

Missouri Communities:

Enhancing Reentry Interventions in Tough Economic Times

By Dan Hanneken and Carey Kaltenbach

Much progress has been made during the past several years to improve public safety and reduce crime through evidence-based, best practice reentry strategies. Is this progress now in jeopardy as a result of the economic crisis? States such as Missouri appear to be well-prepared to weather the storm while continuing to provide offenders essential services.

Nancy G. La Vigne, Ph.D., director of the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center, could not have been more correct in a recent speech given to the Policy Research Institute for the Region (PRIOR) at Princeton University when she said, "The correctional system in the United States is at a critical crossroads." La Vigne was referring to the intersection of effective criminal justice interventions and that of shrinking budgets at the state and local levels.¹ On the one hand, it appears the corrections field cannot afford to provide the services necessary to effectively reduce recidivism and improve public safety; on the other hand, it appears it cannot afford *not* to provide these services.

In 2002, Missouri was chosen by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) as the first state to implement the "Transition from Prison to Community Initiative." This model encourages state and local collaboration and provides a philosophical framework for stakeholder agencies to promote common interests, integrate policies and services, and improve the overall transition process of offenders leaving prison and returning to Missouri communities. A total of eight states implemented the model. Results clearly indicate a collaborative approach is crucial to the mission of improving public safety, reducing crime and reducing recidivism.²

Peggy Burke, principal of the Center for Effective Public Policy, a nonprofit criminal justice training organization

based in Silver Spring, Md., has stated that Missouri has been on the vanguard nationally. "Many others have learned from Missouri's experience because [Missouri] has been at this longer," she pointed out. "It was one of the pilot states NIC worked with and has shared a lot of information and strategies with other states." Missouri has been working on offender reentry strategies for eight years and demonstrates a truly collaborative approach that can effectively serve the offender population even in the worst of economic times.

Collaboration

While collaboration has not historically been a cornerstone of the justice system, it has now become a critical element of any successful reentry effort, both internally and externally.^{3,4} The 2005 Executive Order 05-33 from former Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt, a Republican, and more recently Executive Order 09-16 in 2009 from Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, directs the Missouri Department of Corrections (MDOC) to lead a permanent interagency steering team for the initiative now called the Missouri Reentry Process (MRP). Nine state agencies are represented on the MRP steering team, which continues to demonstrate one of the most extraordinary collaborations in state government.⁵ The benefits are countless, from the Department of Revenue providing state identification cards and the Department of Health and Senior Services providing offender birth certificates prior to release to the Department of Mental Health providing offenders with a 30-day supply of medication upon release. Corrections also partners with the Department of Social Services to assist offenders with Medicaid applications prior to release.



Misty Werkmiester accepts “Best of the Best” Award on behalf of the local reentry team. The award is presented by Ellis McSwain, chairman of the Parole Board.

Offenders who are disabled, 65 and older, under 19, blind or developmentally disabled who are eligible may now receive notification of benefits within three days of release. For maximum benefits, the efforts at the state level must be connected to the community.

Missouri is divided into six regions led by regional administrators with the Division of Probation and Parole. Each region oversees reentry efforts in the local communities of its catchment area. The state has a diverse array of communities, each presenting different and unique reentry challenges. The resolution of offender behavioral issues can be best addressed through community-based resources and specific knowledge about the local community.⁶ Attempts to recruit local partners proved to be highly successful. The Missouri Reentry Process launched an aggressive community education campaign beginning in 2003, and district administrators of the Division of Probation and Parole were tasked with initiating the development of individual local teams. With the support of regional administrators, administrators at the district level have started 44 local MRP teams. Local teams consist of service providers, government officials, the faith-based community and concerned citizens, including victims and offenders. Contact information for each team is made available on MDOC’s website.⁷ Also, “starter kits” are available on the website for communities interested in creating a reentry team.⁸

At a June 2010 local community reentry conference, MDOC Director George Lombardi emphasized, “Only with the help of concerned citizens such as you can we effectively interdict crime and reduce victimization.” Lombardi regularly attends such conferences across Missouri, demonstrating the state’s support of local teams. Reentry teams at the local level meet routinely and one-day conferences have become the norm for professionals and lay people alike. Local teams are represented at the regional level just as the regional level is represented at the state level.

The Transition from Prison to Community Initiative implemented eight years ago has resulted in effective and active relationships. Linking state, regional and local reentry efforts has maximized collaborative capacity, leveraged existing resources and cleared lines of communication. The recent economic climate, however, has exacerbated critical

gaps in reentry services and supports. Communities need funding now more than ever to effectively address reentry at the local level.

Community Reentry Funding

In July 2005, a law was passed allowing MDOC to begin collecting intervention fees from offenders placed on supervision through either probation or parole. In 2008, Missouri launched the Community Reentry Funding Project utilizing revenue generated from offender intervention fees. The competitive process aims to increase public safety by supporting efforts that will reduce risk for offenders under supervision by Missouri’s Division of Probation and Parole. Despite bleak budgets and dwindling state revenue, intervention fees allow Missouri to sustain efforts to fill critical gaps in Missouri’s reentry services.

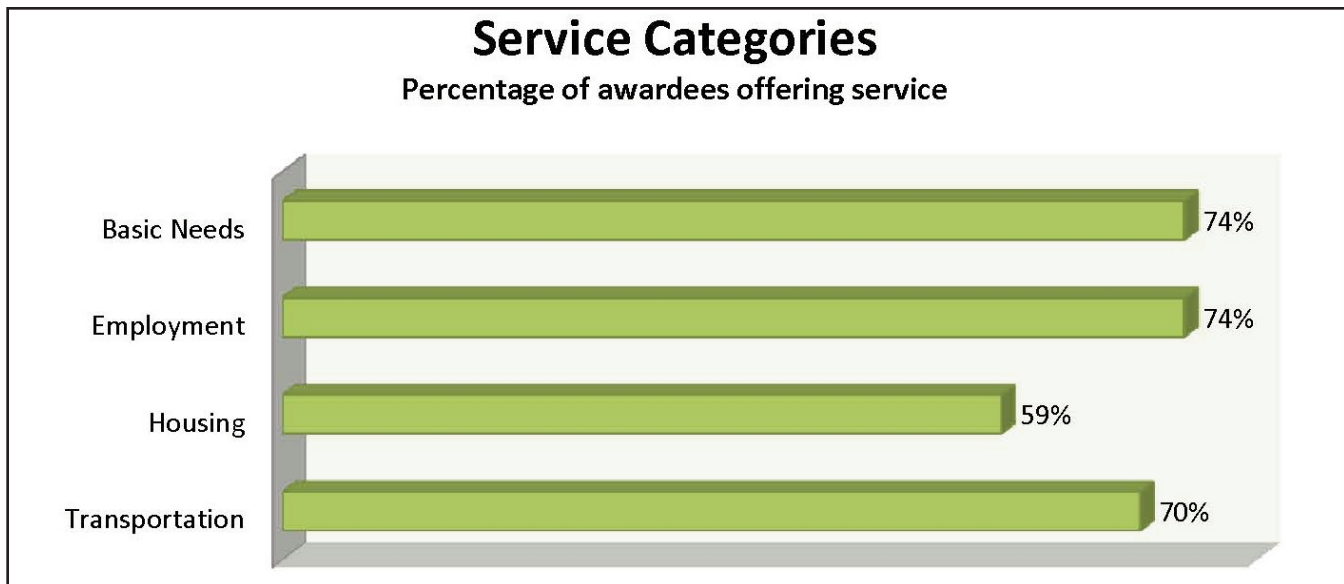
Initiatives funded by the Community Reentry Funding Project are classified into four service categories: basic needs, employment, housing and transportation. The basic needs category includes providing food, clothing, hygiene supplies and other necessities. The contracts awarded are used to implement new projects, programs and services, or to enhance existing efforts that assist offenders in making a successful transition back into the community and the work force. Funding is distributed across the state proportionate to the offender population in each region. Agency capacity and local need are considered when granting awards.

“This is a great opportunity for the little guy to get involved,” said Julie Kempker, then MDOC reentry manager (now assistant division director for probation and parole). “We want these organizations to help our offenders, but they need money to do it.”

Community Intervention Examples

Community members and offenders alike are often surprised to find out the services provided under this funding come directly from the contributors of those same offenders. Saint Louis, Columbia, Mo., and Jasper County, Mo., are three very different social, economic and geographic areas of the state. A Saint Louis proposal established that female offenders leaving the halfway house lack crucial support and are more likely than men to be homeless.⁹ Project funding enabled MERS/Goodwill to provide transitional and long-term housing assistance, employment incentives, bus passes and basic essentials to recently released females in the large metropolitan area.

Columbia, a college town in mid-Missouri, was ranked by *Money Magazine* as the 13th most highly educated municipality in the nation. Understandably, offenders find it particularly challenging to obtain employment in this environment. Employment is a predictor of offender success, but what makes the biggest difference is the wages one earns. Released prisoners who earn \$10–12 an hour are twice as likely to remain crime-free than their employed counterparts earning minimum wage.¹⁰ JobPoint in Columbia used contract funding to provide employment support. Aside from employment readiness and job-seeking skills classes, the agency provides a heavy road construction vocational course through which graduates can be state



certified and immediately earn a living wage. In addition, the proposal includes partial pay for a GED instructor and a coordinator position for the Reentry Opportunity Center (ROC), Columbia’s reentry one-stop shop. ROCs have proven to be a best practice in Missouri, providing a wide array of educational and case management services at no cost to the offender.

Rural communities present unique reentry challenges, and Jasper County is no exception. The county identified gaps in public transportation service as a major barrier for returning offenders. Rural residents without access to cars are particularly dependent on public transportation, especially in high poverty areas.¹¹ The Alliance of Southwest Missouri used its funding to purchase a van and employ staff to transport offenders to necessary destinations such as treatment appointments and jobs. Once employed, an offender purchases subsidized vouchers to offset the remaining costs for transportation. The creative and innovative strategies required in these tough economic times have proven to be a collateral benefit of the Community Reentry Funding Project.

Measuring Success

Three rounds of funding have been awarded since April 2009. The funding cycle is one year with the exception of round one, which was four months. MDOC has contracted with the University of Missouri-Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs to identify the impact of the initiative. Given the limited resources, MDOC wants to make sure it is making a difference.

Round one. Funding was distributed in April 2009. Twenty-seven agencies received a total of \$664,654 and assisted more than 3,400 offenders by providing various services.

A report on the first round of funding cited:¹²

- Increased employment rates;
- Increased job readiness skills;
- Improved fulfillment of basic needs;
- Improved access to vital documents;

- Improved access to safe and affordable housing; and
- Improved transportation to employment and medical related services.

“The initial evaluation of this first round of funding analyzed the process and impact of the programs in the community,” explained Emily Johnson, a coordinator and policy analyst in the Institute of Public Policy within the University of Missouri-Columbia (UMC). Analysis of future rounds of funding will focus on long-term outcomes such as a reduction in recidivism among participants. In addition to evaluation, UMC provides technical support to funded agencies. Follow-up includes site visits during which service providers are presented an opportunity to ask questions and solicit support to effectively serve the offender population.

Round two. Thirty-six contracts, totaling \$3 million were distributed in December 2009. Second quarter reports of the funding cycle indicate 2,279 offenders had been served as of April 30, 2010. The complete report on the outcomes and impact of this second round of funding is not yet complete. However, the comments from service providers can be just as valuable as the formal evaluation.

Bobby Reichert, a recipient of the Community Reentry Funding Initiative, explained the benefits. “It sure is nice to be able to put clients in my car and drive them to the job interview rather than simply handing them a bus schedule,” he said.

Reichert explained that the tangible support he is now able to offer, such as work boots and medication, not only meets their immediate needs but also opens the door to a population that is often hard to engage so that underlying issues can be addressed. “It makes it much easier to effectively connect with an inherently resistant group of people.”

Round three. In July 2010, 34 awards totaling \$3 million were distributed. It is expected by the end of round three that the overall effectiveness of the Community Reentry Funding Initiative can be measured. The end of round three will represent roughly two years of enhanced support. At that time, MDOC can begin to look at recidivism rates for those who participated in the initiative and determine overall impact.

Conclusion

Tough economic times do not necessarily translate into reduced services. The Transition from Prison Community model has provided Missouri a solid foundation from which to build, irrespective of economic conditions. Effective collaboration, efforts from local reentry teams and the Community Reentry Funding Project allow Missouri to continue to move forward with the MRP and further the department's mission to enhance public safety.

ENDNOTES

¹ La Vigne, Nancy. Director of the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. 2010. Speech given March 5, 2010, to the Princeton University Policy Research Institute for the Region. Retrieved June 16, 2010, from http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/901332_reentry_programs.pdf.

² Burke, Peggy. 2008. *TPC Reentry Handbook: Implementing the NIC Transition from Prison to the Community Model*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections.

³ Carter, Madeline et al. 2005. *Collaboration: A training curriculum to enhance the effectiveness of criminal justice teams*. Silver Spring, Md.: Center for Effective Public Policy.

⁴ Carter, Madeline, Susan Gibel, Rachelle Giguere and Richard Stroker, eds. 2007. *Increasing Public Safety Through Successful Offender Reentry: Evidence-Based and Emerging Practices in Correction*. Silver Spring, Md.: Center for Effective Public Policy.

⁵ Missouri Department of Corrections. 2009. *Missouri Reentry Process: Report to the Governor*. Jefferson City, Mo. Retrieved June

16, 2010, from <http://doc.mo.gov/documents/mrp/GovReport2009.pdf>.

⁶ Family and Community Trust website. Retrieved June 15, 2010, from http://mofact.org/who_we_are/caring_communities/overview/.

⁷ Missouri Department of Corrections. Reentry Teams Contact Information. Retrieved June 15, 2010, from <http://doc.mo.gov/documents/mrp/CommunityTeams/MRPMap.pdf>.

⁸ Missouri Department of Corrections. Starter Kit. Retrieved June 16, 2010, from <http://doc.mo.gov/documents/mrp/CommunityTeams/Starter%20Kit.pdf>.

⁹ Bloom, B. 1998. *Women with Mental Health and Substance Abuse Problems on Probation and Parole. Offender Program Report*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Press.

¹⁰ La Vigne.

¹¹ Economic Resource Center. 2005. *Rural Transportation at a Glance*. Retrieved June 15, 2010, from http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aib795/aib795_lowres.pdf.

¹² Missouri Department of Corrections. 2009. Community Reentry Funding Report. Retrieved June 15, 2010, from <http://doc.mo.gov/documents/mrp/DOC%202009%20Summary.pdf>.

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