

PRISON FELLOWSHIP'S MODEL PRINCIPLES OF REENTRY

■ **The purpose of our criminal justice system is to create safer communities and reduce the number of victims.** There is a tendency to focus on institutional safety, rather than community safety. Under this narrow, institutional focus, the surest way to avoid escapes and riots would be to keep prisoners in their cells 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, the public would be in far greater danger after those prisoners were released. Instead of focusing on institutional convenience, correctional policy must be judged by whether it makes the public safer.

■ **Reentry planning should start at intake.** Planning for the release of inmates should start as soon as they are sentenced. Assignment to a prison should include factors such as the proximity of the prison to the inmate's family and the availability of needed programs.

■ **Prison policies should strengthen families.** Crime not only has a devastating impact on the direct victims, but also on the families of offenders. Incarceration puts tremendous stress on the spouses and children of offenders. These family members have committed no crime. The stress on the family is exacerbated by placing inmates far from their families, being disrespectful to family visitors, and charging exorbitant fees for telephone calls.

In addition, there are often preexisting issues of drug abuse, physical abuse, and marital conflict. If these issues are not resolved during incarceration, reentry will be much more difficult. Programs such as *La Bodega de la Familia* in New York, work with the entire family to strengthen their relationships. A healthy, functioning family is one of the most important predictors for successful reentry. Our prison policies must be changed to strengthen families rather than destabilize them.

■ **Prisons are for people we're afraid of, but many of those filling our prisons are there because we are merely mad at them.** The response to a technical violation should not automatically result in return to prison. Obviously, it is important for offenders to learn to live by the rules. However, if an offender is making good progress it makes little sense to throw that all away because he didn't file his paperwork on time or missed a meeting with his probation officer. One judge here said, "Right now, I can either send him back to prison or let him go to the beach. Give me something in between."

■ **Inmates should be encouraged to participate in faith-based programs.** To deal effectively with crime, we must first understand it. At its root, crime is a moral problem. Offenders make bad moral choices that result in harm to their victims. To break the cycle of crime, we must address this immoral behavior. There aren't enough police officers to stop everyone tempted to do something bad from doing it; inmates must rely on inner restraint to keep from harming others.

Most inmates are focused on themselves, their needs and desires. Religion teaches them that they are not the center of the universe and that they have obligations to society. Job training and education alone won't transform an inmate from a criminal into a law-abiding citizen. For some inmates such programs merely make them smarter, more sophisticated criminals. It is a changed heart that can transform a prisoner. Unfortunately, many prison programs ignore the moral aspect of crime and avoid all discussion of faith and morality. In doing so, they are missing a significant factor that has proven very effective at changing criminals' behavior:

faith. If inmates are to live healthy, productive, law-abiding lives when they return to their communities, we must equip them with moral standards to live up to and a worldview that explains why they should do so.

 **The community should “own” reentry.** There is a tendency to view reentry as a program of corrections departments. While our prison systems are certainly central to the reentry process, it is the community that has the most at stake. Many corrections policies make it difficult for community and church groups to be involved in preparing inmates for release. Many systems “keep their options open” on release dates, often right up to the day of release, making it impossible to recruit, match and train mentors, locate appropriate housing, arrange for jobs or welcome the inmates at the bus. For reentry programs to be a success, community groups and churches should be viewed as important partners with the state, not as mere auxiliaries.

An important example of a corrections policy that makes reentry much more difficult is the so-called “non-fraternization” rule. The Federal Bureau of Prisons and many states DOC’s prohibit religious volunteers from being in contact with inmates after they are released. This policy cuts the inmates off from the very people most likely to be able to help them make good choices when they are released. Corrections policies must be rewritten to encourage mentoring relationships to begin inside prison and continue after release. These healthy relationships should be encouraged, not prohibited.

 **Programs are important, but healthy relationships are even more important.** The support and accountability provided by mentors often make the difference between a successful return to society and re-offending. As offenders make the difficult transition back into the community, they need relationships with caring, moral adults. The greater the density of good people we pack around them, the greater the chance that they will be successfully replanted back into the community.

When Prisoners Return covers all these issues and is being used by departments of corrections, churches and community organizations to coordinate their efforts to help offenders during the difficult transition from prison to the community. If you and your staff would like copies, I will gladly provide them to you. The book is also available at www.justicefellowship.org.

In addition to these principles for reentry policies, we’ve identified some specific, structured, reforms to guide you in the reentry process.

Model Reentry Initiative

A. Establish a Reentry Policy Council

The Reentry Policy Council will oversee the state’s reentry policies and programs. Appointments to the Council will be one-third by the Majority Leader of each house of the legislature and one-third by the Governor. The Council should include victims of crime, ex-offenders, faith-based groups, community non-profits, corrections officials and local law enforcement. The Council shall:

- (1) Review corrections policies, programs and procedures to ensure that their primary purpose of each is public safety during imprisonment and after release.
- (2) Identify gaps in reentry programs and services as well as overlapping efforts, and recommend changes to address those issues.
- (3) Review policies to ensure that corrections facilities recruit and welcome volunteers.
- (4) Review the state’s licensing procedures to eliminate barriers to employment that are unrelated to the conduct underlying the conviction.

- (5) Report annually to the General Assembly and the Governor on the progress of the Re-entry Initiative including the impact on recidivism, effectiveness of agency coordination and communications, and the implementation of reentry plans and use of funding.

B. Establish an Interagency Task Force

The Interagency Task Force will be composed of the directors of the departments of corrections, juvenile justice, attorney general, housing, health, mental health, labor, and housing. The Task Force shall:

- (1) Coordinate the state's reentry programs to help inmates find jobs, housing, substance abuse treatment, medical care, and mental health services.
- (2) Insure that those who supervise offenders in prison are linked to those that will supervise them after release.
- (3) Identify methods to improve collaboration and coordination of reentry programs and services, including cross-training, management information systems that are accessible to partner agencies, screening procedures to assess and refer efficiently across federal, state and local boundaries, and policies and procedures that measure offender re-entry management with well defined performance based outcomes.
- (4) Seek partnerships with faith-based and community groups to provide programs and services.
- (5) Identify effective evidence-based practices in re-entry support, treatment and intervention programs.
- (6) Encourage expansion of family-based treatment centers that offer family-based comprehensive treatment services for parents and their children as a complete family unit.
- (7) Establish collaboration among corrections and community corrections, technical schools, community colleges, and the workforce development and employment service sectors to:
 - a. promote, where appropriate, the employment of people released from prison and jail, through efforts such as educating employers about existing financial incentives and facilitate the creation of job opportunities, including transitional jobs, for this population that will benefit communities;
 - b. connect inmates to employment, including supportive employment and employment services, before their release to the community; and
 - c. address barriers to employment.
- (8) Include victims in the reentry process and facilitate victim-offender dialogue when the victim is willing.
- (9) Communicate regularly with local agencies and faith based and community groups.

C. Start Reentry planning at intake

Planning for the release of inmates should start immediately after sentencing and continue through completion of sentence.

- (1) Each inmate should be assessed for family issues; addictions; health issues, particularly for communicable diseases; literacy; job skills and educational needs.
- (2) A written plan should be developed to address the issues identified in the intake assessment with the aim of preparing the inmate for a successful transition after release. The reentry plan should be reviewed and updated annually.
- (3) Decisions on prison assignment should include factors such as the proximity of the prison to the inmate's family and the availability of programs needed.

- (4) Family members should be included in the development of the release plan if they are willing.
- (5) Prior to release, offenders should be provided with documents needed to achieve a successful transition from prison, including: identification papers, referrals to services, medical prescriptions, copies of medical records and information on applying for public assistance.

D. Match Inmates with mentors from their community

The support and accountability provided by mentors often make the difference between a successful return to society and re-offending. As offenders make the difficult transition back into the community, they need relationships with caring, moral adults. The greater the density of good people we pack around them, the greater the chance that they will be successfully re-planted back into the community.

The state will:

- (1) Establish a community-based program matching mentors with offenders to help them make the transition from prison to the community safely and successfully. The mentors will provide the offenders with practical advice, encouragement and hold them accountable for their actions.
- (2) Ten percent of all inmates will be linked with a mentor by 2009.
- (3) Inmates will have the option of participating in a mentoring program of their own faith, or participating in a secular mentoring program. If there are no mentors of an inmates' faith available, the inmate may participate in the secular program.
- (4) The mentoring relationship should start at least six months before release, and continue for at least six months after release. The mentoring relationship should include the inmate's family to the greatest extent possible, unless they refuse or their safety would be endangered.
- (5) Release dates should be communicated to the community mentoring team at least a year in advance, so that a mentor from the inmate's community can be recruited, matched, and trained, with at least six months to develop a relationship with the inmate while still in prison.
- (6) Because of the importance of mentoring relationships and the time and effort required to recruit, match and train mentors, once release dates have been established they should not be modified unless a direct and significant risk to public safety is involved.

E. Strengthen families

Maintaining strong family ties during imprisonment has a positive impact on both returning prisoners and their children. Several studies have shown that continued contact with family members during and following incarceration reduces recidivism and helps offenders reintegrate into the community.

- (1) Visitation and parent/child relationships are to be encouraged and facilitated, including lowering telephone costs, easing mail restrictions, and expanding visitation hours and facilities, unless public safety would be endangered. Inmates should be placed in the institution of the appropriate security level closest to their families.
- (2) Family members shall be involved in planning and facilitating reentry, unless they would be in danger or refuse to participate.
- (3) Information regarding children should be obtained as part of intake procedure: number, age, residence of children.

- (4) Develop program/activities that support family and parent/child relationships: using telephone conferencing to permit incarcerated parents to participate in parent/teacher conferences; using videoconferencing to allow “virtual” visitation when parents are more than 100 miles from their families; develop “books on tape” programs, where incarcerated parents read a book into a tape which is sent home to the child; establish “family days” which provide longer visitation hours or family activities; create children’s areas in visitation rooms with parent/child activities.
- (5) Identify and address barriers to collaborating with child welfare agencies in the provision of services to the children of offenders and their incarcerated parent.
- (6) Develop programs to help prisoners with a history or identified risk of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking reconnect with their families and communities as appropriate with the intent that they become mutually respectful, non-abusive parents or partners. Particular attention should be paid to the safety of children affected and the confidentiality concerns of victims. Efforts should be coordinated with existing victim service providers.



*Changing Lives, Minds, and
Communities through Jesus Christ*