

OFFENDER REENTRY PROGRAMS PROVIDE SOLUTIONS FOR A SAFER COMMUNITY

by

Gerald R. Hinzman

Director

Sixth Judicial District Department
of Correctional Services
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

The Reentry Challenge

When thinking about offenders doing time in prison, we must also be thinking about returning them back to the community in such a way that they are less likely to commit new crimes and, more importantly, so they do not create new victims. Therefore we must plan for their release mindful of good cognitive programming, evidenced based practices, and effective accountability.

Rather than letting someone merely walk out the door of the prison, we need to develop a good transition model. Proper assessments and appropriate treatment must be matched with the proper level of supervision. As stated previously during this conference, the public expects us to provide effective treatment for a safe release.

This will most often include some role in assisting with reunification with the family, appropriate living arrangements, and employment. In each of those instances, this activity should be designed to connect the returning offender with pro-social support groups.

As an example, if you allow a returning offender to seek any employment without thoughtful consideration, they may go back to hanging around with the same people they always got into trouble with.

Designing a Good Reentry Program

What would an example of a good Reentry Program look like? First there should be recognition of the special population to be addressed with the program. It could be sex offenders, offenders with mental health issues, or hard core criminals who do not want to change. It could be less serious offenders.

Next those within the selected group should be screened for appropriateness using effective assessment tools to determine if they can succeed. There must be good cooperation between prison counselors and the community reentry team to ensure a smooth transition from prison to the community.

Program Components: Once selected into the reentry program the offender should be involved in a program with components similar to the following:

- A reentry meeting to welcome the offender back and provide an overview of the resources available to them (Welcome And Resource Notification, sometimes called “Lever Pulling”).
- Strict offender accountability is enforced to go hand and hand with effective treatment.
- A citizens advisory board helps the transition process through community reentry.
- An administrative judge enforces conditions and ensures compliance with treatment.
- The success of the program hinges upon a good array of proven treatment and sanction options.

WARN Meetings for Reentry: Welcome And Resource Notification (WARN) meetings permit the offender to meet members of the community who will be working them as they reenter the community. The meetings inform them of the resources and programs available and establish the accountability that will be required.

- The program can be designed for the most prolific offenders, mental health reentry, sex offenders, or other specified offenders.
- There is participation by faith community, prosecutors, law enforcement, victims, neighborhoods, treatment providers, and reentry staff.
- Employment services and housing are critical.

High Risk Unit for Effective Accountability: The High Risk Unit is an effectively trained group of officers who will enforce the conditions of the reentry program and ensure accountability. This group of officers works hand and hand with the treatment staff.

- Sworn and certified peace officers.
- Full arrest powers.
- Expanded search authority in probation and parole agreements.
- Arrest for gun and drug cases and refer for prosecution.

Making Reentry Work

Building on the work of the Reinventing Probation Council of the Manhattan Institute, which produced the seminal monograph *“Transforming Probation through Leadership: The “Broken Windows” Model*, a credible reentry program should embrace seven key strategies.

Strategy 1 – Public Safety Must Come First: The primary concern of the public is to be free of crime. If where they live, work, or visit is not free of crime, the public will not feel safe. Even if the overall crime rate is low, it will not matter to those who live with crime on a daily basis.

Public safety itself must be redefined to include fewer victims. To say our goals are to produce outcomes that reduce crime and reduce recidivism places our focus too narrowly. By adopting short-sighted outcomes we only have to get the offender through our program and a short period beyond (depending on how recidivism is defined). To adopt an outcome of having fewer victims in the community we must think through a longer term approach. In doing so, we will also reduce crime and reduce recidivism as well.

Strategy 2 – Supervise Offenders in the Neighborhood, Not the Office: A primary goal of neighborhood based supervision is increase public safety in the neighborhood by increasing social and economic capital there. For example, if a reentry program operates out of a community center, its presence helps stabilize the neighborhood. With stabilization, other social agencies can also co-locate and deliver services. This in turn creates an aura of security in the neighborhood and attracts economic development and community revitalization.

- Rethink the “fortress” mentality and move operations to the field; create safe havens or resource centers.
- Effective supervision is community-centered supervision.
- The office is the “base” of supervision, while the community should be the “place” of supervision.
- Officers must draw on informal sources of neighborhood and community social control.

Strategy 3 – Rationally Allocate Scarce Resources: Use good assessment tools to make decisions. Failure to make good placement decisions will result in putting offenders in programs that do not match, thereby wasting valuable and scarce resource that could be more effectively utilized:

- Information-driven decision making is critical. Use a good data base to make decisions about options for treatment and supervision.
- Accurate knowledge about offenders is vital. Use good assessments.

Make certain that the program is located where the need is. Do not just place a program out in the field for the sake of doing so:

- Resources and staff are allocated to places where risks to public safety are the greatest.
- Requires focus where community and victim vulnerabilities are the greatest.
- Threats offenders pose to public safety are local in nature.

Strategy 4 – Provide for Strong Enforcement of Reentry Conditions and a Quick Response to Violations: Make certain there is good program validity. Treatment is achieved through good accountability. There must be an effective response to violating behaviors.

- Need for aggressive surveillance and control for offenders deemed a threat to public safety.
- Provision of swift, timely, and proportionate responses to all violations of conditions.
- Graduated sanctions provide a continuum of responses short of revocation.
- Demanding enforcement of offender accountability for compliance with conditions equates to sound practice.

Strategy 5 – Develop Partners in the Community: It is important to develop community partners who can effectively help with the reentry process. Examples of good partners are people who will be able to interact with the ex-offender once he is released from supervision but still needs the guidance and help of people in the community. Mentoring, mental health, and employment are some examples.

- Partnerships and collaboration beyond traditional boundaries recognizes community expertise.
- Augments the limited operational capacity of reentry programs to effect offender change.
- Recognizes that limited leverage of probation can be enhanced by drawing on “social capital” furnished by communities.
- Many partners: law enforcement, human services, mental health, faith-based, local citizen groups, victims’ groups, and neighborhood associations.

Strategy 6 – Establish Performance-Based Initiatives: These initiatives can be developed from the outcomes that have been established. Often broad-based outcomes like reducing recidivism, fewer victims, etc., are difficult to measure in the short run. Intermediate outcomes can be helpful measures in such cases. For example, measuring how many offenders are employed in pro-social work environments is an intermediate outcome. How many offenders are involved in treatment and the rate of successful program completion can be intermediate outcomes.

- Commitment here requires effective programming, evidence-based practices, and strong program design/implementation.
- Public safety means more than recidivism reduction, while achieving this outcome is important, one must think fewer victims.
- Programming must draw on “what works” and principles that drive effective correctional programming.
- Risk classification, criminogenic needs and responsivity are critical.

- Programmatic interventions must connect offenders to environments that have pro-social supports and structure.
- Rehabilitative programming grounded in evidence-based practices is one component of reentry programming.

Strategy 7 – Exercise Strong Leadership: We must recognize the difference between leadership and management. Leadership conceptualizes new ideas and direction. Leadership sets course or direction for the agency and determines what is not negotiable. Leadership is at the table developing and renewing vision and trends at the national level. Leadership develops a strong, committed management team.

Management questions and explores new concepts, particularly for their department. Management contributes to developing new programs and sets direction. Management develops the action plan and the implementation plan for programs. Management sets outcome measures and uses data to ensure program fidelity. Management buys into the course of action set by leaders. Therefore:

- Leadership is, in the final analysis, the most important element of the strategy. Leaders must be willing to be “risk-takers” in re-designing their agencies.
- Must provide a framework to meet the needs of staff and increase their level of understanding.
- Must seek tangible outcomes that matter to the community.
- Must “embrace accountability” for producing results that contribute to public safety.
- Leaders and practitioners must consider how their vision and actions create public value.

Listening to My Mother’s Advise

My Mother had eight children. We would always ask her which of us she loved the most. She always said she loved the child who needed her most at the time. We should apply our scarce resources the same way. When folks are ready to change, it makes sense that we should be prepared to show them the way to change. We should have the resources in place to do so.

Ex-Offenders have basic needs that must be met for them to exist:

- Offenders need a place where they can live with their family.
- A job to sustain them.
- Access to treatment and learning.
- Restoration of basic rights.

Offenders usually come from families where there exists patterns of criminality. They do not believe they have a chance to succeed and generally do

not believe that anyone really cares if they do succeed. As young adults they have a chip on their shoulder and are angry. If asked why they are angry they probably could not tell you why. It is an attitude passed down from one generation to the next. It is something called generational rage. This is why effective programming, mentoring, and pro-social support systems are so important to the reentry process.

Conclusion

At the end of the day it is all about having fewer victims. We cannot build our way out of a prison crisis and it does not make sense to try to. Let's lock up those we are afraid of, but return them mindful of public safety and fewer victims. Give our citizens what they asked for. Do not muddy the water with bad public policy. Use evidenced-based principles and programs for best results and reducing victimization. It is in our hands to make a better future.