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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Reentry & Reintegration: Rebuilding Relationships of Trust

By Margie J. Phelps, Director of Release Planning
Kansas Department of Corrections

If you have worked in corrections for more than a few years, you know the numbers. Nearly 600,000 offenders are released from prisons around America every year. In the double digits they return inside of a year, an alarming barometer of the pitfalls of release. Communities are uncomfortable about offenders returning to their old neighborhoods, even though they have served their sentence and paid their debt to society. A nagging uncertainty about whether the corrections system has changed their criminal thinking and behavior causes law enforcement, victims and service providers to be reluctant to reach out a helping hand.

For decades corrections has often worked in isolation from communities. Rather than dialogue together and wrestle with ways to open opportunities for those who commit crimes to reintegrate, regroup and regain a position in society, communities have preferred that corrections agencies quietly solve the problems themselves, and corrections professionals have been hesitant to ask the communities to get involved. The sometimes-crushing numbers of offenders entering the system gradually increased for so many years that the driving themes necessarily became containment and risk management.

Now we are starting to see that corrections cannot do this alone, and that every community in America is safer if a partnership is formed between key players in the neighborhood, the offenders and corrections workers. Law enforcement and probation and parole officers are beginning to share information and work together. Service providers in the communities are beginning to see the public-safety value of helping ensure that offenders' needs are met. Case managers all over the nation are starting to understand the significance of criminogenic issues and the value of risk reduction as a strategy as vital as

risk management. The importance of making a good fit between what the offender needs and what the community needs is starting to look like the way to do business.

In Kansas nearly 6000 offenders are released statewide each year. About 100 parole officers spread throughout the state are responsible for working with the 85 percent of releasing offenders who are under some form of community supervision. Corrections workers in Kansas are working diligently to make reentry management a priority and to collaborate with facility staff, treatment providers, law enforcement, community organizations, faith based volunteers and victim services to set in place an array of opportunities for those offenders who desire to become productive, law abiding members of their communities. Addressing the

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offender's ability to sustain employment long term, to find housing that is safe and appropriate, and to participate in treatment that is cognitive and responds to the changes in progress, have all become as important as monitoring the offender's movement and activities.

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Public Safety AND Successful Reentry

In the immediate future, the ability of a corrections agency to engage in evidence-based successful practices in reentry management and transitional planning will directly relate to whether that agency can fulfill its mission of public safety. Corrections leaders and professionals will find that communities will increase their quest for participation and demand to understand what strategies have proven to be successful in reducing the risk of offenders creating new victims in their neighborhoods. Of all the things they have in common – or not – about 98 percent of the people sitting in prison today have one shared attribute – they are getting out. It will not be an option to pretend they will not return to the house down the street; it will be impossible to ignore the issue in hopes it will go away; and it will not be practical to expect safer communities without everyone getting involved.

A key component of the future success of these efforts will be the offenders themselves. No initiative calculated to help offenders reestablish trust with their neighbors will ever succeed without recognizing that the centerpiece of the process is the offender him or herself. There is an aspect of returning to a community that has banished the person from the kingdom that no corrections worker will ever fully understand. This is that element of uncertainty, even fear that arises when the condemned comes home. The longer the offender is in prison, the more disconnected he or she will feel, and the greater the level of anxiety as the release date nears. The stigmatizing impact on the heart, mind and soul of being disenfranchised from the place where the offender was born and raised, or at least spent a significant part of his or her life, is not in reach of the imagination of mainstream America. No

matter how well intended the design, any case management strategy, reentry system, or plan of action that fails to acknowledge the psychosocial impact of prison will diminish the chances of success.

Successfully Navigating the Reentry Process

Ned Rollo's *99 Days and A Get Up* is a good starting place. Drawing on the actual experiences of hundreds of offenders who have faced the apprehension and exhilaration of leaving prison and going home, this book walks the offender through the process before and after that critical moment. In real-to-life language Rollo provides the releasing offender with a road map that will help him or her through the mental and emotional turmoil of the last days of incarceration and the first days of freedom. Recognizing the value of taking it one day at a time, the book brings light to the dark moments that must be conquered in order to succeed. And most important, it places the responsibility of rebuilding trust on the offender him or herself.

Any reentry planning that overlooks the emotional dynamics involved will fail to capture the hearts of the offenders. Any release planning that acts as though the point of release is just a procedure or process will exponentially miss the opportunity to change behavior, and even lives. The reality is that releasing from prison into a seemingly hostile community environment brings about doubts, misgivings, and a gray and uncertain feel about the future. But it doesn't have to stay that way. If release planning acknowledges this issue, and tackles

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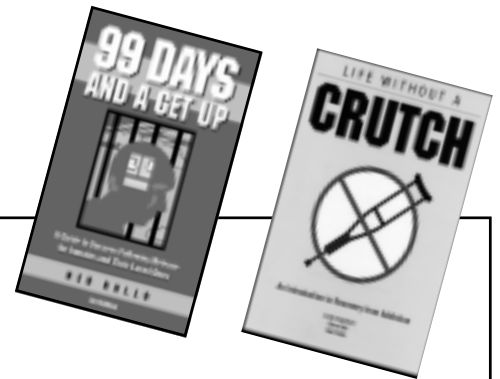
it head on, the questions can turn into determination, the misgivings can convert to goals, and the future can be taken on, step by step, with a sense of responsibility and hope that can sustain an offender through to success. Successful corrections work of the future will satellite around communities and offenders. The bringing together of these two unlikely partners to a strained relationship must be the goal of future strategic planning. One of the most important steps in the process will be enabling the offender to gain the confidence needed to face the breach of trust he or she brought about. And from there, it's essential that we find a way to provide practical guidance to every offender returning to the

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community about how he or she can slowly rebuild – trust, hope and a future. These are exciting times to be working in correc-

tions, and Ned Rollo has found a dynamic way to enrich the process with *99 Days*.

Margie J. Phelps, Director of Release Planning, started her career as a parole officer with the Kansas Department of Corrections and held various positions in operations, human resources and risk management; as well as Deputy Warden at the Lansing Correctional Facility (formerly Kansas State Penitentiary). Ms. Phelps is also an attorney with a private practice in Kansas. For more information you may contact her by phone at 785.296.3128 or 785.224.1817 or by e-mail at margiep77@cox.net or margiep@kdoc.dc.state.ks.us.



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