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Developing external relations for prisoner reentry programming

Abstract

In order to maximize effectiveness, prisoner reentry programs need to develop mutually beneficial relationships with their local government and community, the criminal justice system, community and faith organizations, and employers. The following recommendations serve as a guide for bolstering the external relations of faith and community-based organizations, city agencies, and other entities engaged in prisoner reentry programming. These suggestions are adapted from the publication *Call to Action*, which includes a series of case studies of organizations participating in Ready4Work, Public/Private Ventures' national prisoner reentry demonstration program, or other prisoner reentry issues.

Issue

In order to be as effective as possible, prisoner reentry programs need to develop high quality relationships with external partners.

Action

There are five external entities that require cultivation when building the relationships necessary to operate a prisoner reentry program: the local government and community, the criminal justice system, community organizations, faith organizations, and employers.

Local Government and Community

Developing a strong relationship with individuals and groups who work and live in the area where the reentry program operates will build broad support.

- Garner the support of elected officials who can advocate for the program's needs, sway public opinion, and provide funding.
- Assess the political climate, including the risks of political or government support. Anticipate arguments against reentry programs and prepare the organization's case in favor.
- Employ individuals and recruit volunteers from the community in which the program operates, which will lend legitimacy to the organization.
- Be willing to start with a small constituency of support and build it as the program gains a reputation.

Criminal Justice System

A collaborative relationship with individuals in all areas of the criminal justice system will increase participant levels and referrals and can serve as an effective way to share information.

- Consider the organization's needs and how individuals from the criminal justice system

might assist, especially in advisory roles.

- Judges, parole officers, correctional institutions, law enforcement, and others can all support programs that serve returning prisoners and their communities.
- Reentry programs and the criminal justice system can help each other fill their shared missions of reducing crime and recidivism. For example, judges can order parolees to enroll in programs, corrections institutions can facilitate relationships between prisoners and organizations prior to release, and developing a partnership with law enforcement will ensure that programs and police can target areas that are in most need.
- Conduct research on local and state criminal justice systems for signs of possible collaboration and prepare a presentation of the program's work for individuals within this system.

Community Organizations

Partnering with community organizations can ease the burden of providing services such as substance abuse and mental health treatment, vocational training, soft skill-building, or referrals for these services.

- Remember that relationships between organizations should be mutually beneficial.
- Consider creating formal partnerships with complimentary community organizations, because many funders favor grant applications that are collaborative projects between two or more organizations. Build on the reputation of previous reentry programs, using the copious available research, building on government precedent, and incorporating the stories of the formerly incarcerated.

Faith Organizations

Faith organizations, such as houses of worship and affiliated bodies, have historically been the groups most involved in assisting prisoners reenter their communities.

- Reach out to multiple faith communities, including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other groups invested in the issue of prisoner reentry.
- Create a unique system for communicating with faith leaders and members to facilitate their participation.
- Anticipate and address the faith organization's concerns about participating in a reentry program, including issues such as costs, time commitment, or safety.
- Provide ongoing training and support through orientation, information, and time for questions.
- Allow faith organizations to participate in the creation of the program, rather than asking them simply to sign on to a previously created program. This will give them a greater investment and facilitate a lengthier commitment.
- Recruit mentors from houses of worship and provide extensive training on how to differentiate between counseling and proselytizing.

Employers

Relationships with employers can sometimes be the most difficult to develop, but are some of the most important in reducing recidivism.

- Treat employers as customers.
- Cultivate relationships with local employers in high-need labor areas, especially those that will provide a living wage and opportunities for advancement.
- Break down reluctance to hire ex-prisoners, including giving employers access to case files, giving them the ability to rule out anyone convicted of a certain crime (while considering mitigating circumstances), and providing guarantees if an employee does not fulfill his or her terms of employment.
- Sell the program as good for business, in that employers can: gain opportunities for tax deductions; help lower crime and recidivism in the communities where their businesses operate; save money on fees paid to temporary employment agencies; gain a dedicated employee who has been prescreened for drugs, fully assessed and oriented,

and with comprehensive case management.

- Maintain relationships with employers through cards, calls, and personal visits.

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Context

Ready4Work was a three-year national demonstration carried out in 11 cities around the country, where lead agencies built partnerships among local faith, justice, business, and social service organizations. Together the sites enrolled 4,500 formerly incarcerated individuals, who each received services for up to one year.

Research has shown that ex-prisoners who obtain steady jobs and develop social bonds have much lower recidivism rates, but many find it difficult to obtain stable employment and establish positive relationships.

Thus, Ready4Work aimed to provide support in both arenas. Services consisted of employment-readiness training, job placement, and intensive case management, including referrals for housing, health care, drug treatment and other programs. Ready4Work also involved a unique mentoring component, the theory being that mentors may help ease ex-prisoners' reentry by providing both emotional and practical support.

The lead agencies at six of the sites were faith-based organizations; at three other sites, they were secular nonprofits. A mayor's office and a for-profit entity headed up operations in the remaining two cities. Across the sites, Ready4Work's cost per participant/per year of service was approximately \$4,500.

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Outcome

Ready4Work participants had success both in finding jobs and remaining employed. Almost 60 percent of all participants held a job for at least one month while they remained in the program. More than 40 percent-and more than 60 percent of enrollees who ever found a job-remained employed for at least three consecutive months during the program. And almost a third of all participants managed to remain employed for six consecutive months. These accomplishments are impressive given the many barriers these ex-prisoners face.

Mentoring-particularly one-to-one mentoring-may have played a role in helping these participants find jobs. Enrollees who took part in one-to-one mentoring were more than twice as likely to find jobs as participants who had never been mentored. Mentoring was also associated with helping enrollees remain employed.

According to incarceration records available for 8 of the 11 Ready4Work sites, recidivism rates among participants were considerably lower than those reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) for a nationally representative population of ex-offenders. Just 1.9 percent of Ready4Work participants returned to state prison with a new offense within six months of their release (compared with 5 percent nationally), and only 5 percent did so within one year (compared with 10.4 percent nationally).

BJS data on a group of ex-prisoners more similar to Ready4Work participants-18- to 34-year-old, African American, nonviolent felons-provides a more striking comparison. Just 2.4 percent of African American felons participating in Ready4Work returned to state prison with a new offense within six months, and 6.3 percent did so within one year. These rates are 52 to 62 percent lower than those for the subsample of ex-offenders provided by BJS.

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Keywords

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