

Faith-Based Offender Reentry Programs in Washington DC

The CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership

By Leonard A. Sipes, Jr.

Many offenders are truly ready for change. Those of us in the profession have often heard offenders state that they “are sick and tired of being sick and tired.” We typically read that 50 percent of releases return to prison within three years. But 50 percent do not. Many professionals and policy-makers, including President Bush in his 2004 State of the Union speech, believe we can do better.

Successful offenders tell us that the stabilizing influence of family and caring community members made the difference. Job training, substance abuse counseling and other forms of help are important. But nothing is as powerful as the mother, father, wife, children or friend who provide the structure and support necessary to succeed. Many of us have struggled in our own lives and contemplated the lure of alcohol or other destructive behaviors as relief. When confronted with an angry and insistent mother, spouse or friend, we often find the courage to mend our ways. It's no different with offenders.

But who can repair the broken link between a returning offender and his or her family?

The Role of Faith Communities

It's often the church, mosque or synagogue that provides the bridge between the returning offender and family. Religious leaders and their congregations can act as intermediaries, coaches and sources of services. They can also influence the broader community's attitudes toward ex-offenders.

In many neighborhoods, few institutions are as powerful as the church, synagogue or mosque. These insti-

Religious organizations are long-standing and powerful community institutions. They often have histories with the families and the returning offender. That link often makes it easier for the individual to have new contacts that can move them to do well. Faith succeeds where other things often fail.

— Rev. Donald L. Isaac

Executive Director of the East of the River
Clergy-Police-Community Partnership in Washington, D.C. and
Chair of the CSOSA Faith Advisory Council

tutions speak for the community in ways that other organizations cannot. They often set moral standards. Their leaders become spokespersons for local issues. More important, these institutions provide structure, fellowship and a frame of reference for both identity and possibility. On the day-to-day level, they also provide necessary social assistance.

Law enforcement organizations have embraced “faith-based” solutions to problems for as long as cops have walked local beats. Officers dealing with verbally abusive husbands go to local ministers (as well as clinics) for intervention. They ask priests to arrange for drug counseling or Imams to mentor straying probationers. Many of us have asked religious leaders for assistance at one time or another. We do it because they have the resources. We do it because they have the moral authority, and they know how to use it. They know when to speak softly and encouragingly. They also know when to challenge a “knucklehead” because he desperately needs a wake-up call.

But the question is how to take the moral and practical authority of “faith” and apply it to meeting the needs of returning offenders. In Washington, D.C., we are taking the power of faith and moving it to a larger (and hopefully) more productive level.

The Provision of Resources

In Washington, D.C., there are approximately 140 trained faith-based volunteers operating under the umbrella of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA—D.C.’s federally funded parole and probation agency) who provide an array of services.

Returning offenders often have at least loose ties to a congregation. Volunteers within the church, mosque or synagogue can act as mentors or coaches. They can repair damaged relationships within families. They can provide housing (which is increasingly challenging as real estate costs go up in D.C.). Drug treatment can be offered. Clothing can be provided for job interviews. Meals are offered. People are willing to listen, care and provide fellowship.

But the most important thing may be acceptance by someone beyond another addict or gang member. The power of faith-based volunteers is that they bring credibility and the potential for a long-term, positive source of support and influence that government cannot provide during the time that a person may be on parole or supervised release.

Rev. Donald Isaac understands the unique power of faith to reach returning offenders. “Everyone returning home after years away has a need to feel connected with family, friends and community,” he says. “It’s the same for offenders. The faith community can be that connection when there are no others. We can be the family the offender is looking for.”

Religious bodies have resources at their immediate disposal, or they can refer offenders to other locations or services that are part of the larger denomination. As important as spirituality is, and it may be the key for many of us, the availability of the right resources at the right time can be crucial.

“The sacred, spiritual mission must be there to change. You have to have it. It may not mean a reliance on a religion, but faith is a necessary component of change. To make progress on the path to peace, belief in yourself is a crucial first step. Offenders see it work with others. They begin to believe. Spirituality gives hope beyond human needs.” Muhammad Karim, a founder of Path to Peace, Inc.

Well over 600,000 offenders are released from prison every year in the United States. Thousands more are released from jails. According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over two thirds are rearrested for felonies and serious misdemeanors within three years. These statistics have prompted many policymakers to see reentry and faith-based programs as necessary.

This is new ground. Members of the criminal justice community are increasingly seeking alliances with the faith community. We see the possibility of tapping into new support structures with rewarding possibilities.

The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency and Faith-Based Efforts

CSOSA is a federal, executive branch entity providing parole and probation services for Washington, D.C. CSOSA is a research-based, technologically oriented community corrections agency with a growing national reputation. CSOSA is a new federal agency, independent as of August of 2000.

The CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership was initiated in FY 2002 as an innovative and pragmatic collaboration to expand the range of support services available to offenders returning from incarceration. The program bridges the gap between prison and community by helping them get started with a new life.

But more important, we recognize that spirituality and the moral authority of religious organizations motivates some returnees in ways that conventional programs cannot. Combine this with supportive people and resources and one realizes that faith-based efforts can be a very important ingredient for crime prevention and stable communities.

Why do faith-based efforts work?

Rev. Stephen Tucker, pastor of New Commandant Baptist Church in northwest Washington and recipient of a grant from the Department of Justice’s Community Oriented Policing (COPS) office, recently hosted a two-day conference on how offenders relate to police and community. The sessions were designed to get offenders to understand law enforcement and police to understand offenders and their struggles to successfully reintegrate after prison. People from around the country participated.

A primary lesson? The deep distrust of police (or other government agencies) towards ex-offenders opens a door for faith-based efforts. The church can be a bridge to bring people together.

Rev. Tucker cites another reason why faith-based programs can be effective. “African-Americans are wedded to God and spirituality,” he says. We have to return to our history. Spirituality is part of our experience and our survival. It is the key to our future success.”

Evolution

During the early stages of the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership, mentoring has been the primary focus. The mentoring initiative links offenders with concerned members of the faith community who offer support, friendship, and assistance during the difficult period of re-entry. During the transition from prison to neighborhood, returning offenders can be overwhelmed by large and small problems.



Participating offenders are matched with a volunteer mentor from one of the participating faith-based institutions.

The philosophy of mentoring is to build strong moral values and provide positive role models for ex-offenders returning to our communities through coaching and spiritual guidance. Mentors also help identify linkages to faith-based resources that assist in the growth and development of mentees.

According to an in-house evaluation conducted from March, 2002 to March, 2005, CSOSA referred 212 offenders to the program and 411 individuals from the faith community participated in training designed to help them to help the offenders.

Where most mentoring programs offer one-on-one mentoring, the CSOSA/faith community mentoring program provides a group of supportive, positive mentors for each of the offenders. The group mentoring strategy allows the program to not only address what are often multiple needs of the offender, but the group also serves as an alternative for offenders who either lack a strong family support system or face negative-anti-social peer groups.

The evaluation found that the group mentoring approach has provided the alternative positive and supportive assistance that contribute to offenders' successful transition from prison to the community.

The mentoring initiative is a first step toward a city-wide network of faith-based services, including job training, substance abuse aftercare and support, transitional housing, family counseling, and other services.

Structure of the Partnership

Early in the initiative, an Advisory Council was selected by the participating clergy to maximize the participation of the faith community. Much of the Advisory Council's activity has centered on helping CSOSA achieve its goal

of denominational inclusiveness.

Three geographically based clusters were created using the District's ward boundaries. These divisions were based upon the distribution of offenders' residences, the location of participating faith organizations and the location of CSOSA field offices.

The faith community nominated a "lead institution" in each cluster. CSOSA prepared a formal contractual solicitation and made official selections in May of 2002. Approximately \$100,000 was provided to each cluster to cover administrative costs.

Each Lead Institution hired a cluster coordinator to function as the clergy's staff leader/liaison with CSOSA. Each cluster convenes meetings (at least monthly) to discuss experiences, opportunities and issues that need to be addressed to optimize the quality and synergy of this effort. The cluster coordinators meet with CSOSA staff on a monthly basis to review accomplishments and impediments.

Part of the faith strategy involves a successful video mentoring program with a federal prison in North Carolina in which over one thousand DC inmates are housed. In addition, CSOSA has used video conferencing at this facility to introduce re-entrants to their prospective mentors while they are still incarcerated. This has proven to be a workable vehicle to address the needs of re-entrants as they transition into release status. Many have had little or no contact with their families or the community during their period of confinement.

Involvement in this initiative has contributed to additional resources becoming available to two of the lead institutions. As noted above, New Commandment has received a COPS grant. Another lead institution, East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership, has received funding from the Department of Labor to implement a job readiness and placement program.

What Do Mentors Do?

During the transition from prison to community, returning offenders can be overwhelmed by both large and small problems—everything from getting a job to maintaining a residence to negotiating public transportation. Mentors work with CSOSA's Community Supervision Officers to address some of these problems. Most importantly, mentors provide individual support and guidance. They let the offender know that the community is invested in their success.

Mentors help in a variety of ways, such as:

- Coaching in job interview skills.
- Locating a clothing bank to obtain appropriate clothes for work.
- Introducing the offender to a faith institution's support services and leisure activities.
- Helping the offender to develop independent living skills, such as budgeting or shopping.
- Helping the offender negotiate changes in his or her relationships with family and loved ones.

How Are Mentors Selected?

In order to become a mentor, volunteers must meet certain criteria. They:

- Must be affiliated with a participating faith institution. This does not have to be the house of worship to which the mentor belongs. If an individual wants to become a mentor but his or her church is not a partnership participant, another institution will sponsor the mentor.
- Must complete an application and a personal interview with the Cluster Coordinator.
- Must complete 12 hours of initial training.
- Must be willing to commit at least two hours per week, and must be willing to stay with the program for six months.

Conclusion

The CSOSA Faith Community Partnership is an exciting endeavor that will hopefully result in reduced recidivism and safer communities. With large numbers of offenders in need, the task of coordination and cooperation has been challenging. The program is continuously evolving.

Churches, mosques and synagogues can provide leadership, resources and strategies in a coordinated and focused way that we in government find difficult to offer. They bring credibility, long-term support, family, community connections and faith.

Community supervision can provide a structure of accountability, drug treatment, job placement assistance, and more. The faith community can provide the essence of what it means to be a complete human being. Both are necessary. ★



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