

Community Service Council Response to Reintegration of Ex-Offenders in Tulsa and Oklahoma

Executive Report (11.1.13)



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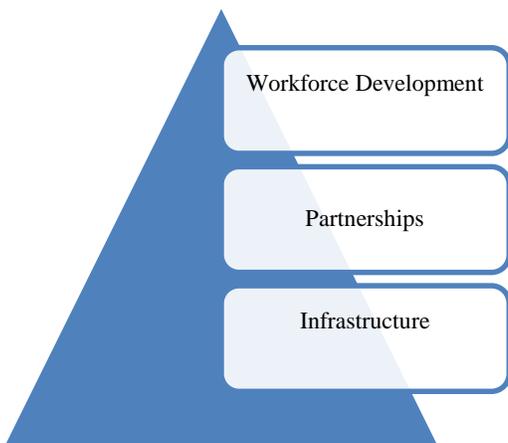
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BACKGROUND AND NEED:

Oklahoma has the third highest incarceration rate in the nation. We incarcerate 661 individuals per 100,000 citizens, far exceeding the national rate of 506 per 100,000. We are fourth highest in the incarceration rate of men and 1st in the nation in the rate of female incarceration. Statics show that 95% of people in prison will be released, but only 1 in 3 will be arrest-free three years later, creating a cycle of incarceration that costs the state in both dollars and community safety. In 2011, 1,725 people with a felony conviction were released to the city of Tulsa alone. It is becoming increasingly apparent that we cannot sustain this level of incarceration without a significant impact on individuals, families and entire communities. The average cost to incarcerate an individual in Oklahoma is estimated to be \$18,000 annually, straining state budgets. The Oklahoma Department of Corrections struggles to provide basic services, with few resources available to treat the underlying conditions that contribute to incarceration or educate and train individuals to prepare them for reentry.

Reentry intersects with a myriad of other social issues. High recidivism rates contribute to increased victimization impacting public safety. Annual earnings are reduced by 40% for those who have a history of incarceration. Homelessness is associated with a higher risk for incarceration, and incarceration contributes to an increased risk of homelessness. Three quarters of those returning from prison have a history of substance use disorders and 24% of individuals in state prisons have a recent history of mental illness. Children of incarcerated parents often struggle with anxiety, depression, learning problems, and aggression making reentry a family issue. A large number of prisoners return to a small number of already disadvantaged neighborhoods making it a community issue.

The federal government has made reentry a national priority with Attorney General Eric Holder establishing a cabinet-level Federal Interagency Reentry Council in January 2011. In Oklahoma, legislative leaders and committed individuals across the political spectrum worked tirelessly with the Council of State Governments to pass a package of criminal justice reforms called the Oklahoma Justice Reinvestment Act. Yet, implementation was not adequately funded and these reforms have been largely abandoned.



The Council became involved in this issue after partnering with the U.S. Attorney and the Mayor's Office to host a Gang Summit in 2005. One of the primary issues identified during that summit was the reintegration of adults returning to Tulsa from prison.

THE COUNCIL RESPONSE:

Building the infrastructure

...addressing the resources and the gaps

The Council's Tulsa County Prisoner Reentry Initiative (TCPRI) planning group was organized in 2009, in conjunction with grants awarded by the Department of Labor and the George Kaiser Family Foundation for the Prisoner Reentry Initiative (PRI), to provide employment services and expand training programs. Frequent meetings with 42 community partners and stakeholders were conducted to discuss issues pertinent to reentry and identify barriers, solutions, and opportunities for ex-offenders in Tulsa County. This ultimately led to the creation of TCPRI's Tulsa Reentry Service Mapping Project, a visual map of services and gaps for reentry based on population (i.e. serious and violent offenders, sex offenders, the elderly, gang involved, substance abusers, etc.).

Through the mapping process, it became evident that there were many gaps in services and deficiencies in how and where the services were delivered. There was not a central, one-stop reentry center to provide a hub for all services necessary for an offender who is returning from prison. A one-stop location is especially critical in Tulsa which has limited public transportation. Services such as substance abuse and mental health treatment, health care, counseling, housing and other supportive services are spread throughout the community and are not easily accessible. Combining these services with job training and placement at one location appeared critical to ensuring successful reintegration of ex-offenders returning to the community.

- **The Tulsa Reentry One-Stop** was created with Department of Labor and George Kaiser Family Foundation funding in October of 2012. It is centrally located in a target community defined by an average poverty rate of 30% and higher rates of unemployment (10.5%), felony crime (6,412 per 100,000), returning offenders (72%) and recidivism (27%) than the city as a whole. This contiguous area includes portions of north, east and west Tulsa. Project partners, co-located at this site, provide a combination of pre- and post-release services. Pre-release services include identification and recruitment, assessment, transition planning, and linkage to the Tulsa Reentry One-Stop. Post-release services include case management, work readiness training, career assessment and planning, job development and placement, training and education, job retention, peer support and mentoring. Connections are made to supportive services such as housing, substance abuse and mental health treatment and medical services. Participant and employer support continues for a full year after job placement.
- **The Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)** is an outgrowth of the original Department of Labor funding. The Council worked with New York based CEO through the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) to replicate their model program in Tulsa. This program provides transitional employment for people with a felony conviction while participants work with vocational staff to get a permanent, full-time job. CEO Tulsa progressed to become a United Way agency in Tulsa and recently opened a new office in Oklahoma City.

Partnerships

...providing integrated services and support

- **Service Providers**

The Council subcontracts services for the Tulsa Reentry One-Stop from local partners in order to utilize their expertise in specific components; leverage the resources of their organization; and increase sustainability.

Partners

Community Service Council

Project Manager

Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Transition Coordinator

Counseling & Recovery Services

Two Case Managers
Peer Support Specialist

Workforce Oklahoma

Two Employment Specialists

Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League

Mentoring Coordinator

The Oklahoma Department of Corrections provides a Transition Coordinator at no charge to the program to provide pre-release identification and recruitment, access to assessments and reentry plans, and link to the Reentry One-Stop upon release. ODOC also provides funding for a Peer Support Specialist with a history of incarceration, who can understand and assist with the unique needs of this population. Counseling & Recovery Services, a local mental health center, provides case management and no cost access to mental health and substance abuse treatment. Reentry One-Stop participants can access all Workforce Tulsa services at the Reentry One-Stop, including Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds for long-term education and training. Over \$55,000 in WIA funds have been provided to date. Their Employment Specialists provide employment and training services, specialized for those with a felony conviction. Finally, Metropolitan Urban League provides mentoring services and a long history of relationships within the targeted community from which to recruit mentors.

- **Housing Providers**

Many traditional housing options are not available to those with a felony conviction. While many releasing under probation or parole must have a verifiable housing option, approximately half of inmates released in Oklahoma are under no form of criminal justice supervision. This results in a segment of individuals arriving homeless and entering the emergency shelter system. Many leave prison with \$50 and a bus ticket. One study reported that people released from prison and jail to parole who entered homeless shelters were seven times more likely to abscond during the first month after release than those who had some form of housing. For those who are required to have a verifiable housing plan, a frequently utilized resource is a faith-based sober living facility. These individual homes are shared with other recently released ex-offenders and require weekly rent payments. They are not regulated by the criminal justice system. The Council has a robust homeless initiative but has a high priority on long term supportive housing for the chronically homeless. The needs of recently released individuals are more suitable for transitional housing until employment can be established. The Council's prisoner reentry work has developed partnerships with these transitional housing options and is exploring alternatives.

- **Reentry Providers**

The Council established the Tulsa County Prisoner Reentry Initiative (TCPRI), a group of local reentry providers, who meet regularly to discuss emerging trends, special populations, criminal justice and policy issues. This group conducted an employer outreach campaign to encourage employers to consider hiring individuals with a felony conviction. A mailer was sent to over 2,000 employers; posters were distributed and radio ads were aired. 211 agreed to serve as the contact for employers interested in hiring. Some specific legislative issues were developed and supported included removing the Governor from the parole process, delaying fines, fees and restitution, allowing provisional drivers licenses and the Justice

Reinvestment Act. Current efforts include working with Right on Crime to develop recommendations which focus on changes to sentencing laws, chiefly the prohibition on probation and mandatory minimums; elimination of impediments to employment for ex-offenders; reformation of length and type of sentence for low-level drug offenses; and enhance and improve community sentencing opportunities.

- **Community Partners**

Many community partners, such as faith-based organizations and civic groups are involved by providing mentors and volunteers for the Reentry One-Stop participants, providing space for activities and providing access to activities through free tickets. We have many trained and matched mentors and RSVP conducts a weekly computer class.

Workforce Development

...meeting the needs of business and increasing community safety

Linking individuals who have been involved with the corrections system to jobs and helping them develop a career path can reduce the staggering costs to taxpayers for re-incarceration and increase contributions to the tax base.

The Tulsa Area Workforce Investment Board, the Tulsa Chamber and local workforce development professionals have identified specific industries that have a high demand for employees. Some of these in-demand industries require less education/training than other occupations and may better suit the aptitude/interest of the reentry population. These employers may be more receptive to hiring individuals with a felony conviction if they have a high need for employees. Machining and welding currently appear to be the most favorable.

A promising approach in prisoner reentry is developing sector based training which leads to industry-recognized credentials for in-demand industries. The Council's efforts are focused on identifying these industries and employers, and forging partnerships with vocational/educational training providers to design short term training. The Council has been working with Tulsa Technology Center, Tulsa Community College, Goodwill Industries and additional vocational training providers to identify and design these trainings. The Council's Tulsa Reentry One-Stop has recently entered into an agreement with TTC's business and industry department to provide a machining certification for our participants. TCC has conducted an employer survey with encouraging results. 50% of employers reported a willingness to hire someone with a felony conviction for full time employment, increasing to 65% if they had completed a certification.

Why the Council?

The Council takes the lead in developing collaborative pilot programs which bring organizations together to integrate, coordinate and streamline services among and across systems. Supporting the work of the many grassroots organizations and individuals who are the pioneers of social justice issues is an integral function of the Council. The Council's legacy of breaking down barriers for marginalized populations contributes to lasting community and system change.