



# Citizens' Circles:

## Community Collaboration in Re-Entry

By Ed Rhine,  
John R. Matthews II,  
Lee A. Sampson and  
the Rev. Hugh Daley

**T**oday in corrections, there is a tremendous amount of focus on offender re-entry. Within a short time span, a national dialogue has emerged that calls for a major re-examination of how correctional systems prepare offenders to return home as productive, crime-free citizens. An ever-growing number of publications is now available illustrating the public safety issues embedded in the return of hundreds of thousands of offenders each year to cities and neighborhoods nationwide.<sup>1</sup> These reports highlight the very substantial difficulties newly released offenders confront in resuming work, reuniting with families and coping with the demands of everyday living. They also demonstrate that, at a time when inmate reintegration represents a pressing issue for correctional administrators, too many offenders are

re-entering society ill-equipped, ill-prepared and with only limited support to successfully make this transition.

Ohio, like many states, has embraced the myriad challenges associated with re-entry. Last year, the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC) issued a comprehensive report, *The Ohio Plan for Productive Offender Reentry and Recidivism Reduction*. DRC has adopted a new vision and mission governing offender re-entry and at the core of DRC's approach is the notion that re-entry is a philosophy, not a program. Under the plan, re-entry calls for a broad systems approach to managing offenders returning to the community. It requires the involvement of every phase of the correctional system beginning at reception, and continuing through to release and community supervision. It expresses a strong commitment to answering the question: What is needed to prepare this offender for successful re-entry? This commitment is summarized succinctly in the slogan, "Re-entry means going home to stay."

One of the key assumptions behind the Ohio plan is the recognition that community partnerships and collaboration are essential to ensuring successful offender reintegration. It is not possible for any correctional system acting alone to create effective and durable pathways to re-entry. The links and connections that are forged with key stakeholders and individuals in the communities to which offenders return carry the potential to reinforce and sustain the reintegration prospects

of ex-inmates. The active participation of citizens, as well as local agencies and groups with an interest in public safety, serves to augment the limited operational capacity of the correctional system.

DRC has long embraced community justice as a framework governing correctional practices in its institutions and parole regions. A community justice cabinet was created in 1997 to improve citizen satisfaction and provide guidance through the participation of victims, the community and offenders in the process. In addition, the Adult Parole Authority has established community policing partnerships in several areas of the state. One of the department's major new initiatives under the Ohio plan that speaks directly to the importance of citizen involvement and community collaboration is the development of citizens' circles.

### Citizens' Circles Development

Community members are often resistant to the idea of offenders living in their neighborhoods. As a result, offenders return to their neighborhoods with little or no support from local citizens. The public often relies on the justice system to supervise and monitor released offenders rather than taking an active role in the reintegration process. Yet, community support is vital for offenders leaving prison. Ex-inmates who make positive life changes while incarcerated but

return to environments without guidance and support frequently resume old behavioral patterns that lead to new crimes. Offenders who feel accepted by their community and believe they are valued are less likely to re-offend. The formation of a citizens' circle contributes to this process. Within Ohio's plan, citizens' circles are community justice partnerships forged between the Ohio DRC and communities within the state that promote prosocial interaction and offender accountability upon release.

A citizens' circle attempts to address the root causes contributing to offenders' commission of crimes, encourage local ownership of and solutions from the community itself, and achieve agreement on the responsibilities of offenders upon release. The process is based on peacekeeping, negotiation and consensus-building among the parties involved that, according to the Department of Justice, draws from the principles of the Justice/Sentencing Circles established in Minnesota and Vermont. Community expectations are conveyed to offenders who work with circle members to reach agreement on the final outcomes to be accomplished through their participation. In essence, citizens' circles embrace local citizens and community agencies, alongside DRC, in decision-making and case management relative to offender rehabilitation and re-entry.

## Citizens' Circles In Operation

Offenders enter the circle on their own free will to seek restored citizenship. The circle reviews applications for membership from offenders who are incarcerated, those currently under community supervision, and from halfway houses or community-based correctional facilities. Prior to offenders attending their first meeting, circle coordinators conduct an in-depth interview with them. The information disclosed is verified before presenting the application to the entire circle membership. Circle coordinators are individuals drawn from parole or institution staff, most often supervision officers, case managers or treatment counselors.



John R. Matthews

Marion, Ohio, Citizen Circle

### Who should be involved?



This chart represents a typical circle membership.

Circle members may accept offenders based on the following criteria:

- The circle application process has been completed.
- Responsibility has been accepted for the commission of the crime and the harm resulting from the offense.
- A plan of reconciliation has been developed.
- There is an expressed willingness to accept agreed upon circle recommendations.
- There is a commitment to take part in community service.
- There is a clear willingness to set goals focused on law-abiding and productive community behavior.

The acceptance of an offender into a circle, however, is not solely based on these criteria. The circle members can arrange a face-to-face interview to ask specific questions or to clarify information on the application. Once offenders have met with the circle members, nonapplication-based factors (e.g., if offenders are viewed as

insincere and/or untruthful) may be a cause for rejection. Once accepted, offenders must communicate their strengths, weaknesses and needs to the circle to ensure that viable circle accountability plans may be negotiated and developed with the members. Circle accountability plans are formed in concert with parole supervision guidelines and may address:

- Job seeking;
- Education;
- Family issues;
- Mental health;
- Substance abuse;
- Attitude;
- Social interactions;
- Community service;
- Housing assistance;
- Spiritual needs; and
- Designation of a community sponsor.

The circle members meet on a regular basis to discuss offender progress, review and modify their accountability plans, interview new applicants, admit new members and discharge successful or unsuccessful

offenders. Circles involve the offender, their support systems, victim advocacy groups and community members.

Citizens' circles offer a powerful forum for community collaboration by providing an opportunity for citizens to communicate their expectations for successful re-entry. They also help offenders recognize the harm their criminal behavior has caused others, especially their victims, and develop a viable plan of action to promote responsible citizenship. Circle members inform offenders that society is willing to accept them as restored members and believes that they have paid their debt. Importantly, the circle helps offenders understand that acceptance back into their community requires the fulfillment of certain obligations and commitments. Citizens' circle objectives are centered on opening the lines of communication between citizens and offenders returning home. They foster equality for the parties, promote a problem-solving environment and encourage mutual respect among the participants.

## Looking Ahead

Citizens' circles will play an integral role as DRC moves forward under the Ohio plan to create stronger links with community partners that support re-entry. Since the inception of the first circles in several communities in north central Ohio, they have been, or are in the process of being, implemented in each of the seven parole regions in the state. DRC envisions that citizens' circles will eventually become a presence in every major city throughout Ohio. In the larger metropolitan areas, citizens' circles will target certain neighborhoods and areas to which significant concentrations of offenders return.

Parole officers in Ohio, as elsewhere, are currently faced with large workloads and fewer programmatic options from which to draw. These conditions present a challenge to field staff and correctional administrators to find new models for effectively supervising offenders in the community. Citizens' circles present an innovative approach to involving the community in effective community-based offender supervision. They enhance offender supervision by

securing citizen involvement in offender case management. Through hands-on contact with offenders, community members become more active in re-entry and develop an increased knowledge of the correctional system. They also develop a better understanding of the correctional process and the issues offenders face as they transition from prison to the community. Offenders themselves develop a more positive attitude as they return to their communities and are provided opportunities to give back and to become productive members of the community.

As the expansion of citizens' circles continues, and the lessons that are learned are factored into improvements in the process, community safety will be strengthened. It is expected that offenders participating in citizens' circles compared with nonparticipants will show reduced rates of re-offending, lower rates of unemployment, higher completion rates for provider-based programming and increased compliance with supervision conditions.

## Conclusion

Under the Ohio plan, citizens' circles are designed to address the multitude of challenges that offenders face upon their return to the community. Such circles draw on the social capital provided by linking a network of community-based partnerships with individual citizens and local agencies that have a direct stake in the outcomes that are achieved. Citizens' circles seek to create and sustain collaborative relationships that are able to more effectively supervise offenders, impose greater leverage and account-

ability over them, and contribute to greater public safety in the process. The operation of citizens' circles incorporates the greater operational and resource capacities of local communities in responding to the crime problem. Ultimately, citizens' circles recognize that it takes a community to successfully transition offenders home.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Petersilia, J. 2003. *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Petersilia, J. and J. Travis. 2001. From prison to society: Managing the challenges of prisoner reentry. *Crime and Delinquency*, 47(3):291-485. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Rhine, E.E. 2001. Rethinking prisoner reentry: Implications for corrections. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5(3):V-VIII. Frederick, Md.: Aspen Publications.

Travis, J., A.L. Solomon and M. Waul. 2001. *From prison to home: The consequences of prisoner reentry*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

---

*Ed Rhine, Ph.D., is chief of the Office of Offender Reentry and Correctional Best Practices for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. John R. Matthews II is regional services coordinator for the Offender Services Network of the Adult Parole Authority-Mansfield Region, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. Lee A. Sampson is regional administrator of the Adult Parole Authority-Mansfield Region. The Rev. Hugh Daley is deputy warden of the Toledo Correctional Institution of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.*

**Citizens' circles offer a powerful forum for community collaboration by providing an opportunity for citizens to communicate their expectations for successful re-entry.**