




ENGAGING COMMUNITIES:

An Essential Ingredient To Offender Reentry

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Although it is a widely acknowledged variable to the success of offender reentry, the development, maintenance and influence of community providers in the reentry process has become more paramount as releases from confinement continue to increase at record levels. In less than a decade alone, communities nationally have witnessed a double-digit percentage increase in the number of adults on parole from 1995 through 2003,¹ with nearly two-thirds of all offenders returning to prison within three years of their release.² Therefore, it is an obvious conclusion that more innovative strategies must be undertaken to engage community providers in an effort to establish both a conceptual and operational foundation for offender success.

Given the increasing number of offenders currently being supervised in the community, compounded with stagnant or declining budgets equating to fewer personnel, correctional leaders are being placed in the precarious situation of being almost dependent upon outside providers to jointly take ownership of the reentry process. This is not to say that the linkage between corrections and the community is something new to the field. On the contrary, the use of community providers such as churches, businesses and social service agencies has essentially been imbedded in the corrections profession. Yet, the field still has a long road to travel in order to change the ideology of communities into taking a more significant role in the processes involved with re-integrating offenders back into society.

In effect, the burden can no longer be exclusively placed upon corrections to ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals become productive citizens. Correctional agencies should not be the only entity tackling this problem. For reentry to be a success, communities must become engaged and empowered to work collaboratively with corrections to provide guidance and direct assistance to released offenders. Correctional entities should also, how-

ever, maintain a primary role in working with each community to facilitate change and to provide technical assistance when necessary. Similarly, corrections professionals must recognize that each community is unique and may expect ideas toward successful offender reentry to reflect that community's priorities and values. The adage of "one glove fits all" simply will not work across diverse communities.

Dispersing Responsibility

Neither corrections nor communities can view reentry as being the sole responsibility of the other. From a historical perspective, communities by and large have ostensibly been comforted in the knowledge that the post-release supervision of offenders would act as a "safety net" for both the offender and themselves. For it was this point during an offender's supervision that determined whether successful re-integration was occurring. However, significant increases in the number of released offenders coupled with limited resources have clearly weakened what was, and still is considered to be a vital link to offender rehabilitation. With more offenders also being released without any supervision, the safety net is rapidly diminishing to where the criminal justice system's influence on post-release behavior is tenuous. Because of the inverse nature of this relationship, where more offenders requiring greater need is met with less support and programming, a larger number of offenders are being returned to prison.³ Thus, it becomes imperative for correctional leaders to work toward the development, maintenance and influence of community providers to play a larger role than previously sought in reentry initiatives.

It is reasonably safe to portend that the benefits of engaging community entities in the reentry process can far exceed corrections officials' current realities in terms of reentry success. The dilemma that is faced, however, is the

question of how to engage the community so that the potential for success is optimized. Though still evolving, the question of community engagement is being confronted across multiple fronts in Ohio that include cooperative efforts with businesses, pro-social support systems and family reunification initiatives. Similar to the processes currently ongoing within the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's 32 prisons, a comprehensive reentry plan within Ohio's communities is in place that encompasses a core set of programming focusing on employment opportunities, professional intervention for special needs offenders (e.g., substance abuse), and social, familial and faith-based interactions. Research has suggested that offenders who discontinue crime are socially bonded to family and/or significant others, show characteristics that include those that are embedded in structured routines, are socially bonded to family and/or significant others, and have used available resources and social support systems for their relationships while under supervision.⁴

What Works

It has been well established that providing opportunities to improve educational and work-related skills can reduce the risk of future offending.⁵ Further, some have argued that employability is related to criminal involvement⁶ considering that a significant number of offenders come to prison with poor work histories.⁷ Therefore, it is vital that correctional agencies work with community organizations whose expertise involves employment readiness, workplace culture and knowledge of job opportunities that commences at the outset of an offender's incarceration, thus preparing him or her for meaningful future endeavors. Although society maintains knowledge that the cost-benefit ratio of meaningful employment for offenders has positive, tangible outcomes over time (e.g., reduction in crime, declining prison populations, decreased operating costs), community business leaders continue to review their bottom line in terms of human resources and cannot obviously afford to hire unqualified offenders. As such, the absence of skilled labor on the part of offenders reentering the community can create uncertainty and, in turn, unstable working habits.

Without the development of relevant job skills, offenders will find their ability to obtain sustainable employment challenging. Attaining sustainable employment and acceptance into the work force can serve as a building block to connecting with the community. As with any member of society and particularly with released offenders, those gainfully employed are capable of taking care of themselves, their families and are contributing members to the tax base of the community in which they reside. The fiscal burden of caring for the offender is now placed upon themselves and not on the community.

Traditionally, many employers have been reluctant to hire former offenders due to the perceived risks and potential public backlash to the company. However, corrections and the business community must work together to help overcome these barriers. For example, Cleveland's program, Providing Real Opportunities for Ex-Offenders to Succeed, includes work force skills development, job place-

ment and federal incentives to employers who hire offenders. The program has shown tangible results with increases in both tax revenues and gross wages. These results are now leading to additional business participation.

Leveraging pro-social support through the community is another venue that aids in the reentry process as offenders attempt to re-establish connections to their support systems. As an increasing number of offenders begin to reenter the community, the importance of providing pro-social support through nonprofit groups or organizations, such as faith-based organizations, can help to alleviate the uncertainty prevalent in many newly released offenders. Developing relationships with community organizations to provide mentoring and peer support to offenders is an area that has shown promise and has recently gained support through the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative that includes the provision of mentoring services.

However, correctional agencies must be proactive in their approach to soliciting community organizations to participate in a reentry initiative. In Ohio, for example, agency staff attend community functions to provide education and to dispel misinformation about offenders entering their neighborhoods. As such, informed decisions can be made in relation to reentry participation. In the same regard, Ohio has developed "citizen circles" that include members of community organizations, faith-based groups, employment agencies, business and law enforcement, among others. The group meets on a monthly basis with the offender and his or her family or other support person to assist with the re-integration process. Members of the citizen circle address the offender's risk factors and relay their expectations for successful reentry. Concurrently, the offender is able to network with members for opportunities and to demonstrate his or her potential value as a community member.

Mending Families

The development of pro-social support systems within the community is also critical to the reentry process when the concern focuses on family reunification. It has become increasingly apparent that offenders have difficulty reentering the family structure they left behind prior to being incarcerated for any period of time. Family members and the offender change, as does the structure of their relationships. In many instances, children of the incarcerated have not seen their parent since they were incarcerated. Recent estimates by the Bureau of Justice Statistics suggest that 1.5 million children have at least one parent currently incarcerated.

The adjustment back into family life for an offender can create further problems that, if left unattended and without intervention, may produce negative outcomes that make other reentry initiatives ineffective. In essence, the success or failure of any single reentry initiative designed to impact a particular risk factor is not mutually exclusive to another and can determine the outcome of other initiatives geared toward the offender. In other words, if an offender is having a difficult time adjusting back into a relationship with his or her spouse or child, how engaged or encouraged will the

offender be to successfully participate in an education or job skills program?

In Ohio, the DOC and selected community partners have developed Family Life Centers and the Ohio Family Council to aid in the reunification process. A pilot project of the Family Life Centers, Children of Incarcerated Parents: Breaking the Cycle, provides services to the incarcerated offender and his or her family prior to and after release. The program is based on the premise that family relationships should be re-established prior to reentry into the community. Similarly, the Ohio Family Council was established to address familial issues that develop and adopt practices that foster family reunification. Along with the offender and his or her immediate family, the Ohio Family Council includes family-counseling practitioners, nonprofit and interfaith organizations, and corrections personnel as well as other state agencies relevant to the offender's case.

Perhaps one of the most successful examples of community engagement into the reentry process has been the development of the reentry court, where Ohio was selected as one of nine states in 2000 to engage in a partnership between the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction and the Richland County Common Pleas Court. Paralleling the principles underlying drug courts, the Richland County Common Pleas Court is responsible for managing the return of offenders who have been released from prison into their community. The court uses its authority to apply graduated sanctions and positive reinforcement to support the offender's re-integration. An initial needs assessment is completed on each offender with a reentry court case manager periodically meeting with the individual, along with prison staff, to monitor the case plan to ensure the offender's needs and court orders are being fulfilled. While incarcerated, the offender is placed in programs consistent with his or her reentry plan. If programs dictated by the reentry plan are unavailable, the court case manager coordinates with community entities to have these needs addressed upon release. Parole and probation officers work jointly to monitor offenders once they return to the community and assist with helping them meet the program's requirements. Local law enforcement also participate as part of the team to enforce the conditions of release.

Corrections officials' understanding of the reentry process and of what works to assist offenders in becoming participating members of their respective community is still in its infancy, but appears promising. Reentry has cer-

tainly taken root in the philosophy of corrections, with communities now beginning to grasp the essential role they play in the process. There are obviously multiple pathways to engage communities in reentry, and this article has discussed only the surface of the many possibilities currently in operation. The community's role in corrections has become a necessary component and essential ingredient to the success of offender reentry. If developing viable community partnerships is aggressively pursued, correctional agencies will embrace the knowledge of the importance of establishing multiple means of working with and through the community to the extent that offenders will be more likely to experience successful transitions home.

ENDNOTES

¹ Glaze, L.E. and S. Palla. 2004. *Probation and parole in the United States, 2003*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.

² Petersilia, J. 2003. *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ Wilkinson, R.A. 2001. Offender reentry: A storm overdue. *Correctional Management Quarterly*, 5(3):46-51.

⁴ Laub, J.H. and R. Sampson. 2003. *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Andrews, D. and J. Bonta. 1994. *The psychology of criminal conduct*. Cincinnati: Anderson.

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⁶ Andrews, D. and J. Bonta. 1994.

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⁷ Saylor, W. and G. Gaes. 1996. *PREP: Training inmates through industrial work participation and vocational and apprenticeship instruction*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons.

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