

ARTICLE (800 words)

For Immediate Use

Title / Topic: Commitment To Change

By: Anthony Tinsman 04276-063

FCC PO BOX 3000, Forrest City, AR., 72336

Many prison programs offer selected inmates access to positive peer support, but none, until recently, have scaled 1:1 service to the entire population. Here in Forrest City Medium (BOP) there is a functioning model of evidence based 1:1 peer support and counseling. The program uses reentry curriculum, resources and peer facilitation to prepare prisoners for transitioning back to their communities. The key is making productive use of their time. Facilitators (known as Reentry Technicians) have been trained under Staff Supervision to provide a range of services.

In each of the three wedge shaped four story housing units (containing 12 separate dorms with 140 inmates each) prisoners participate in the program. They meet daily from 8 am to 3 pm in the sparsely furnished class rooms arranged for them. The curriculum guides each group through basic consumer skills like making a budget, a resume, and landing mock interviews with employers. The catch is that for reentry preparation to be effective it must also address irrational thinking. This requires a lot of Personal Unconditional Regard (Carl Roger's technique), patient instruction and active listening, praising and informed correction. Above all it requires a role model.

Prisoner Reentry is a vehicle to teach prisoners how to maximize their roles in society after they become ex-

offenders. Multiple disciplines align through reentry discussions: responsibility, making amends, providing constructive service, and being effective consumers and advocates. Reentry Technicians help provide role models, and 1:1 peer support. It is easy to lay out practical solutions to problems. In fact talking the talk seems to be the most common approach to problems. But what we need (both society and prisoners) are replicable models, or bright spots of the desired changes in behavior and thinking. All of these aspects are anchored by programs such as "Take A Load Off" (TLO), which is the primary program used in Forrest City, and the personal commitment of those in positions to provide assistance.

Upon founding TLO in 2011 it has developed a reputation with Staff who share the same personal motivations towards facilitating change among prisoners (especially those Staff with a history of family members who are imprisoned). Staff have adopted this equipped dorm concept now that policies & procedures is available, and it has made observable impacts. Not only are there ongoing classes, workshops and open house meetings in each unit (named the Reentry Opportunity Center) but interest is growing as more prisoners see the convenience and benefit of life-skills assistance.

The biggest challenge is scraping together enough books, reentry handbooks and correspondence course to offer inmates. The program isn't just for those nearing their release, change comes from environmental shifts and must include everyone, even those with life sentences. There is no fixed budget yet, so resources are scrounged and copied from contributions by

prisoners, Staff, businesses and organizations. Developing "Take A Load Off" for example (a 400 page program consisting of three workbooks, program manual and facilitators guide) was personally funded over several years including research and in-class adjustments. The finished program (in its third edition) is free, and helps set the example for contributors in the future. But as the reentry initiative in Forrest City begins to bear fruit it will also reduce barriers to integrating this systems elsewhere. One sign of the Bureau Of Prisons (BOP) commitment to change came after reviewing the Reentry Opportunity Center performance, and its infrastructure, which were rated a Best Practice for this region last month.

The most immediate results are unfortunately the most subjective, "... The touchstone of extraordinary rehabilitation is fundamental change in attitude." (U.S. v. Willey <2003, CAS Iowa> Supreme Court Opinion: [majority]). Staff and Reentry Technicians can observe behavior over time, but tracking participants re-arrest rates after their release will be the only reliable empirical measure of this approaches effectiveness. The programs available in Forrest city are voluntary, and as much as we measure participants who pass the programs we also track those who drop out or are rejected due to failing to complete the courses. Having unique voluntary participation to the entire population (except in SHU, the "hole") serves a broad range or age, race, and education levels. This data is being laterally studied to guide adjustments to the program. Demonstrating what changes are brought about by this new level of mentoring & advocating will

provide more answers to what we are all seeking namely, feasible and timely improvements on the Criminal Justice Systems end product: Ex-offenders.

For those who are interested in joining the institutional reentry initiative there is good news. Only a few years ago there were no models, curriculum or administrative procedures for unit-based programming. Today this information is easy to locate and replicate, thanks mostly to its integration into Forrest City Medium. Think of it as the path beckoning all those who walk the walk.