



## PRISONER REENTRYSTAT: CREATING A SYSTEM THAT WORKS

BY RICHARD GREENWALD AND HOWARD HUSOCK

CitiesOnAHill.org

MEDIA INQUIRIES:

Kasia Zabawa

Press Officer,

Manhattan Institute

212-599-7000

More than 700,000 prisoners will be released in the United States this year. Tragically, some two-thirds will wind up back behind bars. Improving on that record is of crucial importance, especially to cities and the mayors who lead them. The numbers are telling. Nearly 40,000 people are released to Philadelphia annually from federal and state prisons or local jails. At any given time, approximately 12,500 parolees are under mandatory supervision in Baltimore. Dallas handles the release of 400-600 newly-released prisoners every month.

This wave of returning ex-offenders is a long-brewing side effect of the stepped-up law enforcement and tougher drug laws of the 1980s—imaginative reforms which helped bring down crime rates and contributed to the rebirth of cities such as New York.

Today, the challenge has changed: returning ex-offenders need the right assistance—and incentives—to avoid returning to lives of crime.

Cities are often expected to take on that job. In Newark, NJ, for instance, it is not unusual for ex-offenders to walk right in to city hall looking for help. Finding a job is almost always at the top of the list.

But cities typically have neither an independent agency with a mandate to handle prisoner reentry nor a budget to support such efforts. That's a symptom of a larger problem. In contrast with most government functions—from public health to public assistance—there is no one agency charged with, and accountable for, the job of helping ex-offenders become successful, law-abiding citizens. State corrections departments' authority and interest extends only as far as the prison gate. Parole and probation systems devote many of their resources to identifying new offenses (or technical violations) and returning those in their charge to jail. Police departments understandably focus on arresting law-breakers, not working with other agencies to share information about parolees. Social service providers operating under state or county contracts

are frequently evaluated by the quantity of services they provide, rather than whether the cases they manage result in positive outcomes. No one part of government ever seems to be in charge.

Increasingly, in cities like Newark, Jacksonville, and Chicago, mayors and municipal leaders, knowing that their cities are at risk if the reentry problem is not addressed, are taking steps to organize this disjointed non-system and to hold accountable those who are supposed to be steering former prisoners toward constructive lives. At the heart of this effort is the same strategy that made welfare reform effective in the 1990s: a focus on employment.

### THE EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

For every three ex-offenders released from jail or prison, two are rearrested, reconvicted, or reincarcerated within three years; many for violating technicalities of their parole or for past warrants for other crimes. A recent Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation study indicates that when people are working, or are engaged in reentry programs immediately upon return from prison, they are less likely to recidivate than those without support. It may seem logical to help ex-offenders first with an array of personal problems, whether substance abuse or mental health, but there's good reason to believe that getting a job—and getting one quickly—is the key to a better life for ex-offenders. Many newly-released prisoners want to work and are willing to work, but need to earn income quickly in order to make child support payments or satisfy other debts. Years—and, in some cases, decades—of disconnection from the labor market can demoralize ex-offenders, who often assume that they are unskilled, unemployable, or unlikely even to survive. Most do not qualify for public assistance. For some ex-offenders, the temptation of a quick buck is ever-present, making it all-the-more important that reentry programs provide a legal avenue for generating income.

How can cities—without authority and often without

funds—take the lead in making that happen?

Mayors may not run their own prisons or parole departments, but they can use the power of their offices to bring together and hold accountable those whose job it is to help ex-offenders. And they can use their bully pulpits to help bring down inappropriate legal barriers which keep ex-offenders who may want to start new lives out of the workforce.

#### THE NEWARK MODEL

Some 1,700 formerly incarcerated individuals return to the City of Newark from New Jersey state prison each year; 1,400 inmates return home to Newark from Essex County Jail each month. Some 4,500 more are under probation supervision. Even more return from federal prisons. By some estimates, a quarter of the city's 280,000 residents have, at one time or another, been "involved" with the criminal justice system.

Prior to the 2006 election of Mayor Cory A. Booker, there was no shortage of county, state, and federal agencies charged with helping Newark's ex-offenders. Drug treatment programs operated under contract to the local county government. The state Parole Board operated three secure "halfway house" facilities from which parolees were supposed to look for work; the New Jersey Department of Corrections operated more than eight. Yet, no one could say for sure how many ex-offenders actually got jobs, or even tried to find work. In part, this failure resulted from the absence of benchmarks to measure success (but was also related to the policy priorities of the mayor's office at the time). Though it may seem an obvious question in hindsight, no one at city hall ever thought to ask, "Are these programs working?"

Crime in the city stayed stubbornly high in 2006: 105 murders, 1,359 aggravated assaults, and 5,097 stolen cars.<sup>1</sup> Despite the presence of so many newly-released ex-offenders, Newark's city government played no direct role in assisting them. A federally funded "one-stop" workforce development center was notorious for its long waiting times, limited job leads, and unknown number of placements. And while it served ex-offenders, it did not offer any services specifically tailored to their needs.

Three years later, and despite the fact that the city has no budget of its own to do the job, dozens of ex-offenders are being seen each day by a network of agencies coordinated by the Mayor's Office of Reentry and its Newark Prisoner Reentry Initiative (NPRI). Since its inception, the program has served 300 people. The goal is to serve 1,340 by the end of December 2010.

In effect, the City of Newark has created a system which forces the numerous agencies playing a role in the lives of ex-offenders to work together. At its heart is a new philosophy for ex-offenders. Instead of job training or other forms of social service, the emphasis is on creating a "rapid attachment to work." Unless a newly-released ex-offender gets on the right path within days after leaving prison, there's a strong likelihood he'll soon be back behind bars. In New Jersey, 62 percent of ex-offenders are rearrested within three years.

The Newark model has relied in part on Opportunity Reconnect, a first stop for those on probation or newly-released from jail or prison. This one-stop service "portal" is supported by private philanthropic funding from New Jersey's Nicholson Foundation. It is run in collaboration with the city; the state Parole Board and Department of Corrections; and the Essex County Probation Division, Division of Welfare, and Community College. Opportunity Reconnect maintains a data base with information about those asking for help and directs jobs-seekers to one of five inter-connected nonprofit organizations which provide hands-on assistance and case management. These agencies do not operate in a vacuum, however. They are monitored by the Mayor's Office of Reentry, which itself has become a defacto portal for ex-offenders.<sup>2</sup> Newarkers, ex-offenders, and the general public alike have traditionally relied on city hall—the mayor, council members and agencies—to help them find jobs.

Whether through Opportunity Reconnect or the Office of Reentry, ex-offenders are referred to faith-based and community organizations (some of which are located at Opportunity Reconnect, some of which are not) that are funded by the City of Newark under NPRI to assist ex-offenders in finding and maintaining jobs. These FCBOs, as they are called, have performance-based contracts with the city that require them to meet specific targets for placing ex-offenders in jobs. Over a two year period, three agencies—La Casa de Don Pedro, Renaissance Community Development Corporation, and Offender Aid and Restoration—have been given responsibility for a portfolio of 138 ex-offenders and are required to meet the following benchmarks: (1) an overall "portfolio" employment rate of 60 percent; (2) a 70 percent, six month job retention rate for new hires at an average wage of \$9 per hour; and (3) a recidivism rate of less than 22 percent after one year. One agency, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (NJISJ), is required to meet these same benchmarks for 256 individuals. Additionally, NJISJ has been contracted to provide all of its clients with eight-week long transitional jobs to increase work-skills and employability.

NPRI employs a specific, tested approach to finding meaningful employment for ex-offenders based on the successful “Ready4Work”<sup>3</sup> model which provides rapid placement combined with mentoring and referrals to other services (such as substance abuse treatment) that continue even after someone is placed in a job. This model has been tested in seventeen other cities.

This focus on “work first” is not the only thing which distinguishes Newark’s approach from other prisoner reentry models. A data-driven performance management system is currently in development. Modeled on the famous CompStat arrest tracking system used by police to reduce crime, the program will be called “ReentryStat.” The Mayor’s Office of Reentry will work with its NPRI partners to track, evaluate, and make management decisions based on data. ReentryStat will make Newark a pioneer in the compilation and use of reentry data. By contract, participating non-profits will be asked to meet specific employment and wage goals or risk losing their funding. Plans call for a fully integrated, cross-agency system which will facilitate regular meetings of parole and probation officials, the Newark Police Department, and participating social service agencies to track and improve performance. Robert Behn of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government has referred to this approach as “collaborating for performance.”

## FUNDING

Newark was able to obtain a \$2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) to support services for ex-offenders and secured another \$2 million in private match dollars. Other USDOL investments in this project included approximately \$1 million dollars split between a “Fishbowl” lessons-learned initiative and the New Jersey Department of Labor, which provides technical support. The effort has also benefited from private philanthropy. Because the federal grant could not be used to help violent ex-offenders, a local foundation came forward to provide such support. And the Manhattan Institute also provides support for a “loaned executive” to head the Mayor’s Reentry Council, the entity which will operate ReentryStat.

The Newark model offers guidance to any jurisdiction looking to improve its reentry services. Mayor Booker’s office does not provide social services itself. It acts, instead, to convene agencies and departments with a shared interest in ensuring that services are measured and effective. Further, the mayor’s team has structured contracts in ways that provide agencies with an incentive to perform.

Newark’s success in obtaining private, philanthropic assistance for its prisoner reentry initiatives is atypical. But resourceful city, state, or county officials looking to replicate the “cross-agency” approach to reentry may find it possible to follow Newark’s example. Many cities have local community foundations willing to assess which local, state, and federal funds can be leveraged for use in reentry programs. Some states have funded reentry programming with unspent welfare (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), Workforce Investment Act monies, and food stamp funds. TANF funds are controlled at the state level and, depending on the state, decisions about how they are used are also made at that level. Local leaders must request that the state agency controlling TANF funds (typically either a welfare or labor agency) allow city agencies to access them. It behooves mayors and other local leaders to make requests in accordance with state priorities for TANF and other funding streams. Similarly, Workforce Investment Boards set policy at the state level for workforce funding and goals. These WIBs draw up plans, which local governments can influence, defining how funds may be spent. Working with ex-offenders is allowable in most cases, but most WIBs don’t see it as a priority. Mayors who do can advocate for workforce development funds to be spent on reintegrating ex-offenders.

In the last year, New Jersey spent approximately \$16.5 million in Newark on state corrections programs, probation work, halfway houses, day reporting centers, community release programs, facility education programs, parenting programs, drug courts, probation costs, and workforce development. Mayors looking to calculate the amount of state-level funds already at work in their communities should begin by assessing spending among different agencies and building a comprehensive reentry budget. Those agencies can include corrections, parole, the courts, labor, and welfare, in addition to any private monies being spent. A mayor must then petition his or her governor for data about returning prisoners and state-level efforts to reintegrate ex-offenders into their community. This can help a mayor understand the range of services already available for municipal prisoner reentry programs and get a better sense of what can be done to leverage or add resources. Perhaps most important, data produced by an inventory of state funded services can be used by a mayor to pressure state authorities to demonstrate positive outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

## NEXT FRONTIERS: FAMILIES AND BARRIERS

Getting a job is a new start for someone who’s been behind bars—but it’s just a start. What will give him the in-

centive to keep the job, improve his job skills, and move up the wage ladder?

One key answer: a tighter bond with family. Having a job is one thing. But having someone to work for can be a strong incentive to stay on the straight-and-narrow path.

That's why Philadelphia and Newark have begun fatherhood programs which provide mentoring and parenting skills along with help getting ready for work. Counseling is usually available to participants and there is an emphasis on group support. Child and parent activities are also part of the structure. The men in these programs are either returning from incarceration or getting their lives back together after losing a job and a home. These programs get their funding from private foundations. Philadelphia's also gets some funding from the Workforce Development Intermediary using TANF dollars.

But those who hope to reunite ex-offenders and their families face significant legal obstacles. Of these, child support arrearages are often the most difficult to overcome.

Ex-prisoners are often saddled with court-ordered obligations to pay child support. While they are incarcerated, these debts only grow in size. As the Center for Law and Social Policy reported in 2007, 55 percent of state pris-

on inmates are parents. "Typically, parents owe \$10,000 [upon] entering prison and \$20,000+ upon release," the report noted. The size of these obligations, compared to the likely income of an ex-offender, only fuels the ever-present temptation to earn fast money in the informal/illegal economy.

An increasing number of states, led by North Carolina, are moving to cap or forgive such arrearages upon release. (In many cases, much of the money is actually owed to the state as compensation for public assistance provided to children.) Other jurisdictions are reviewing whether some jobs or legal privileges should no longer be held off-limits to ex-offenders. As with burdensome child support payments, laws making a driver's license difficult to obtain, perhaps due to unpaid traffic or parking tickets predating a prison term, may force ex-offenders underground.

But central to the goal of identifying and ameliorating these related problems is the creation of reentry systems which help ex-offenders get jobs, keep jobs, and avoid going back to prison, while integrating the many moving parts of government, including corrections, parole, police, and social service agencies. Mayor Booker's Office of Reentry and the Newark Prisoner Reentry Initiative are promising steps in that direction.

---

<sup>1</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigations, Criminal Justice Information Services Division

<sup>2</sup> This initiative is in collaboration with the United States Department of Labor. The City subcontracts with Public/Private Ventures to help manage the effort and provide technical support

<sup>3</sup> Public/Private Ventures created **Ready4Work: An Ex-Prisoner, Community and Faith Initiative** in 2003. It was Funded by U.S. Departments of Labor and Justice, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. What makes Newark unique is the scale of the program and the fact that it is being implemented by a city and not piloted by a federal agency.

<sup>4</sup> See *Financing Transitional Jobs Programs*: CLASP Winter 2003 for a list of program dollars that can be used for re-entry programs:

- Serious and Violent Reentry Initiative
- Workforce Investment Act (WIA)
- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)
- Food Stamp Education and Training (FSET)
- Funds for Basic Vocational Rehabilitation
- Social Service Block Grants
- Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act
- Workplace and Community Transition
- Life Skills for State and Local Prisoners Program
- Literacy Program for Prisoners
- Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency Program (ROSS) Hope VI
- Empowerment Zones (EXs), Enterprise Communities (ECs) Renewal Communities (RCs)
- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)
- Job Opportunities for Low-Income Individuals (JOLI)
- Operation Weed and Seed