Broadcasting Without Boundaries: Ohio’s Reentry Television Network Delivers Hope

By Todd Ishee, Theresa Keho, Jennifer Boswell and Jo Ann Faver

Reaching a viewership of nearly 8,000 offenders, the Helping Ohio Prisoners Excel (HOPE) Channel offers just that: hope. Hope often implies something for the future, but the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) Northeast Region’s broadcasting network introduces hope for today, as it brings challenging opportunities and positive programs into the typically routine day of incarceration. These inspirational and motivational broadcasts are delivered seven days a week to all offenders throughout the region’s six prisons, which house various security-level offenders from the lowest-level reintegration centers to Ohio’s highest levels of security.

The HOPE Channel team consists of ODRC and Adult Parole Authority staff, community partners, volunteers and a group of inspired offenders. Each of the members brings a variety of abilities and service experience to the table, including community volunteer work with organizations like building with Habitat for Humanity, coaching Little League, conducting international mission trips, advising for 4-H youths, pastoring and, in the case of veterans and offenders, experiencing Ohio’s criminal justice system from a personal perspective. Bringing such a broad assortment of lifestyles and experiences together creates a valuable collaboration, resulting in diverse ideas and programming to meet the interests of a wide range of viewers. So far, the channel has been steadily expanding and contingently requiring more sophisticated equipment. Over the past year, the team has transitioned from using a duplicator and manually transporting DVDs with programmed content to transmitting content via a Nexus server, which is programmable remotely. Although equipment and technology for such a project is costly, the entire HOPE Channel project is not funded with state dollars, but instead utilizes grant funding and donations.

Also starting small and continuing to grow are the programs and content. Beginning in 2014 with one program, offenders under the supervision of ODRC staff and volunteers created the talk show “Outlook,” which permitted inmate panelists to discuss current events. Since that time, the HOPE...
Channel’s content has greatly expanded both in variety and quantity. With the focus on anchoring pro-social, meaningful activities around reentry and stressing inmate contribution, the HOPE Channel now airs ex-offender success stories, family-centered programs, career profiles, artistic and musical shows, and shows discussing matters that affect the quality of residents’ lives. Working with the HOPE Channel has provided the incarcerated team members with life-changing skills, as well as character-building experiences; they create positive broadcasting formats that will speak the language and gain the attention of fellow inmates. During his incarceration, an offender became a team member of the channel and has remained involved even after his release. Speaking about what the HOPE Channel meant in his experience, he said it helps “to foster development of the individual while they are still incarcerated, teaching them social skills and life skills that will not only prepare them for their return home, but also help reshape their character and value systems.”

Aside from overcoming technological and funding hurdles, the channel transcended traditional beliefs regarding incarceration, such as inmate access to video equipment, male and female offenders working collaboratively on projects and travel beyond the institutional grounds. This groundbreaking aspect of the HOPE Channel — which uses inmate camera crews from the Northeast Reintegration Center, under staff supervision, to travel to community events — has been remarkable. The events provide unique opportunities to create broadcasting material related directly to the inmate viewers’ home communities, supporting organizations and reentry opportunities, as well as programs involving ODRC initiatives and meaningful activity opportunities. An example of a meaningful activity is the Northeast Region Talent Show, where inmates are invited to display their talents, such as singing, dancing, poetry, art, cooking and other categories — as long as they remain free of rule infractions. These acts are required to have a pro-social message, and the judges are a group of ODRC leadership and local celebrities, including ex-offenders who have created a career using their talents and are now giving back to the lives of those incarcerated.
Inmate camera crews recorded and participated in the Northeast Region Summit’s “Making Ohio Communities Safer” video. More than 1,000 people were in attendance, including community partners; volunteers; federal, state and local law enforcement members; judges; ex-offenders; family members of offenders; and ODRC staff. After filming, the male members of the team began the editing process at the Media Studio, which is located in the Northeast Region’s male reintegration center. Creating a collage of pictures and sound bites, the team was able to capture the message of the event and include the keynote speaker, ODRC Director Gary Mohr, sharing his vision for the department, which was later broadcast on the channel.

Community partners and area organizations offer great programming opportunities like the classes at Education Wins (EDWINS) Leadership & Restaurant Institute, a Cleveland-based institute dedicated to helping offenders pursue a career in food service. Other segments include Truly Reaching You Ministries and a play regarding gun violence that was performed by residents of the Cuyahoga County Community Based Correctional Facility. Holiday programs and inmates performing “Othello” under the direction of a local college drama department are just two examples of programming designed to inspire and promote pro-social community behavior. Further, the channel has produced and/or broadcast shows about departmental initiatives. The team produced a new suicide-prevention video at the request of the ODRC’s Office of Correctional Healthcare. Other projects have included subjects such as opiate education, family development, faith-based initiatives, Northeast Ohio Reentry Coalition and Citizen Circles, presentations on small-business development and broadcasts of several TED Talks videos.

Ohio’s early-release initiatives were also determined to be a worthy project for the HOPE Channel. The team filmed, edited and broadcast judges and defense attorneys explaining the early-release initiatives and encouraging eligible offenders to take advantage of these opportunities. Judge Nancy Margaret Russo of the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court filmed two segments regarding these initiatives to specifically highlight Reentry Court and explain applications, judicial involvement and participation requirements. Russo also explained updates on recent legal decisions, such as the opportunity for offenders to complete community service while incarcerated to reduce court fees and fines.

Although the team’s production and broadcasting education is ongoing, one of the educational highlights came from Jonathan Demme, director of the movie “The Silence of the Lambs.” Demme met with and provided creative insight to the team based on his experience and successful career. Oberlin College was instrumental in arranging Demme’s inspirational visit, but the college is just one of a diverse group of community partners that has been actively involved in the team’s development and continued growth. Among these partners are volunteers from local businesses and organizations that regularly schedule coaching sessions with the team, as well as faculty and students from Kent State University who share their scholastic expertise by providing instruction on various aspects of production.
As previously mentioned, the programming provided is positive, educational, entertaining and appeals to a broad audience, offering hope, encouragement and practical information to its viewers; it is also in alignment with the ODRC’s three-tiered prison system. The three-tier system allows offenders, based on their behavior and attitude, to reduce or maintain lower classification levels in order to gain more privileges and participate in more programs and activities. Supporting the 11 reintegration pathways (wellness, education, vocational, pro-social programs, recovery, community service, family connection, faith-based, victims, residency and veteran) are numerous series and presentations, including “Success Stories,” “Parenting Within” and “Business for Reentry.” Shows explaining the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, federal bonding and the Certificate of Achievement and Employability help offenders navigate various barriers in the employment field upon reentry.

The majority of the time, content being broadcast throughout the six prisons is uniform, but individual institutions are able to tailor some programming to the needs of their own facilities. The region’s two reintegration centers, the pinnacles of Ohio’s three-tiered prison system, are able to involve more community linkage programs and reentry preparation. Along with hundreds of other broadcast hours, Ohio State Penitentiary is able to air an eight-week art class to those in restrictive housing. Each institution is also able to develop their own content for editing at the region’s media centers. Further, the HOPE Channel content is continuously being evaluated through focus groups, and now through an audience feedback email account. One offender emailed, “I feel that the HOPE Channel is such a wonderful addition to the prison system, because after 19 years of physical incarceration, I have finally found something that offers me HOPE for a better tomorrow.”

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The impact of this “information vehicle” cannot be overstated. While the offenders involved in the Ohio State Apprenticeship Council–certified apprenticeship program learn various transferrable skills that assist with employment opportunities upon release, the channel inspires creativity and positivity. The impact of the structured, meaningful activities reaches far beyond those who produce the programming to those who view the shows, ascertaining various common courtesies, skills and a vast array of knowledge. One community partner commented, “While they are learning these marketable skills, they are also interacting as pro-social professionals with others both outside of the institution and with each other.” The assortment of provided content directly supports the ODRC’s objectives to reduce prison violence, prepare offenders for community supervision and decrease recidivism, which positively impacts the safety of all Ohioans.

This collaborative effort of offenders, correctional staff and members of Ohio communities is an influential force in reducing Ohio’s already low recidivism rate of 27.5 percent, not only by linking offenders with services and training useful after release, but providing a sense of community while still incarcerated. One community partner said of the channel, “It reminds them they are not alone; it informs them about programs that are available to their loved ones while they are incarcerated and after release. The HOPE Channel reminds the prisoners and their families that the ODRC cares about them and wants them to succeed at their reentry transition.” Through the HOPE Channel, inmates witness members of their community — the society they will return to — reach out to assist them while they are incarcerated; this promotes the feeling of belonging, offers hope and strengthens pro-social behaviors.

The growth of the HOPE Channel to this point has been outstanding; however, the future goals will expand the channel’s influence exponentially. In the foreseeable future, the HOPE Channel will be shared with all Ohio prisons, as well as local jails, community-based partners and those released from prison on community supervision. In 2015, members of the HOPE Channel team were nominated for the Governor’s Award for Employee Excellence. Excellence could well be this team’s motto as their work to inform, educate and entertain has created an interconnected community of those individuals providing hope and those individuals needing its vision.

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