

Reducing Recidivism for Ex-offenders Returning to Essex County

Background

When The Nicholson Foundation began to focus its efforts in New Jersey in 2002, research into the most important problems confronting Essex County's families revealed that many of its communities were impoverished by rising crime, incarceration and recidivism. Between 1980 and 2002, the number of New Jersey residents entering prison annually—including federal, state, and county facilities—had increased almost four-fold from 4,000 to 15,000, and approximately one third came from Essex County. In 2002 in Essex County, 46,143 residents—almost 6% of the population—were arrested, the most of any county in New Jersey. A significant portion of the arrests were for serious and violent crimes, with Newark experiencing a record number of homicides. One out of six adult males had a felony conviction.

The more recent experience of the Essex County Department of Corrections reveals that these trends are not abating. The Department moved into a new \$416 million 2,300-bed facility in the spring of 2004. In combination with nearby private facilities, the jail was expected to meet the County's incarceration needs for decades to come. However, by the fall of 2006, it was already overcrowded. That a high-cost, new facility proved inadequate so quickly is a telling indicator of the challenges faced by Essex County's criminal-justice delivery system and their growing negative impact on the social fabric of its communities.

Most Essex County ex-offenders return to just four communities: Newark, Irvington, East Orange, and Orange. At any point in time, nearly 10,000 County residents are under criminal justice supervision. The majority are black males on parole or probation, with poor literacy, few employment skills, fragile family relationships, and little know-how in accessing important social and community supports. Significant numbers struggle with chronic unemployment, drugs and alcohol, and health and mental health conditions requiring treatment. After three years, less than 25% obtain legitimate employment. Research indicates that unless these newly released prisoners can obtain jobs, successfully reunite with their families, find a place to live, and obtain substance abuse, health, and mental health treatment, the majority will return to

prison within three years, many within six months. If, however, they receive comprehensive and integrated services within the first six months after release that are based on a reentry plan developed while incarcerated, they will experience significantly enhanced prospects for successful reintegration. Not only can this approach improve their lives and those of their families, it can also lead to financial and social benefits for the City of Newark, where the problem is concentrated, and Essex County at large.

Government officials and community advocates have realized the importance of addressing the destructive cycle of crime, arrest, incarceration, release, and recidivism repeated annually by thousands of County residents. Since 2002, the Foundation has convened expanding groups of stakeholders, including city, county, and State agencies, profit and non-profit organizations, and formerly incarcerated individuals, to examine ways to confront this problem together. This has led to a growing awareness of the need to work in partnership to spearhead and coordinate the multiple service-delivery systems required and to foster long-term solutions. The Foundation has provided technical assistance and numerous [grants](#) to develop, implement, and evaluate programs and to support offender reentry initiatives reflecting current knowledge about what is most effective. The Foundation also supports programs in crime prevention; diversion/pre-sentencing programs; in-prison education and skills development; discharge planning; and targeted post-release activities. The Foundation has committed \$7.8 million for these projects as of mid 2008.

The last decade has seen an increased awareness by policy makers and practitioners of the importance of objectively evaluating reentry programs to determine what works best. The Foundation views evaluation as essential and is committed to aiding its partners in incorporating research findings into their initiatives. It has therefore supported several evaluations of Foundation-supported initiatives to improve their service delivery and outcomes. The principles of effective reentry programming that represent the best research-based thinking today are described below.

Key Elements of Successful Reentry Service Delivery Systems

Pre-release Activities

Well-designed offender reentry programs support the delivery of pre-release services, as they promote the success of the post-release phase of an offender's individualized discharge/reentry plan. These pre-release activities include several key elements.

- Family reconciliation, including repairing child-adult relationships, is very important since fractured family relationships can cause frustration and anger for returning offenders. Family bonds can be a source of motivation and support; and initial housing is often provided through the family. The children of returning offenders benefit from healthier interactions with their parents, which can minimize next-generation criminal behavior.
- Early determination of eligibility for government benefits (e.g., SSI, welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, Veteran's benefits) aids post release stability.
- Identification cards, such as driver's licenses, often expire during prison terms or are forfeited as part of sentencing. Assistance in obtaining required documentation and completing the identification card application process prior to release ensures that lack of identification is not a barrier to obtaining employment, housing, or other essential social services.
- Job training and other educational programs should start during incarceration and continue after release. Recommended programs include courses to increase educational and/ or occupational skill achievement, obtain credentials (e.g., GED, high school diploma, college courses, or occupational skill certificates) and improve work readiness. Instruction can be teacher-led or computer-based.

Probation and Parole

An effective reentry service-delivery system addresses the fact that when released, a large majority of ex-inmates are on probation or parole. Parole and probation officers are important to successful reentry because they help to ensure that those under their supervision actively implement their reentry plans.

- The judicial system should consider making reentry program enrollment mandatory upon release. This can include requiring that returning prisoners participate in reentry centers.
- It is often advantageous for parole officers to require mandatory participation of ex-offenders in their release plans and to impose escalating penalties, including returning newly released inmates to prison if they fail to follow their plans.
- Partner agencies at reentry centers are very important in supporting probation and parole compliance and helping returnees overcome obstacles to meeting their probation/parole requirements.

Case Management

Within six months, the reentry process must address each returning offender's numerous and complex needs, requiring the management of services from multiple programs and across delivery systems. Therefore, a matrix of case management is essential.

- Lead case managers are needed to coordinate services across multiple programs and delivery systems. They monitor and facilitate compliance with all the activities specified in their clients' reentry plans. Lead case managers also solicit regular feedback from providers and clients to troubleshoot problems, evaluate outcomes, and make recommendations to improve the process.
- In each particular program, service-specific case managers are necessary since they provide and/or monitor particular services for which clients are referred.

- Among the different program and service partners, joint case management at the individual level is critical to effectively manage client flow and address individual client needs. This helps resolve obstacles to client participation and promotes continuous improvement in service delivery.

Direct Connections to Collaborating Programs and Services

Experience has shown that on their own, recently released prisoners find it difficult to navigate among numerous service providers, which sometimes make competing demands. The services are essential, yet accessing them can be fraught with problems. The co-location of government agencies and community-based programs at reentry centers makes it easier to connect the returnees to the services and to coordinate the providers' efforts. This coordination, implemented through formal inter-agency agreements, leads to better service delivery, enhanced outcomes, and improved cost effectiveness.

Information Systems

An offender reentry service-delivery system supports a large population of returnees who receive varied services from multiple agencies, where each case can result in a different outcome. Thus, to reinforce coordination and collaboration across agencies, an up-to-date shared electronic information system is essential. It facilitates communication by allowing all agencies to learn about the other services their shared clients are receiving. It simplifies monitoring clients' compliance with, and progress in, agreed-upon activities. It also enables management to collect and analyze individual and aggregate data to assess the efficacy of the reentry service-delivery system and make improvements as needed.

Evaluation

Evaluation is vital to the implementation of an effective reentry service-delivery system. Policy makers and practitioners can only make informed decisions about program design and resources if they have objective information about the program's process and workflow, its successes and limitations, its outcomes and their cost. Both process and outcome evaluations are valuable.

- Early on in a reentry service-delivery system's implementation, a process evaluation assesses what is working and what needs improvement, e.g., recruitment processes, work flow, participants' implementation. It can determine the extent to which the reentry system is operating in the way in which it was designed and identify which program components can be improved and which meet or exceed expectations. A process evaluation allows decision makers to make important modifications before the reentry system becomes too entrenched to change.
- An outcome evaluation determines whether the reentry service-delivery approach being studied reduces crime and decreases recidivism. It can pinpoint which program components are most successful and inform decisions about which programs should be expanded and replicated.

Application of the Model in Newark/Essex County

One example of a state-of-the-art, evidence-based initiative designed to promote effective social and community reintegration is Opportunity Reconnect. The program was started in 2006, and the phase-in of all its basic components was accomplished by mid 2008. Its partners are Essex County College, the New Jersey State Department of Corrections, the State Parole Board, Essex County Department of Citizen Services, the City of Newark, and The Nicholson Foundation. Opportunity Reconnect puts the findings from reentry research into practice, serving as a one-stop reentry center for returning Essex County offenders. Multiple government agencies and community-based organizations collaborate across delivery systems to provide critical services that include welfare, Medicaid, workforce preparation, housing, health, education, mentoring, and family reunification. Community and faith-based organizations coordinate these services, which are offered in one physical location at Essex County Community College. This co-

location makes it easier for returnees to access services and facilitates their integration. Because it takes advantage of existing funding and staffing resources, Opportunity Reconnect does not require large additional financial or resource investments by government or community-based organizations. Still, key positions must be filled to make the new system work. Where government budgets cannot accommodate the need as yet, The Nicholson Foundation temporarily fills the gap.

The Commitment of Government to Offender Reentry in Essex County

In the time since the Foundation made offender reentry a top priority and a partnership coalesced to address the problem in Essex County, the importance of the issue has received growing recognition among policy makers from all levels of government. Most states and many cities have now initiated formal reentry programs.

The City of Newark

Mayor Cory Booker has recognized that to increase safety and economic vitality in Newark, his administration must reduce crime and find effective ways to help the approximately 2,000 ex-inmates that return to the city each year from State prison. Thus, the Mayor has made prisoner reentry a signature issue. In the “Perspective” section of the July 29, 2007 issue of the *Star-Ledger* (Newark, New Jersey), Mayor Booker wrote:

As Mayor of our state's largest city, I have decided to join with others to do whatever is necessary for a dramatic change in criminal and prisoner reentry policy at every level of government. If we continue on the path we have chosen in the years and decades ahead, all of New Jersey will feel greater and greater pain and be forced to pay the ever-increasing price.

Mayor Booker's administration has participated in an innovative public-private partnership that has resulted in many essential services, including Opportunity Reconnect, to help ex-offenders successfully reintegrate into their communities.

The State of New Jersey

In October 2007, New Jersey Governor Corzine unveiled his reentry strategy for the entire State. The Governor's strategy recognizes that successful reentry service-delivery systems are not based on a series of isolated programs but rather must be implemented as a coordinated whole, using multiple resources to help returning offenders lead productive, law-abiding lives.

In *A Strategy for Safe Streets and Neighborhoods*, the Governor stated

[I]t is now generally recognized that successful reentry efforts need to involve collaborative and integrated efforts involving multiple agencies across all levels of government, with local community-based organizations as partners in these efforts. Successful reintegration of ex-inmates contributes to public safety through a reduction in recidivism.

In one of the Governor's new multi-agency reentry initiatives called Another Chance, the State is targeting 1,300 ex-offenders returning from prison to three New Jersey communities, including Newark, for enhanced vocational and employment services. In addition, as part of the Governor's strategy, with the Foundation and its partners' collaboration, the state of New Jersey is replicating Opportunity Reconnect in Camden, Mercer, Union, and other counties in New Jersey.

The Federal Government

In April 2008, President Bush signed the Second Chance Act, authorizing \$165 million annually to prisoner reentry programs across the country. The 2009 federal budget will appropriate funds for the first time to fund programs authorized as part of the new legislation. Additionally, in recognition of the important reentry initiatives being implemented in Newark, the US Department of Labor is funding a Prisoner Reentry Demonstration Initiative in a partnership with the City of Newark, the State of New Jersey, community organizations, and foundations including The Nicholson Foundation. The Department of Labor is investing \$2 million per year over the next two years, with a \$2 million per year match required by state, local and private sources. An extension for an additional two years is possible. The demonstration will serve 1,345 returning prisoners over two years to determine if Prisoner Reentry can be brought to sufficient scale to help reduce recidivism as it affects an entire community.

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