He then decided to wait until he was released from the halfway house to try to obtain another job. Until he completed his halfway house term, Keyes said he settled for several weeks of idleness.

### **Kenard Johnson**

Kenard said everything about getting from the halfway house to work was a struggle. The first bus from the halfway house took about 20 minutes, and then there was another 10-minute bus to get to the train. He said the train trip was anywhere between 50 minutes to an hour after which he had to walk from Union Station to his place of work for about 10 to 15 minutes. He said he felt he was high-stress all the time during these trips, concerned if he’d get to work on time or get back to the halfway house before he

had to be in for curfew. Kenard said he saw people return one minute late and receive a disciplinary report.

### **Earl Kenny**

Earl said he observed individuals who lacked the financial support from family or friends and could not afford transportation back and forth from the VOA facility to DC to obtain important documents or attend job-readiness programs.

While the Correctional Information Council says, “the VOA gives residents bus cards, SMART cards, and MARC train tickets for travel,” he said that wasn’t his experience. He said he only received four tickets per week most of the time, and he required ten tickets throughout the week to go to DC for work. Earl said the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs does offer SmartTrip for the DC Metrorail system, but this office does not help individuals get to DC from Baltimore or return to Baltimore at the end of the day.

In order to leave the VOA facility, Earl said, you had to submit an itinerary every week that provides information on your upcoming schedule for the week. If you didn’t submit the itinerary, Earl said, you could not leave the building. According to Earl, people would often lose their jobs, or sometimes quit their jobs, because of the restrictions and challenges surrounding leaving the halfway house and the long distance that DC residents had to travel.