

TARRANT COUNTY ¹ REENTRY COUNCIL POSITIONS ON EX-OFFENDER REINTEGRATION ²

OVERVIEW

The Tarrant County Reentry Council understands that prisoner reentry has become a crucial criminal justice and community safety issue in Tarrant County. While the Reentry Council recognizes that the role of county officials in the arena of prisoner re-entry will vary according to law, policy and administrative practices, Tarrant County officials should, where practicable, be participants in addressing this issue in an effort to reduce recidivism and ensure community safety. Currently, there is a forty-one percent parole revocation rate of ex-offenders in Tarrant County therefore it is inevitable that with this rate of recidivism that this community will suffer unless provisions are made to assist ex-offenders with planning strategies and resources to successfully transition back into the community.

The lack of education, unmet health needs and the lack of services and support upon release adversely impact the reentry process and are considered obstacles. The Tarrant County Reentry Council encourages the use of educational programs, vocational training, substance abuse treatment, mental and medical health services, risk assessments, and programs that address parenting skills in order to facilitate the transition of the ex-offender back to productive community living. These resources should be developed through a collaboration of the public and private sectors of the community by utilizing existing resources, developing resources to fill identified gaps, and establishing creative funding strategies.

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Position:

The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that prisoner reentry has become a crucial criminal justice and community safety issue. While the Tarrant County Reentry Council recognizes that the role of county officials in the arena of prisoner re-entry will vary

¹ This document was developed by the Tarrant County Administrator's Office from the proposal titled *Policy Positions on Prisoner Reentry Issues* provided by National District Attorney's Association 99 Canal Center Plaza, Suite, 510 Alexandria, Virginia 817-703-549-9222, (July 17, 2005) (Portland, Maine) and information synthesized from various Reentry Council concept papers.
http://www.ndaa.org/pdf/policy_position_prisoner_reentry_july_17_05.pdf#search=%22policy%20positions%20on%20Prisoner%20Reentry%20Issues%22

² The Tarrant County Reentry Council recognizes that the roles of county officials in the arena of prisoner re-entry will vary according to law, policy and administrative practices. The Reentry Council also recognizes that various established positions in this proposal will require future legislation.

according to law, policy and administrative practices, Tarrant County officials should, where practicable, be participants in addressing this issue in an effort to reduce recidivism and ensure the safety of victims and the community.

Explanation:

The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that prisoner reentry is an important consideration for the criminal justice system and this community for a variety of reasons including a record number of prisoners being released from incarceration on an annual basis, the cost of housing inmates increasing at a rapid rate, and the high rate of recidivism among those released from incarceration.

According to the United States Department of Justice, approximately 650,000 are released from incarceration annually. As a result 650,000 ex-offenders reenter our communities in need of housing, medical and mental health treatment, employment, counseling and a variety of other services. Local communities are often overwhelmed by these increased demands and, due to budget constraints, unable to provide minimum services to ex-offenders. As a result of these conditions, the safety of our communities and citizens are jeopardized when ex-offenders revert to a life of crime.

The U.S. Justice Department reported that in 2002, 300,000 prisoners released in fifteen states in 1994 (Texas included in the study), 67.5% were re-arrested within three years. In 2005, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported there were 1,681 1st and 2nd degree felons eligible for parole in Tarrant County, Texas. In 2005, Texas Inmate Services of Tarrant County reported a forty-one percent parole revocation rate of ex-offenders in Tarrant County. It is inevitable with this rate of recidivism that *community safety* will suffer unless provisions are made to assist ex-offenders with their transition back into the community.

VICTIMIZATION

Position:

When addressing prisoner reentry, the Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that emphasis should be placed on providing a safe environment for the victims of crime and the community. The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that it is imperative that the needs of the victims of crime be addressed in conjunction with the development and implementation of prisoner reentry and ex-offender reintegration plans.

Explanation:

While the Tarrant County Reentry Council recognizes that ex-offenders encounter impediments to productive living, the focal point for reentry should include the safety of the victim and the community. As a result, those persons and entities involved in the reentry and reintegration process must address victims concerns and needs as part of the development of the ex-offender's reintegration plan. Victims of crime have a wide

variety of concerns regarding prisoner reentry. As a result, victims should be informed about the status of the offender, the offender's location, and the projected release date. The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that the perspectives of the community and the victim(s) of crime should also be reflected in re-integration plans. Issues such as the payment of restitution and provisions for victim services should always be incorporated into such plans.

REENTRY OBSTACLES FOR EX-OFFENDERS

Position:

The lack of education, unmet health needs and the lack of other services and support upon release adversely impact the reentry process and are considered obstacles. The Tarrant County Reentry Council supports the use of educational programs, vocational training, substance abuse treatment, mental and medical health services, and family/relationship oriented resources based on risk and needs assessments, during the incarceration/detention of *adults*³ as a means of easing the transition back to productive community living. Smooth transitions will serve to reduce recidivism and increase overall community safety.

Explanation:

Offenders often enter prison with chemical dependency problems and without the basic skills necessary for productive and successful living. Many lack education, vocational training, and even parenting and life skills. In addition, offenders often have unmet medical and mental health needs. A lack of family or support systems, housing, transportation and even nourishment add to the list of hurdles which ex-offenders often face as they reenter the community. Empirical evidence suggests that services such as education, job training, housing assistance, medical and mental health care, substance abuse treatment provided while in prison promotes the reintegration into the community and reduces recidivism, which inevitably will raise the level of *community safety* and lower criminal justice costs. Individual reintegration plans should be created as soon as is practicable by criminal justice officials. Such plans should require, where appropriate, personal development in the area of education, vocational training, individual responsibility and accountability, and substance abuse treatment for release into the community. Institutions should also develop and implement objective methods for measuring the development of offenders during incarceration. Certain issues such as housing and benefits acquisition should be addressed during the latter portion of incarceration. While such provisions cannot be utilized until an offender's release, leaving such issues unresolved until the date of release will ultimately make the ex-offender's reintegration into the community more difficult.

³ The Tarrant County Reentry Council understands that 40% of children of incarcerated parents are between the ages of 10-17 and these children are all associated with persistent and pervasive disobedience, aggressing and violence; they will eventually enter the prison system if neglected (Criminal Justice Research Reports July/August 2005).

**COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION
POST-RELEASE
(TRANSITIONAL & LONGTERM PHASES)**

Position:

The Tarrant County Reentry Council recognizes that the lack of employment, housing, transportation, medical services and education for ex-offenders is the responsibility of the community and government. These issues create barriers to successful reintegration and must be addressed as part of the reentry discussion. The Tarrant County Reentry Council supports the use of community based resources to develop and implement reintegration plans to assist ex-offenders with their transition from incarceration to productive community living upon their release. The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that it is appropriate for criminal justice officials, where feasible, to assume policy development or supportive roles regarding post-incarceration reintegration plans.

Explanation:

In order to provide the necessary services for ex-offenders upon release, resources should be offered by utilizing programs and personnel from a variety of agencies and providers in both the private and public sectors. If possible, resources should include those entities responsible for the formal control of ex-offenders such as corrections, parole, and law enforcement. In addition, entities with the ability to provide the ex-offender with the necessary resources, such as the departments of social services, health care providers, substance abuse counselors, mentors, faith based community members, private and public employers, housing authorities, educational institutions, policy-makers and defense counsel, should be involved.

All facets of the community should be used to evaluate and provide the ex-offender with the necessary resources along with meaningful oversight and the use of sanctions, interventions and incentives to promote success. Correctional officials should conduct risk assessments on offenders scheduled for release. Risk assessments should be evaluated for efficacy and found to be reliable before their use by correctional facilities. Supervision by parole officers should include other elements of the community such as the department of social services and local or state housing authority which often include, health care, substance abuse treatment, transportation, transitional and long-term housing, development of parenting and life skills, educational opportunities and literacy training, vocational training, assistance with obtaining employment and assistance with accessing community services and benefits

INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR ADDRESSING REINTEGRATION ISSUES

Position:

The Tarrant County Reentry Council supports the development and implementation of innovative resources and legislation to assist with prisoner reentry issues to help fill identified gaps. For example, community justice is a broad strategy that is based in three principles. First, community justice selects high impact locations where there is a concentration of crime and criminal justice activities, in order to develop special strategies designed to improve the quality of community life, especially by promoting public safety. Second, community justice approaches its tasks in these areas by working to strengthen the capacity of informal systems of social control, such as families, neighborhood groups, friends, and social supports. Third, in order to strengthen community capacity, community justice initiatives develop partnerships with residents, businesses, and other social services to coordinate the way public safety problems are addressed. Community justice can be initiated within the traditional criminal justice functions of law enforcement, courts, and corrections.⁴

Explanation:

Innovative solutions should be developed to deal with the myriad of prisoner reentry issues that exist upon and after release. After existing community resources are evaluated, proposals for additional resources and/or the need for revised legislation should be considered.

COLLATERAL SANCTIONS

Position:

Collateral sanctions normally include the loss of voting rights, eligibility for federal student loans, federally subsidized housing and licensure for certain occupations. The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that collateral sanctions imposed as a consequence of a conviction are an important element in protecting the public. However, the eventual relief from some collateral sanctions may be appropriate if they do not directly relate to the conduct involved in the offense of conviction.⁵

⁴ Clear, T.R. et., al., *Community Justice* (2003), Wadsworth Publishing Co NCJ number 196696

⁵ The need to provide eventual relief from collateral sanctions such as the freedom from declaring previous convictions to employers and the same within the voting and citizenship process is considered a part of the overall strategy of in rehabilitation that is linked to rewarding positive achievements and punishing violations (Offenders Programs Report May/June 2004).

Explanation:

The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that there must be consequences for criminal behavior. Those consequences may and should at times involve collateral sanctions. Ex-offenders should be held accountable and accept that in addition to incarceration that their illegal behavior may cause other ramifications, including collateral sanctions. While such sanctions may cause additional difficulties for ex-offenders, they should never be used as a justification by ex-offenders for failing to re-enter the community as productive citizens.

FUNDING

Position:

The Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that increases in funding at the federal, state, and local level are imperative to developing and implementing reintegration plans for ex-offenders; for developing and providing community resources for ex-offenders upon their release from incarceration; for providing meaningful oversight by parole officers of ex-offenders following release; and developing and implementing innovative resources. Increased funding is also vital for conducting further research on prisoner reentry issues, developing solutions for problems encountered and for tracking process and outcome measures. The Tarrant County Reentry Council will work to identify and coordinate these efforts to maximize the utilization of resources.

Explanation:

Given the burgeoning numbers of prisoners being released from incarceration each year, the Tarrant County Reentry Council believes that the only way that reentry and reintegration programs can achieve their goal of protecting the safety of the community while transitioning offenders back into the community is through additional funding at all levels of government. Correctional facilities will require additional funding to develop and implement appropriate reentry programs and reintegration plans as well as provide the necessary medical and mental health care, vocational training, and development of life skills. The community and social service organizations in particular will need additional personnel and resources to provide the necessary services for reentering prisoners. The court systems, correctional institutions as well as parole departments will demand additional funding in order to provide meaningful oversight of ex-offenders and for the imposition of sanctions when offenders fail to comply with the terms and conditions of their release. It is equally important that additional funding be available for research and evaluation on issues such as the impact of reentry resources on the rate of recidivism; for ongoing development of innovative resources for dealing with prisoner reentry issues; for evaluating risk assessments for efficacy and reliability; and for determining those circumstances which predispose offenders to succeed or fail in these programs.