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## The Reentry Movement in Corrections: Shift in Paradigm or Passing Fad?

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There is a reentry movement in corrections that continues to demonstrate impressive growth across the United States. It is notable that only a decade ago the term reentry was not part of the lexicon of corrections. Since the late 1990s, a vast range of initiatives has been launched across the country centering on offender reentry. These efforts suggest that the emphasis on reentry is here to stay — it is not a fad. But does reentry represent a shift in paradigm that will exert a marked impact on the field for decades to come? It is important to realize that reentry is much more than a philosophy. It is more than a trend. Actually, reentry is a very productive way of conducting business in the world of corrections.

There are many markers that point to the ever-expanding presence of reentry at the national and state levels. The Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., has hosted a series of Reentry Roundtables that have spawned a rich body of research and publications on the topic. The National Institute of Corrections is currently engaged in a laudable “Transition from Prison to Community” project, offering technical assistance to a small cluster of states aimed at transforming their systems governing reentry.

In 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice and a broad consortium of federal agencies forged a path-

breaking partnership by providing \$100 million in grant funding, spread across all 50 states, to address reentry planning and programming for serious, violent, felony offenders. Known as the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, this initiative just came to a close, but a comprehensive, multiyear, multisite evaluation is under way to assess the changes that were produced.

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President George W. Bush, in his 2004 State of the Union address, urged Congress to allocate \$300 million over four years to support reentry. Since then, the U.S. departments of Labor and Justice have provided grant funding under their Prisoner Reentry Initiative, centering on the return of nonviolent offenders to selected urban communities. More

recently, the U.S. Department of Justice offered another competitive grant opportunity under the Prisoner Reentry Initiative, calling for proposals earmarking assessment and case management strategies supportive of offenders’ reentry transitions.

Finally, through the auspices of the Council of State Governments, the Re-Entry Policy Council issued a landmark report offering a comprehensive set of bipartisan, consensus-based recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners interested in improving the likelihood that adults released from confinement will avoid crime and become productive members of their communities. This unprecedented project brought together nearly 100 leaders and agencies representing a wide spectrum of systems connected to prisoner reentry.

The groundswell of support for reentry is important and welcome, but the pace at which it is moving forward suggests the need for caution. In 1982, Jim Finckenauer published *Scared Straight and the Panacea Phenomenon*. He argued that all too often corrections’ seemingly most promising programs fall victim to the panacea phenomenon. That is, in the search for rehabilitative interventions, proponents identify innovative treatments, elevate expectations and assume their programmatic efficacy. When the expectations are not met, reformers move on to embrace another cycle of

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new strategies and interventions, ultimately producing identical outcomes. This same cycle may affect the reentry movement today, unless we proceed by keeping the following in mind.

Each year, approximately 650,000 offenders will be released from state and federal prisons. During the next decade, 6 to 7 million formerly incarcerated persons will return home from confinement. The findings from two Bureau of Justice Statistics reports show that nearly two-thirds of offenders are likely to re-offend (that is, be rearrested) within three years of release. Despite many efforts in the past, the problem of offender recidivism remains serious.

Offender reentry and recidivism must be addressed from within a fundamentally different framework. We must begin by recognizing that corrections leaders and correctional systems cannot go it alone. To do so promises to repeat the failures of the past and guarantees continued high rates of offender recidivism. Effective reentry requires a holistic approach with a set of practices, which link offenders as they move from the inside out and engage communities from the outside in. It requires part-

nering and teaming up with the appropriate resource providers along the way. Reentry is everybody's business.

The focus on reentry in the field of corrections remains strong, and is growing stronger. Reentry, however, must be pursued within a holistic framework if it is to become a force for changing both culture and practice in corrections. This means drawing on programmatic best practices, seeking and sustaining active collaborations with community and faith-based partners, engaging and empowering families across the full spectrum of reentry, and overcoming barriers that undermine offenders' successful transitions from prison to home.

It is evident that in a growing number of states and local jurisdictions, reentry is being approached in a systemic manner. Innovative initiatives are under way that emphasize building a continuum of services, programming, support and offender accountability that extend from sentencing to release to post-release supervision. The key is that these strategies and initiatives must be developed through collaboration and in concert with offenders' families, community groups and organiza-

tions, service providers, citizens, victims, and formerly incarcerated persons. Their ownership and support at the grassroots level are vital to achieving successful pathways for offender reentry.

Reentry, ultimately, represents a shift in thinking and a change in how we conduct business inside and outside of our correctional systems. It is inclusive of programming but extends well beyond prison walls. The commitment to reentry requires thinking differently about the business of corrections and how those in the field should go about conducting that business.

If we accomplish these goals, then the reentry movement in corrections will serve as a historically unique, if not unprecedented, paradigm change that reshapes and redefines the operations of corrections jurisdictions across the country. So, unlike many fads that come and go, I truly believe that reentry is and will remain a major process that works to assist offenders, their families and other stakeholders in becoming participants in creating and sustaining safe, secure and successful communities where we all can live. ♦