Policy Breakout: Improving the Reentry Process and Reducing Offender Recidivism

Background
The successful reentry of prisoners to society is a critical public safety issue and requires more than supervision by a parole officer to ensure success. Successful reentry reduces recidivism and saves public resources. However, many former inmates return to the community with limited education, poor employment skills, substance use disorders, and other deficits that are well known risk factors for reoffending. Without treatment and assistance during the transition to community life, many offenders are likely to return to prison.

Presented below are three reentry planning and development guides, followed by several programs and practices that are effective at reducing recidivism, facilitating desistance, and promoting successful reentry.

Planning and Development Guides

The National Re-Entry Policy Council Principles and Recommendations for Re-Entry Planning and Development
The National Re-Entry Policy Council developed a guide for states and other jurisdictions interested in pursuing improvements for prisoner reentry (www.reentrypolicy.org). The 2003 Re-Entry Policy Council Report includes a series of “policy statements” and recommendations to guide the reentry planning and development process and can be used to develop state-specific approaches to improve prisoner reentry.

The National Institute of Corrections’ Transition from Prison to Community (TPC) Model
The National Institute of Corrections’ TPC Model (http://nicic.gov/tpcmodel), consisting of three phases and seven decision points, helps unravel the complexity of the reentry process by providing states guidance for the improvement and expansion of existing policies and the adoption of new approaches that facilitate successful reentry.

The Louisiana Prisoner Reentry Initiative Framework
Building upon the policy statements of the Re-Entry Policy Council Report as well as the work being done in several states, the Louisiana Prisoner Reentry Initiative Framework (Framework) provides guidance for specific justice policies and practices to improve prisoner reentry. The Framework is presented within the context of the overarching policy and practice considerations of Transition Accountability Planning, Case Management, and Evidence-Based Practices—which must be in place to change returning citizens’ behavior.

Programs and Practices

Education and Vocational Programs
Rigorous studies of educational and vocational programs in prisons have found lower recidivism rates for program participants and positive returns on investment (ROIs). MacKenzie (2006), for example, found that on average, adult basic education and GED programs reduced recidivism by 9 percentage points, while post-secondary education programs reduced recidivism by 13 percentage points. Similarly, a Washington State Institute for Public Policy study found that community-based employment programs and prison-based general education and vocational training all reduced recidivism and produced positive ROIs.
Improving Access to Health Systems and Improving Services and Supports for Family Members of Prisoners

In 2003, the Council of State Governments Re-Entry Policy Council issued a comprehensive report presenting a series of principles and recommendations that should underpin a reentry initiative. The report underscored the importance of improving access to physical health care systems, and improving the availability of services and supports for family members.5

Substance Use Disorder Treatment

The links between substance use and crime are well documented. Research has produced clear and convincing evidence that substance use disorder treatment reduces alcohol and drug use and crime. Moreover, research has consistently shown that offenders ordered to enter treatment do as well as those who enter treatment voluntarily.

Treatment and Other Services for Offenders with Mental Illness (OMIs)

Successful reentry is a major challenge for offenders with mental illness. Treatment services are critical for successful reentry of OMIs to the community. These include but are not limited to: Integrated Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment, Pharmacotherapy/Medication-Assistance Treatment (MAT), and Supported Employment and Housing. Each of these are described in further detail in the NCJRP Issue Brief on Evidence Based Practices for Offenders with Mental Illness.

Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions (CBT)

Reviews examining the effectiveness of correctional interventions consistently report that cognitive-behavioral programs are effective at reducing recidivism. CBT programs have been used in institutional and community settings, and administered independently or as part of a multi-component intervention.6 Several evidence-based CBT programs have been used with offenders across the country, including Moral Reconation Therapy®, Thinking for a Change, and Aggression Replacement Training®.

Day Reporting Centers (DRCs)

Day reporting Centers (DRCs) provide a community-based alternative to incarceration for many types of offenders, including probationers, parolees and pre-trial detainees. Offenders are required to report, usually daily, to a specified and central location for both for supervision and services. DRCs services include substance use disorder treatment, employment assistance, education and life skills training.

Flash Incarceration

Flash incarceration is the use of a brief period of incarceration – usually a brief jail term – as a sanction for a technical violation. The period of incarceration may be as little as a few days, as the focus is on the swiftness and certainty of the sanction, rather than its duration.

Reentry Courts (The Harlem Parole Reentry Court)

Reentry courts are specialized courts that are designed to reduce the recidivism of ex-offenders and facilitate their reentry to the community. The Harlem Parole Reentry Court in New York, NY, engages parolees for 6-9 months and has several core elements: (1) pre-release engagement, assessment and reentry planning; (2) active judicial oversight; (3) coordination of support services; (4) graduated and parsimonious sanctions; and (5) positive incentives for success.7 A rigorous evaluation conducted by the Center for Court Innovation found that this reentry court model reduced recidivism for program participants and helped parolees succeed in areas such as employment and education, leading to positive outcomes for program participants, their families, and the community.8
Structured and Graduated Sanctions for Technical Violations

Structured and graduated sanctions are another approach being used to respond to technical violations in several states. This approach typically involves a graduated continuum of responses to technical violations that increase in severity with the violation behavior, but that are proportional to the violation and the reoffending risk presented by the offender. Structured sanctions may also include guidelines for reducing supervision levels or otherwise providing incentives and positive reinforcement for appropriate and law abiding behavior.

2 Ibid.
8 Ibid.