

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Houston Health Department

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The Honorable Jeff Leach  
Chairman  
House Interim Committee on Criminal Justice Reform  
Texas House of Representatives  
P.O. Box 2910  
Austin, TX 78768

Dear Chairman Leach:

The City of Houston Health Department appreciates the opportunity to provide comments regarding identifying successful re-entry programs. As the director of a local health department (LHD) in Texas and as the Co-Chair of the Houston-Harris County Reentry Workgroup, I am particularly compelled to provide my perspective regarding work necessary to reduce recidivism and support returning citizens after a period of incarceration in Houston, Harris County, Texas.

Recent data reflects that more than 12,000 releasees and discharges return annually to Houston, Harris County, Texas from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Further, the overall recidivism rate over the last 10 years has been between 20.3 and 21.4 percent. Although this is one of the lowest recidivism rates nationwide, there is still work to be done.

## **Current Successful TDCJ Reentry Measures**

During the 84th Legislature, state policymakers continued to demonstrate commitment to enhancing both state and local level reentry practices. Policy initiatives enhanced the development of a comprehensive reentry process designed to eliminate reentry barriers and achieve the goals of increased public safety and reduced recidivism. Measures taken by the Legislature enabled the TDCJ to further implement evidence-based practices to assess criminogenic risks and needs and apply that information to develop effective individualized plans for return to the community. As a result, there were numerous accomplishments, including:

- Continued engagement with the Reentry Task Force;
- Full implementation of the automated Texas Risk Assessment System as well as
- An addition of 50 reentry transition coordinator positions;
- Expansion of the Post Release Community Reentry Program;

- Development and implementation of a Special Needs Reentry Program to supplement the existing continuity-of-care program;
- Improved processes to increase the number of offenders approved for a Texas ID;
- Automation to better identify eligible offenders for all phases of the Reentry Program; and
- Improved tracking and security accountability related to offender identification documents.<sup>1</sup>

The Houston Health Department has aligned its services and supports with these accomplishments to allow a smooth transition from a period of incarceration to a direct connection to supportive case management and services designed to aid returning citizens in Houston in the successful reintegration process.

The Houston Health Department established the Community Reentry Network Program (CRNP) in 2008 to address the varying needs of citizens returning to the Houston, Texas community. The program is appropriately housed at the Kashmere Multiservice Center, 4802 Lockwood Dr., Houston, TX 77026. It provides accessibility to neighborhoods in East Houston and the Eastex-Jensen areas. These neighborhoods have the greatest number of returning citizens in the Houston area that releasees from TDCJ call home.

The mission of the CRNP is to work in partnership with the community to assess, plan and implement effective strategies to reduce recidivism, increase public health and safety and successfully assist and support ex-offenders in their transition into productive, contributing members of the Houston community. The core program components are behavioral health, accessible health care, case management, life skills classes and workforce development and support to aid in stabilizing each participant to become independent and self-sufficient. The program works closely with faith-based and community agencies to assist participants in meeting their basic needs.<sup>1</sup>

In response to Houston's reentry challenges, the CRNP partners with the City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity to support the Turnaround Houston Resource Fairs. The CRNP has participated in each Turnaround Houston event since its inauguration in May 2016.

The CRNP has also supported the Second Chance Job Fair sponsored by former Council Member Dwight Boykins. This opportunity allows the program to reach additional formerly incarcerated individuals as well as prepare program participants as they seek employment at this venue.

As a result of 84th legislature appropriations, TDCJ entered into agreements with the City of Houston and the City of Dallas to create and operate pilot programs for local reentry services for offenders being released from TDCJ to the Houston and Dallas regions. <sup>1</sup> Via this agreement, Houston has contracted with local entities providing reentry services include training, employment referrals, housing, work supports and other evidence-based training to move recently released individuals from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Institutional Division and State Jails to successful reintegration.

A review of best practices by Doug Hooley with the Sheriff's Office in Lane County, Oregon identified six key best practices to decrease recidivism. All six of these need to be integrated and depend on each other to work. The CRNP works to integrate these best practices to meet the needs of returning citizens through its greater network of supports and services.

## **Component 1. Risk/needs assessment**

Each offender should undergo a risk assessment to determine how likely he is to reoffend, using a validated risk assessment instrument. The instrument used by the CRNP is the Wisconsin Risk Needs Assessment. In 1984, the National Institute of Corrections adopted this instrument as a benchmark by which future offender classification systems should be based. The Wisconsin Risk Needs Assessment has been the most widely adopted risk classification instrument in the United States [as of 2003]. The risk scale of this assessment measures the offender's level of education, current employment status, and past criminal behavior. The needs scale measures the needs for treatment interventions such as educational, employment, psychological and substance abuse needs.<sup>2</sup>

There are criminogenic factors that lead to the offender breaking the law, but they are not food, shelter or employment. Examples of these are:

1. Having an antisocial peer group
2. Having a drug and alcohol dependency
3. Lack of self-control
4. An antisocial belief system

While food, shelter and employment are important for ex-offenders, for those who are high risk, these are not sufficient to stop them from future crimes.

Criminal Justice agencies throughout Texas have adopted the Texas Risk Assessment System (TRAS) which is a customized case management programs for individual offenders. As of May 2018, CRNP staff was trained to use the TRAS assessment tool.

Currently, the CRNP does not have access to assessment and reassessment findings for individuals on parole supervision. If assessment and reassessment outcomes are shared upon program enrollment, this information might prove useful in determining community-based interventions required.

Additionally, the CRNP employs licensed behavioral health staff who conduct biopsychosocial assessments to determine if participants present with behavioral and/or psychosocial stressors. Based on these findings, appropriate referrals are initiated. During FY 2018, the program identified roughly 30 percent of enrolled participants with a behavioral health concern. These participants are referred to community-based services such as the Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD due to exhibiting symptomology of a behavioral health condition. Of the 30 percent identified, 23.8 percent of these participants followed up with community-based providers for treatment and/or medication.

## **Component 2. Individual motivators**

The next step is to assess the offender for what motivates him or her on an individual basis. This information is used to "self-motivate" the offender. All program staff receive on-going training in motivational interviewing. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based practice that is used to promote meaningful change in those who have previously committed offenses. It is a behavior change model that has been adopted in both correctional systems and reentry programs alike. MI has received its greatest empirical support from research on engaging substance users in treatment and improving their treatment outcomes. Additionally, MI has been effectively used to supplement or enhance treatment engagement and progress in offender populations in prisons and community probation agencies, and dually diagnosed individuals with substance abuse and mental health disorders.

### **Component 3. Target the appropriate interventions**

The research says that we will do more harm than good if we put an offender in a treatment program that he doesn't need. Utilization of the Wisconsin Risk Needs Assessment and regularly scheduled case staffing allow CRNP staff and partners to ensure enrolled program participants who have been assessed at a medium and maximum level risk of recidivism have access to an array of supports available via the program and its partners. Some of the services and supports available include restorative justice, intensive case management, life skills training, GED and ESL classes, substance abuse support groups, peer support, family reunification, food and clothing pantry, transportation, behavioral health assessments and referrals, adult immunizations and connections to primary care providers, job development and training opportunities.

Community and faith-based partners expand the reach of the program offering in-reach and training and certification opportunities for appropriate candidates. Additionally, these partners offer support to individuals and families pre-release that provide linkages and prepare them for successful transitions post-release.

Obtaining the required documentation and being approved for a Texas ID have been identified as some of the greatest challenges during incarceration, specifically for those in state jail. Because this can be a long and tedious process, many individuals leaving the state jail are unable to complete this process prior to the exit. As a result, community-based programs such as the CRNP are available post-incarceration to assist.

One way to improve in this area is to connect individuals with community-based programs prior to release that assist with these supports. This will aid them in being better prepared to enter programs and seek opportunities for employment.

### **Component 4. Rewire the brain**

Cognitive-behavioral strategies are emphasized to help offenders learn new skills and new ways of thinking and involve a great deal of practice and role-playing. Staff members need to be skilled in using cognitive-behavioral techniques. A great deal of repetition is needed to foster skills in living in a positive way in the community.

The life skills curriculum utilized as a part of the CRNP is based on Cognitive Restructuring. Courses were designed based on the topics suggested by the Council on State Governments Justice Center, "What Works in Reentry Clearinghouse." Some of the courses include Anger Management, Communication, Goal Setting, Job Readiness/Skills, Career Exploration, Time Management, Budgeting and Finance, Family Reunification and Peer Support.

These life skills courses are offered over a four to six-week period to support successful reintegration. After completion of the life skills courses, program participants are ushered into appropriate supports including housing, employment training and certification and transitional employment (as available), high demand employment training and job referrals, and other employment opportunities with program partners.<sup>4</sup>

### **Component 5. Increase positive reinforcement**

Offenders (like all the rest of us) respond best to at least four positive comments for every one negative. This can take the form of verbal reinforcement or other rewards such as cash or tickets to a game.

To support continued participation, the CRNP incentivizes participation at pivotal points that promote successful reintegration and re-establishment of family bonds. Additionally, program staff work daily to encourage all program participants through verbal positive reinforcement. Program participants receive a Letter of Successful Achievement after completion of the life skills portion and a Certificate of Program Completion, Volunteer Acknowledgement and a Letter of Recognition from various City Councilmembers provided during the CRNP biannual graduation.

### **Component 6. Ongoing support**

Once the offender is out of jail, ongoing community support is the most important factor. Family and friends are even more important than staying away from old negative influences. Those who were deeply entrenched in gang cultures have the most difficulty and need the most support.<sup>5</sup>

According to the 2014 Center for Public Policy Priorities, "Integrating Peer Support into the Reentry Process Report," studies have shown that many former inmates with mental illness experience a decline in prescription medication use or decline in mental health treatment during the post release period. The CRNP uses the tenets of the Peer Support model to aid in the successful transition back into society after a period of incarceration. Peer support is an evidence-based practice that allows an individual with a lived experience of mental illness who has gone through the recovery process to provide guidance, mentorship and supportive case management assistance to another individual with a lived experience of mental illness. The program employs formerly incarcerated individuals who provide a host of services among the 'lived experience' including outreach, case management, group facilitation, and follow up services and supports. The goal is to aid in recidivism reduction and to improve the well-being of returning citizens including those with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse disorders. The program has also contracted with local community-based organizations to offer training, certification, and transitional employment opportunities in Peer Recovery Coaching.<sup>6</sup>

For returning citizens who are deeply entrenched in gang cultures, the program offers ongoing case management and mentorship in partnership with faith and community-based entities. Also, the program works to connect these individuals with training and certification opportunities, so they are provided an opportunity to support themselves and their families. The program also refers eligible participants to agencies that provide tattoo removal at Turnaround Houston events where the program is actively involved in planning, support and operations.

I am committed to supporting returning citizens because incarceration is a public health concern weighing heavily on public health resources. In an examination of "Using a Public Health Approach to Address the Incarceration Crisis, " key issues demonstrate poverty is both a


contributing factor and consequence of incarceration. Incarcerated individuals have disproportionately higher rates of chronic conditions and infectious disease and even when controlling for demographic, socioeconomic, and familial characteristics, parental incarceration is independently linked to a number of poor health outcomes for children, including learning disabilities, behavioral or conduct problems, and developmental delays. Further, for mothers, having a child's father incarcerated is linked with mental health problems, including an increased risk of a major depressive episode, and a higher level of life dissatisfaction.<sup>17</sup>

The program continues to support the ever-growing needs of returning citizens to the Greater Houston community. As a public health entity, we have been afforded a unique opportunity to offer an extensive host of services and supports to the reentry clients seeking assistance. As public health priorities continue to evolve, the Houston Health Department recognizes the indelible impact incarceration has on public health. Our priority as it relates to reentry is to preserve, support and enhance what is currently in place, including infrastructure, activities, staffing, resources and supports. Additional funding for community-based reentry programs would enable LHDs and faith and community-based partners to increase service capacity to offer support for successful reintegration, provide targeted in-reach and outreach, and further examine and enhance the effectiveness the scope of our current implementation.

If you have further questions, please feel free to email me at [Stephen.Williams@houstontx.gov](mailto:Stephen.Williams@houstontx.gov) or by phone at 832-393-5001.

The Committee's consideration of this matter is greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,

  
Stephen L. Williams, M.Ed., M.P.A.  
Director

Cc: Members of the House Interim Committee on  
Criminal Justice Reform

## Citations

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