



THE COMMUNITY
RESTORATIVE
JUSTICE CENTER

Strengthening Reentry Services for Incarcerated Individuals

Improving Reentry Services for incarcerated individuals can result in decreased recidivism, increased community safety, and more meaningful, pro-social connections for reentering individuals. Following are some suggested proposals that could increase the likelihood that a formerly incarcerated person would be able to access employment upon release and find the supports needed within their communities that are needed to sustain their ongoing success on furlough, probation or parole.

Apprenticeship Opportunities while Incarcerated

If the appropriate connections and permission could be negotiated between Dept. of Corrections, Dept. of Labor, Secretary of State's Office of Professional Regulation, Community High School of VT or other instructors and educational funders, apprenticeship possibilities could be embedded within the correctional facilities. Inmates can currently access certain employment or training opportunities while incarcerated, but few result in any type of formal certification or licensure.

There are several types of apprenticeship programs that could be initiated and supervised while an individual is incarcerated which could result in real-world licensure and employment possibilities upon release from incarceration:

Tattoo Licensure

Currently, tattooing is prohibited in correctional facilities. If an inmate is caught with tattoo equipment or receiving a tattoo, this can result in disciplinary action. If tattooing were instituted as a legal, controlled practice, those who are truly skilled in this area could receive licensure while incarcerated and be able to work for a tattoo shop or open their own practice upon release.

Concerns	Solutions
Keeping equipment secure inside the facility	Equipment would be brought in and brought out by the instructor
Screening to identify people with true artistic ability and skill	Instructor would screen and select candidates
Gang signs or other inappropriate tattoos applied	DOC would have ultimate screening and approval of tattoos applied
Spread of infectious disease	All apprentices would take/pass the necessary Infection Control Practices class
Benefits	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tattoos would be accessible, free, and applied in a safe manner with better quality. This would reduce the possibility of spread of infectious disease from using homemade tattoo guns with no gloves or appropriate sterilization measures. • Cover ups for existing inappropriate or gang-related tattoos could be offered to inmate, which would help boost their employability upon release. • Apprentices would have willing participants at hand. 	

Cosmetology

The same space that would be created for a tattoo shop could also be utilized for a hair salon or barber shop. Inmates are currently offered the opportunity to give haircuts as a paid position, but without any formal training. They could, once again, work on the classroom component through Community High School and the apprenticeship hours under the tutelage of a licensed instructor. Many of the benefits would be the same as those mentioned above, providing healthy, safe hygiene practices in an environment where grooming is not currently emphasized.

Vocational/Technical Training

In the two counties that are served by our Justice Center – Caledonia and Essex – there is a demand for skilled workers in a number of trades including but not limited to:

- CNC Machine Operators
- Agricultural Workers (dairy and produce)

- Woodworking laborers

There is already a movement to make college courses available to inmates on a limited basis. Vocational/technical training is equally important and could be made possible on the grounds of the facility in many cases. For example, the Northeast Correctional Complex once boasted a huge garden and greenhouse. The greenhouse is currently being used for storage. One of our volunteers, who is a Master Gardener and homesteader offered to provide classes to teach inmates how to grow their own food while also reinstating the garden. The garden could provide locally sourced produce, not only for use by the facility, but which would also be sold to local restaurants. This offer was declined because the facility said they had to use the greenhouse for storage and could not make it available for its intended use.

Another example of how vocational training could be embedded would be to follow the example of the prison in Thomaston, Maine. Their prison has a woodworking program that takes place inside the facility where inmates learn to make cutting boards, children's toys, games and furniture. They sell all of the items out of a store front in Thomaston. The inmates are granted release to work in the store. They learn every aspect of what it takes to run a commercial enterprise such as pricing of materials, inventory, cash register operation, and customer service. DOC employees oversee the operation in the store and work alongside the inmates. This builds trust and camaraderie between the inmates and the correctional officers. The inmates are given a written reference upon release from incarceration. The proceeds from the sale of their products completely pays for the store operation and inmates are given valuable, transferable work skills. More importantly, they feel a sense of pride from working in the store, greeting customers, and receiving feedback about their excellent products. The Northeast Correctional Complex is well suited to run a business such as this out of their underutilized wood shop and their products could be sold out of one of the many vacant store fronts on St. Johnsbury's main street.

References

Inmates who are working in our jails work for very little pay. It has been stated that the job should be reward in itself because they are paid. A typical job, such as spending 8 hours in the kitchen cooking and cleaning pays approximately \$2/day. Working outside in the garden at the

Northwest Regional facility yields \$5/day. This provides for some commissary or some release money if the inmate is able to save money.

It has been the Department's policy that DOC facility staff are not allowed to write written references for inmates upon release. A written reference can sometimes be the key to a released individual securing employment. If an inmate carries out their duties in a professional way, they should be granted a written reference upon release. There is no cost associated with this effort.

Housing

Lack of housing for individuals with criminal backgrounds is a critical issues. Facility caseworkers, DOC field officers, and Reentry Coordinators, as well as inmates themselves, struggle to find housing. At present, there are dozens of inmates currently incarcerated simply for a lack of housing. From inside a cell, these individuals face the daunting task of trying to locate an apartment or shared living situation without the benefits of having income; having the ability to see a landlord face to face; or to use restorative methods to repair damaged past rental histories.

On rare occasions, DOC offers release money to certain individuals to assist them to move into their own apartment and to cover several months of rent. The list of landlords who will accept this type of payment arrangement is short.

The average cost to incarcerate one individual is roughly \$60,000 for a male and \$80,000 per female in the State of Vermont. According to RentData.org, the average Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a one-bedroom apartment in Vermont ranges from just under \$700 in Orleans County (lowest) to more just over \$900 in Chittenden County (highest), with no utilities included. If DOC were to guarantee six months of payment to a landlord under a strict lease agreement, costs to support a reentering person at the rental rates above would range from roughly \$4200 to \$5400. This six-month period would give the reentering person time to obtain needed work documents if they don't have them; conduct a thorough job search or obtain job skills training and education; complete programming; find and connect with support services and resources necessary to stabilize their housing.

Liability/Worker's Compensation Access for Reentry Coordinators

In my past roles as a Reach Up Case Manager and VocRehab Counselor, I routinely connected Reach Up participants to work experiences and work placements. Participants' liability insurance and worker's compensation was covered by the State of Vermont. When Creative Workforce Solutions came into effect, the VT Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation (VABIR) gained access to this specialized insurance coverage through their employment consultants who provide worksite development for Reach Up and VocRehab clients.

Not all reentering individuals are eligible for VocRehab or Reach Up services. Those that are, may have to wait for weeks to months to be connected to work experiences or job placements. Reentry Coordinators could benefit from access to the same type of insurance coverage for the individuals on our case loads in order to expedite placements for returning offenders. In some cases, work experiences could be established prior to the person's release so they would be in a placement at the time of release.

Many releasing individuals have treatment group fees, programming costs, license reinstatement fees, supervision fees and restitution that they are due immediately upon release. When an offender cannot meet these costs, they may receive a violation or, in extreme cases, return to incarceration. Work experiences can provide a way for individuals to begin meeting these costs right away. These limited work experiences can also often lead to full-time employment.

Restorative Practices

As a Reentry Coordinator, I facilitate Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA). COSA provides an opportunity for referred individuals to meet with a trained team of community volunteers to work toward the primary goals of COSA:

- Identifying who was harmed by the core member's actions.
- Identifying and implementing ways to repair the harm to victims and the community.
- Holding the core member accountable for past and present behaviors, while seeking to develop more positive behaviors and safe decision-making ability.

- Connecting core members to the community is meaningful, pro-social ways; deep connection with individuals and communities is key to reducing recidivism.

There are so many individuals who could benefit from a COSA, but capacity is lacking. There are not enough Reentry Coordinators or volunteers to meet every need. Research has shown that individuals who are offered a COSA show a statistically significant decrease in recidivism over those who cannot access this process (see Dr. Fox's report).

COSA is a simple process that yields complex results. Core members often report that they experience higher self-esteem and confidence, feel more open to talk about their past and present thinking and behavior, and most importantly build trust and healthier relationships when they have the opportunity to have a COSA.

With no funding to expand the number of Reentry Coordinators, I would suggest that there may be ways to teach the COSA model to inmates so that they could run circles in the facility prior to release. These circles could perhaps be facilitated by Reentry Coordinators if time permits, or by facility staff who wish to learn the process. Ideally, community capacity should be expanded to offer COSA post-release. In keeping with fidelity to the model, COSA works best when the community is directly involved and core members are making direct connections in the community they return to upon release.

Respectfully submitted,

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