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# Missouri Makes Its Move Toward a New Reentry Philosophy

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One of the most pressing and complex changes facing state government in Missouri and elsewhere across the nation today is the reintegration of adult offenders from prison back into the community. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of all men and women committed to Missouri prisons will someday be released from incarceration. In fiscal year 2005, our releases totaled 20,684 individuals. It is in everyone's best interest that released offenders reenter society safely and live as productive, law-abiding, and self-sufficient citizens. The Missouri corrections system is making major progress toward this goal through internal changes and external partnerships, as approached through the Transition from Prison to the Community (TPC) model being advanced by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC).

Missouri adopted this innovative transition model in 2002 as a philosophical framework for improving offender transition processes. The TPC approach proposes that states can increase public safety, close the revolving door of incarceration, diminish new victimization, and break the cycle of offenders' children becoming the next generation of offenders. This can be accomplished by forming strategic and tactical partnerships to integrate and coordinate basic policies for providing services to former inmates, and by sustaining and nurturing those partnerships and policies over time.

A milestone in Missouri's transition was reached on September 21, 2005, when Governor Matt Blunt signed Executive Order 05-33 establishing a permanent interagency Missouri Reentry Process (MRP) Steering Team. The team is comprised of senior leaders from the Departments of Corrections, Mental Health, Social Services, Health and Senior Services, Economic Development, Elementary and Secondary Education, and Revenue, and from the Office of the State Courts Administrator. Other members represent stakeholder groups including crime victims, ex-offenders, law enforcement, treatment providers, and the faith-based community.

The Executive Order defines the mission of the MRP Steering Team as the successful integration of offender reentry principles and practices within state agencies and communities, resulting in partnerships that enhance offender self-sufficiency, reduce re-incarceration, and improve public safety.

## **Preparing for Change**

The state-level MRP Steering Team initially identified factors that are highly correlated with successful transition or reduced recidivism, and it developed

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strategies to address these factors, based on an analysis of Missouri quantitative and qualitative baseline data.

Locally established MRP steering teams have expanded on this work by identifying specific areas of need and strategies for response at the local level to address the particular barriers in each community. Missouri has established 33 MRP Community Steering Teams (CSTs) across the state. They are comprised of representatives from community organizations, local and state agencies, faith-based organizations, the Missouri Department of Probation and Parole, local law enforcement, the judiciary, local businesses, treatment providers, victims, ex-offenders, and correctional staff. Each CST collaborates on the application of Missouri reentry principles in its community. Their goal is to identify the needs of offenders in their communities and partner to meet those needs, making their community stronger in the effort.

The local reentry CSTs have been established in collaboration with Missouri's existing framework of Community Partnerships. There are 21 of these independent, non-profit organizations throughout the state. Each Community Partnership is governed by the state's Family and Community Trust (FACT), a private/public Board, and is funded through the state Department of Social Services.

### **Addressing Barriers to Success**

A wide range of service enhancements have been put in place through alliances between state agencies and between state and local agencies, organizations, and service providers.

**Employment.** Unemployment and underemployment are the leading factors behind offenders being returned to prison. Missouri data show that offenders who do not find full-time employment upon release are much more likely to return to prison than those who do. Employment provides adequate income that is critical to the offender's overall stability in the community.

Several strategies have been implemented to address the issue of employment.

- ◆ Offenders are receiving employability skills/life skills programming. An evidence-based, 10- to 12-week program covers a wide variety of topics that people typically encounter in their daily lives. Offenders learn to assess their job skills and abilities, complete employment applications, and interview for jobs. Sessions also cover family relationships, self-esteem, marriage, parenting, budgeting, and other issues
- ◆ The Department of Corrections (DOC) and the Division of Workforce Development (DWD) are working together to help offenders obtain employment soon after release, thereby reducing recidivism rates and saving taxpayers' dollars. Before release, all offenders are screened for services offered at local one-stop Career Centers, such as Parent's Fair Share, the

Career Assistance Program, and veterans' services. Offenders are registered in the DWD's "Great Hires" system and have a scheduled appointment with a Career Center before their release from incarceration.

- ◆ The DOC and DWD have initiated a public information program that emphasizes the benefits of hiring ex-offenders. A video and various other materials describing the Missouri Reentry Process are being shared with the community, and a brochure on employing ex-offenders has been developed to educate prospective employers about the benefits of hiring former inmates. Benefits of hiring ex-offenders include the work opportunity tax credit, which is available to employers that hire targeted groups of workers, including ex-offenders. In addition, there is the Federal Bonding Program, which provides bonding insurance to employers willing to hire certain high-risk applicants who may otherwise be denied coverage from commercial bond carriers. The bonds protect employers against theft, forgery, larceny, and embezzlement.
- ◆ Because reentry into the labor market is one of the most challenging situations an ex-offender faces, the DOC has implemented institutional job fairs in collaboration with the DWD. The job fairs familiarize offenders who are approaching release with the types of employment opportunities available to them, and they expose potential employers to a skilled workforce pool they may not have considered previously.
- ◆ Ensuring that offenders have a Social Security card, a birth certificate, and a state-issued identification card when released from prison directly affects their ability to obtain employment quickly after their release. To do this, DOC staff help offenders verify their Social Security numbers through a procedure agreed to by the Social Security Administration. The DOC also has partnered with the Department of Revenue and the Department of Health and Senior Services to help offenders obtain a birth certificate and state identification card before their release.

**Substance abuse.** The DOC estimates that 75% of offenders in Missouri need substance abuse treatment services. Though substance abuse treatment is offered within correctional facilities, there is considerable variance from one facility to another in the types and quality of programs and services provided. Data show that when offenders leave a treatment setting and are linked with aftercare immediately upon release, they are less likely to return to prison.

In an effort to address the serious issue of substance abuse and aftercare, the following strategies have been implemented:

- ◆ The DOC and the Department of Mental Health, Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, are collaborating to revise the Code of State Regulations by placing a new emphasis on certification of institutional treatment programming, discharge planning, and continuity of care.

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- ◆ Community-based treatment programs now offer individualized programming that helps offenders succeed in both employment and substance abuse treatment, without one interfering with the other. Staff have been trained on the importance of flexibility in schedules between employment and treatment. Our staff as well as our treatment providers strive to ensure that offenders have a realistic schedule so they can become economically self-sufficient and also maintain their progress in the world of recovery.
  
  - ◆ A standardized substance abuse screening and assessment tool has been implemented for offenders in reception and diagnostic centers and in the community.

**Mental health.** More than 75% of Missouri offenders with serious mental health issues return to prison within 5 years of release. Although mental health care is offered within the institutions, our system has had poor coordination of care for transition from prison to the community. Without a well designed discharge planning process, offenders needing and/or receiving mental health services are at high risk of disruption of necessary services. Discharge planning begins early, and each offender's plan is continuously addressed and updated until he or she is discharged from community supervision or released. Proper discharge planning ensures better communication between the institution, field probation and parole staff, and community providers.

To address the serious risk of releasing offenders who have untreated mental health conditions, the following strategies have been implemented.

- ◆ In February 2005, the DOC finalized its new policy on mental health discharge planning. This policy established guidelines for preparing offenders with serious mental illness for discharge to the community.
  
- ◆ The DOC and the Department of Social Services are collaborating to help potentially eligible offenders apply for Medicaid 90 days prior to release. This ensures continuity of care for most persistently and chronically mentally ill and medically disabled offenders who are released from DOC custody.

Another issue in mental health care is the lack of standards of care for agencies or professionals who work with offenders, unless they are certified by the Department of Mental Health or contracted by the DOC. This creates variance in the quality of mental health services provided once released offenders enter the community. Specific elements with significant variation include the conditions under which information is shared, the level of involvement of field officers, processes for officers' outreach to and engagement with offenders' family members, use of assessments, protocols for treatment planning, methods of treatment evaluation, and discharge planning.

In response, the DOC and the Department of Mental Health collaborated in developing a set of guidelines for mental health and substance abuse treatment

professionals who provide clinical services to offenders under probation or parole field supervision. The guidelines also delineate expectations of probation and parole officers in the referral and treatment process.

**Education.** Approximately 55% of Missouri offenders without a high school diploma or GED return to prison. In an effort to promote educational advancement among inmates prior to release, the following strategies have been implemented.

- ◆ Research shows that praise is the single most powerful motivator for good behavior and achievement. Offenders participating in GED classes are provided an Academic Achievement Report every 30 days.
- ◆ Additional data show that offenders who raise their vocational skill level while in prison have a much lower return-to-prison rate in the first 5 years after release than those with no vocational skills. All Missouri Vocational Enterprises (MVE) programs are now classified as vocational training and have received accreditation from the U.S. Department of Labor.

**Veterans' assistance.** Making sure veterans are linked with available services can greatly improve their reintegration into our communities.

- ◆ The DOC formed a partnership with the Missouri Veterans Commission to ensure that incarcerated veterans statewide are aware of veterans' benefits and are able to receive assistance for a successful transition into the community. An Incarcerated Veterans Reentry Coordinator provides a presentation to incarcerated veterans during the transitional phase of their incarceration, meets with them to determine if they are eligible for benefits and services, and helps them complete necessary applications.

**Families.** Studies show that continued contact with family members during and after incarceration can reduce recidivism and foster integration into the community.

- ◆ The DOC is training staff who work in the visiting room on issues related to offender and family dynamics, family values, and the importance of family and pro-social relationships.
- ◆ The University of Missouri–Extension provides a program called “Building Strong Families,” which helps families identify and build on their strengths, face their challenges, and make informed choices.

Missouri offenders in prison and under community supervision report having 112,246 dependent children. A high percentage of offenders do not receive visits from their children.

- ◆ The DOC is piloting a Supportive Parent/Child Visitation (SPCV) Model for incarcerated parents, their children, and other family members at the Algoa

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Correctional Center and the Western Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center. SPCV focuses on healing and building positive relationships, pre-visit preparation, structured visits, and post-visit debriefings.

**Transportation.** Focus groups conducted with parolees revealed that transportation is another major issue for releasees, particularly in the rural areas of Missouri. The DOC and the local MRP Steering Teams continue to address this barrier.

- ◆ The DOC has partnered with the Missouri State Highway Patrol to allow offenders to take the written driver's license test at three correctional facilities. On release, offenders who have passed the written exam can go to the Department of Revenue to take the driving portion of the test.

## Preparing for Release

Three major innovations represent a new dynamic for offenders experiencing release from prison in Missouri.

**Transitional Housing Units.** The NIC transition model stresses the importance of pre-release planning conducted intensively in the 6 six months prior to an offender's release into the community. Eleven (11) of the DOC's institutions currently have a Transition Housing Unit (THU) within the correctional facility. The purpose of these units is to provide intense pre-release preparation with offenders who are within 6 months of their release date.

Pre-release preparation in the THUs addresses continuity of care for mental health, medical, and substance abuse treatment, employment search assistance, help with personal identification, exploration of faith-based links to the community, help with child support and child care arrangements, transportation plans, educational needs, family support, pro-social community participation, impact on victims, cognitive skills development, insurance, and any other needs identified by the staff and the offender. The offender is essentially given a "toolbox" with the tools needed to be successful and is held accountable for doing so.

**Transition Accountability Plans.** The DOC also has created and implemented a process for the development of a Transition Accountability Plan (TAP) for each offender being released. At first, TAPs were prepared only for offenders in the THUs, but their use is being expanded to all institutions. This document is used by all staff who work with offenders and is shared with partnering agencies, organizations, and treatment providers that serve released offenders. The TAP outlines the offender's assets and liabilities as well as outlining goals, self-defeating behaviors, and plans of action for the offender. The TAP is the primary document for case management, and it has increased communication greatly between institution and field staff within the DOC as well as with service providers in the community.

**Case management.** An Integrated Case Management Model is in the process of being designed for the DOC. As the DOC has moved into case planning, release

planning, and utilizing the Transition Accountability Plan, creating a case management model has become a priority. The model focuses on assessment, appropriate program referrals based on risk and need, and effective case planning. Motivational interviewing is included in the staff training plan for implementing the case management model.

### **Extending Connections**

Missouri's Community Partnerships have established themselves as the experts in the areas of community-based collaboration, facilitation, and coordination. Governor Blunt has endorsed the work of FACT and the Community Partnerships, calling the partnerships a good example of "system change" and stating that they are positioned to help state departments achieve their goals.

With the establishment of the CST reentry collaboration, the Community Partnerships were awarded a grant to hire 20 VISTA volunteers to further the progress of offender reentry in Missouri communities within several urban areas that together receive a high percentage of released offenders.

The goals of the VISTA project are:

- ◆ To build or maintain, and expand, an ex-offender Reentry Advisory Group associated with each of the participating Community Partnership sites;
- ◆ To make easily available the resources identified by each Reentry Advisory Group to all returning ex-offenders and the community in general;
- ◆ To coordinate the building of a network of community support for children and family members of those incarcerated, as well as for the returning ex-offenders themselves;
- ◆ To reduce employment barriers that confront returning ex-offenders by locating and promoting employment opportunities;
- ◆ To reduce or overcome barriers to mental health care that confront returning ex-offenders;
- ◆ To address education/training issues that confront returning ex-offenders by seeking out educational opportunities on their behalf; and
- ◆ To address housing/home plan issues that confront returning ex-offenders by seeking out potential housing sites and also by locating resources to assist those who are returning to live in the homes of family members.

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## Celebrating Partnership

It is very evident that the Missouri DOC would not have been able to progress to this degree without the partnerships established throughout the state. Collaboration has been the key to the success of the reentry initiative in Missouri.

Our hard work and that of our partners was rewarded recently when the Missouri Department of Corrections received the Service Excellence Award from Governor Blunt at the 2007 Governor's Conference on Economic Development. The award was specifically given to the Missouri Reentry Process as a result of its partnership with the Division of Workforce Development.

The Service Excellence Award was presented to the DOC to recognize collaborative excellence by a group of partners who have formed strategic alliances and designed initiatives that serve a unique population in the workforce system. The award also recognizes their efforts in developing non-traditional pipelines to enhance economic opportunities for hard-to-serve populations, including offenders.

**M**issouri will continue to identify strategies to resolve the barriers that confront offenders already under supervision in our communities as well as those just coming home from incarceration. Public safety is a top priority, and the State of Missouri recognizes that preparing offenders to be productive, employed, and law-abiding citizens is a win-win situation.

As suggested by NIC's TPC model, the Department of Corrections alone cannot effectively address all the issues offenders face when they are released into our communities. By forming strategic and tactical partnerships that enhance offender self-sufficiency, the Missouri Reentry Process Steering Team is making a difference in the number of successful offenders in our communities.

Missouri could not have continued the momentum without the assistance we received from the National Institute of Corrections and the Center for Effective Public Policy. These two organizations have provided technical assistance in every stage of our progress, and each has been a loyal contributor to this philosophical change in Missouri. ♦

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