

Outside the Walls: Inside Innovative Prisoner Reentry Programs

January 27, 2004

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: (Don Murray, National Association of Counties) There are roughly about 10 million admissions to county jails each year and 10 million exits, and recently we asked the Bureau of Justice Statistics to tell us how many serious misdemeanants there are in county jails and they came up with a figure that's close to about 500,000 inmates that are serving at least 6 months or greater in a county jail. Now the administration has targeted their reentry program toward Part 1 offenders. In most places, Part 1 offenders are serving their time in State prisons. It seems to us that we should include serious misdemeanants as well as Part 1 offenders if we're going to prioritize the population. And I know the sheriff and others might want to comment on this although this whole panel has a strong local government background.

A: (Sheriff Cabral) We have both actually. The Boston Reentry Initiative targets the high impact players, people who've got serious gang involvement, have been convicted of serious crimes and are likely to do serious State prison time, they won't come back to the House of Corrections for the next conviction. That's what the Boston Reentry Initiative is about. But our Office of Community Corrections really does target what you would consider to be a serious misdemeanor but a misdemeanor nonetheless. A lot of the crimes are related to substance abuse problems that may not be discernible from the nature of the crime itself but that there's some level of substance abuse and mental health issue. And we have 2 Units that are reentry living units for these folks, we call them the one to one units. They are also the folks who are out on our community work crews who are out in the neighborhoods cleaning up abandoned lots and doing some landscaping and so forth and those are the people who you have a really good shot if you have some mentoring, education, job skills, life skills and real support out in the community, those are the folks that you're really likely to have the highest impact on in terms of not re-offending. So we found that we have to do both.

(Tomi Hiers) In Maryland, the Department of Public Safety oversees the Baltimore City detention center which has a large number of inmates so as we've crafted our department wide reentry strategy, we have developed one for the city detention center. The other thing we're doing is reaching out to the country detention centers and looking at the fact that sometimes our folks step down from state prison and they go to these local detention centers and their released from there. So we've reached out to three so far in trying to figure out the best way to help our folks transition from state prison into the locals and what is it that we need to be doing on our end to better prepare those folks and to make sure that the communication is flowing with those inmates to those facilities and what kind of partnerships we can build. So we are starting to look not just at the state level but at the detention centers as well.

Q: (Ray Whitfield, Ex-offender) What I would like to know is there among the thinking of all of you folks. Once group that I see that's missing is the education piece. And I'm

not just talking about getting your GED. I mean the education piece. And I don't know how they're involved with any ones thinking all the way across the board. The other thing is does anyone think about when the person who has been a prisoner, is no longer a prisoner, has finished their probation and parole, when do they just become a person in the community? And I'm thinking about jobs, etc. There are policies and restrictions that are there for a life-time. I haven't been in prison for 31 years. I was fortunate enough that someone said, even with your background, I will hire you. But they didn't have to. So we find ourselves caught between telling the truth and not getting the job, lying and getting fired at some point, so the question is broad. But with all that you're trying to do, I think that would be a big step in helping offenders just change their mind and think about the possibility that they may become citizens again.

A: (Edward Rosario) I call myself a reentry specialist life-skills trainer, because what I do is not just case management. It involves a lot of different things. And the core is really life-skills training. Because some of my people can't even be rehabilitate because they've never been habilitated in the first place, and that's what you're talking about. We just recently emerged with an adult literacy organization, so that's a huge component for me, because I just had a gentleman who's 27 years old who spent 10 years in prison and is a functioning illiterate. And he's in my office, no work history. I remember the last time I was convicted of a crime, I was trying to convince the judge and the ADA that my problem was a drug problem, cause I had been out on the street, 14 years ago, I was on the street and in two weeks had a \$300 dollar a day heroin habit and here I was back again. And looking at some really hard time. And the judge just looked at me and said, listen Mr. Rosario, we're not in the business of rehabilitating anybody here. Sometimes you just don't have the cards son. I'll never forget, those are his exact words. Take this two and half to five, otherwise go to trial. And I took the two and a half to five. I'm in recovery and one of the things I learned in recovery is that if you continue to do the same thing and expect different, right, that's a definition of insanity. I went to school and spent over \$20,000 at NYU studying psychology and I still haven't come across a better definition of insanity than that and that speaks to what you're asking about. If we continue to create collateral consequences for those people coming out of prison then we can't expect differently and that's where we have, I think things like this are making a paradigm shift, because I'm an eternal optimist also. And I'm hoping with this type of work, I'm seeing with this media campaign. That's huge to combat these stereotypes and to kind of erode the thinking that puts up these walls that say, well you can't live in Public Housing and you can't get federal grants to get education cause you did time and that's it and we have a place for you.

(Pat Nolan) A whole group of us here have been working on reentry legislation and one of the provisions in there is asking the states to examine all of their post incarceration sanctions and see if they hold a reasonable bearing to Public Safety. In Florida, for instance, you can't be a barber or cosmetologist if you're a convicted felon. How does that make sense? That's one skill that most people learn inside prison is how to cut hair. If there's some reasonable relationship, that's fine. But we're saying to the states, please look at these infirmities that we've place there and if it serves any real public safety purpose. There are many other provisions of that legislation and we've got good bi-partisan backing for it, but I really think there needs to be a point at which people who have served their time move one. When the judge puts the gavel down and sentences you,

that's a formal action. There's no formal welcoming back ceremony. Several local judges do that. When somebody's finished their time, they invite them in and have a ceremony to welcome them back to society, and I think we ought to move toward that. And the last thing, you mentioned education, and that's important, but medical care too. Much is possible if things can be done inside. Make a doctors appointment, give them copies of their record, let them go out ready to continue medical care. Also in the bill we have a provision, because right now you're on Medicare inside prison, and when you come out you have to reapply which means the bureaucratic process has to take it's time till you then can get your treatment. Well if you have tuberculosis or a staff infection or HIV, all the things that are endemic now in prison, you're without treatment. That's a danger to the public. That should be taken care of inside prison so that you walk out with your scripts your records and an appointment to go to. And that's something that can be done by the bureaucracy to help prepare the guys.

(Tomi Hiers) Here in Maryland there's a grass roots organization that's called the Maryland Justice Coalition that's mobilized and comprised of former prisoners, services providers, I'm a member of it. And what the MJC is doing is taking a lead role in advocating for the rights of formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. If you want some information about it either I can give it to you or Felix Motto from the Mayors office can give it to you.

Q: (Janis Hazel, WHUT-TV) As a broadcaster I want to pose a question to the panelists as well as the audience. We as Public broadcasters are embarking on this National Media Outreach Campaign that you may have seen in your literature and I think Denise Blake is here who's Project Director of Outreach Extensions and I think most people realize the power of the media to help dispel some of the myths or continue the stereotypes. I would have to say this session's been quite enlightening for me. I would say I'm a person who would say not in my neighborhood because I have experience crime from a very basic level. So I'm very interested in some of the innovative approaches that people in this room involved in the field would further recommend broadcasters in terms of these outreach programs that we are looking to launch with PBS stations and also linking hands with commercial broadcasters to even further the reach. WHUT has a Public TV station and commercial radio station.

A: (Sheriff Cabral) We have a program that's currently on. We allowed MTV to come into the Suffolk House of Corrections. They have a true life documentary series and it's called "I'm in the system". They did a gentleman in New York, and their effort was, and I give them credit for it, because a lot of the videos kind of glamorize jail, and we thought this was fairly responsible of them to want to come in and do a piece that deglamorizes jail. And they followed a 19 years old, Maurice Jordan, followed him every minute of every day. We had them in there for quite a while. I think the exposure, what you saw, if you could see this piece, their insights into themselves and the surroundings and you not only get the visual of the surroundings you get to see exactly how their functioning in them. And what was interesting about Maurice, he's a very intelligent kids, but at one point he said this place is for big fat losers and I'm one of them. And then by the end of the segment he said, well I'll probably be back. And it was really very compelling. And I think what media and broadcasters can do is reach. Not all places will open their doors to you. In fact MPT was shocked that we let them in because these are very close

communities. Print media picked up the fact that we let MPT in and they started writing about what MPT had covered and that was another way for us to get the story out that you don't want to be here. Jail isn't a glamorous thing. It isn't a right of passage. It's one component of the message that we're actually trying to get out, the overall message. We have a huge sign in the back of our facility that says 'Take Control of Your Life Before We Do'. And it's not an admonition; it is a message of self-empowerment. It is your life. The reason we have that rugged individual thing is because our freedoms are individual. You have control over your life until some system takes a part of it and once we get a hold of it we're a system, we're not individualized. It's a real struggle to care about you as an individual and I really think the media can be the pathway to the public understanding what these reentry initiatives are really about. And I would suggest reaching out and partnership. Even if it's on a grant project, even if it's on one aspect of reentry where you can come in and film. There are lots of inmates who will let you film them that will talk to you. I think it's a marvelous way of getting the story out.

Q (Cedric Hendricks, CSOS) We see just over 2,000 folks come home each year. We have reentry activities going on this week and I just want to say to my friend from WHUT we have an event Thursday night that you all are invited to and we will have some mentors and mentees both here in the Community and the Rivers Correctional institution talking about their experiences working on this reentry issue. And so, getting the word out, this event is an effort to share what we're doing with the broader public as well as recruit new people. So I would be delighted if you would bring your crew to the event Thursday and help us tell the story in a broader way.

Q: (Alan Neunan, Office of Surgeon General) We've been working on a Surgeon General's call to action for Correctional Health and we expect to have a product before the end of the year. And I salute all of you for your wonderful work.

A: (Tomi Hiers) Since we're plugging media events, I just wanted to say that in addition to the Maryland Reentry Initiative being featured in the Redemption Documentary, we're also going to be on 60 Minutes II and like the MTV project, it follows an inmate behind the fence and into the community and also talks to some other individuals who have participated in the program. So we'll let the Institute know when it airs so they can distribute it in their list serve and we think it's going to be a great program.

Jeremy Travis: Please join me in thanking the panel for their presentations.