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SMOOTHING THE ROAD

The Formerly Incarcerated Get a Helping Hand

by

Intelligent Allah

Seventeen-year-old Anthony Sheldon had chased fast cash until he ran into trouble with the law—25 years in prison. During decades of isolation, his friends vanished and he lost his parents to health ailments. Anthony's forlorn journey to freedom culminated with the 42-year-old stepping out of prison and into a homeless shelter. In his pocket were forty dollars in personal savings mandated by prison rules. In his heart was hope for a successful life. On his mind were thoughts of the first year of freedom, a period where approximately 75% of people released from prison remain jobless and two-thirds are rearrested.

Anthony Sheldon is a fictional character in a hypothetical story that mimics the lives of countless men and women released from prison daily. The road to success after incarceration is filled with potholes and speed bumps that even experienced drivers may need help navigating.

But there is a roadmap: reentry. This is the process of helping prepare people to reenter and remain in society by attaining essentials like housing, employment and drug treatment. Reentry programs span from pre-release efforts inside of prison to community based

organizations providing post-release assistance. Some comprehensive programs pair prison staff with community groups both inside and outside of prisons.

BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

Jeremy Travis, president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, coined the phrase “reentry” in 1999 during his tenure as director of the National Institute of Justice. The term grew from then Attorney General Janet Reno asking Travis, “What are we doing about all the people coming out of prison?” In October of that year, Travis and Reno held a press conference to publicize the concept of reentry. Travis further fueled the fervor in 2005 in his book, *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prison Reentry*.

Police officers lock up lawbreakers, but judges do not always throw away the key. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 95% of all incarcerated people in state prisons will reenter society. Numbers print a clear picture for the eyes of politicians. During former President George Bush’s 2004 State of the Union Speech, he stated, “Tonight I ask you to consider another group of Americans in need of help. This year 600,000 inmates will be released from prison back into society. We know from long experience that if they can’t find work, or a home, or help, they are much more likely to commit crime and return to prison. So tonight I propose a four-year, \$300 million prison reentry initiative...America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of prison open, the path should lead to a better life.” Bush later formally introduced the Second Chance Act Bill, calling for the reentry funding he proposed in his speech.

Bipartisan support for reentry radiated from the oval office and throughout the halls of Congress. Conservative Republican Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas and liberal Democrat Danny K. Davis of Illinois were central supporters of the Second Chance Act bill. The bill was endorsed unanimously by the U.S. Senate and received bipartisan approval of 347 to 62 in the

house of representatives. Bush signed the Second Chance Act into law on April 9, 2008, allocating \$326 million toward reentry programs.

The reentry efforts of Bush echoed the sentiments of many presidential hopefuls prior to and during the race for the White House. Then-Senator Barack Obama was an early supporter of the Second Chance Act bill. He had proposed working towards ensuring that the formerly incarcerated gain employment. Senator John McCain supported reentry programs that focus on career training and job placement. Then-Senator Hillary Clinton had plans to address reentry through her Youth Opportunity Agenda. Ex-governor of North Carolina John Edwards and New Mexico Governor Bill Richards had both voiced a need for reentry.

HUMBLE BEGININGS

Before the word “reentry” became a catch phrase on Capitol Hill or the media and cyberspace got wind of it, the concept was the foundation for many unpublicized community-based organizations. Since 1931, The Osborne Association has been aiding New Yorkers entangled within the criminal justice system. With three external sites statewide, plus sites inside of jails, state prisons and courts, The Osborne Association helps over 5,000 people annually. They provide a broad spectrum of services ranging from housing and health aid, to counseling and court advocacy.

Though parole is seen by many as purely supervisory, reentry has long been a hallmark of parole. In 1973, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals issued a report stating, “A parole staff has a specific task: to assist parolees in availing themselves to community resources.” Despite parole’s purpose, its functioning and effectiveness in many states has been questioned. Devah Pager, associate professor of sociology at Princeton University, tackles the issue in her book, *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of*

Mass Incarceration. Pager reasons that peoples' disenchantment with the concept of rehabilitation has fostered corresponding skepticism concerning the viability of parole.

REVITALIZING GOVERNMENT AID

The notion that failed rehabilitative efforts have dampened hope in reentry is debatable. Yet the all-time high of people exiting prison and returning to society proves that the most industrialized nation had missed its mark when aiming to reduce recidivism. The result is a \$60 billion budget for 2.3 million men, women and children behind bars—25 percent of the world's prison—making America the top nation for incarceration.

But recent advances in reentry have reinvigorated hope and shifted correctional policy towards innovative approaches for reducing recidivism. As the Second Chance Act's greenbacks swim through the red tape of Washington, scores of states are revitalizing their reentry efforts.

"It is on reentry that we as a state must hone our efforts to continue the historic reductions in crime and save taxpayers dollars," then-Chairman of the New York State Division of Parole George Alexander writes in the Volume 1, Issue 3 of the Division's newsletter. Under Alexander's leadership, Parole partnered with the Rensselaer County Re-entry Task Force and planned to assign special 'reentry parole officers' for the Task Force initiative.

Arguably, the most celebrated endeavor involving parole in New York is a reentry program stationed inside of a state prison. Explaining the program, Alexander writes, "The Division of Parole, working with the Department of Correctional Services and the Office of Abuse and Substance Abuse Services, this past August began a pilot program at Orleans Correctional Facility in western New York." Participants in the program are afforded services such as job training, anger management and substance abuse counseling, which Alexander stresses will "Help them avoid returning to their old ways."

Other state programs are riding the rails of reentry. Michigan's \$33 million Re-entry Initiative has expanded from 15 metropolitan areas to cover the entire state. California is on the brink of developing 32 reentry centers in response to legislation signed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. New Jersey has launched Another Chance, a program delivering health aid, job training and other support to people incarcerated or on parole in Newark, Trenton and Camden.

COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

Reentry programs are frequently developed by non-profit organizations in communities from which many people in prison come and will return. These programs are usually funded by charitable donations and government aid like the Second Chance Act. Laborers run the gamut from volunteers to salaried workers. The Next Door is a non-profit reentry organization in Nashville, Tennessee that has helped over 380 previously imprisoned women acquire housing, job training and counseling.

A myriad of community based organizations are managed partially or completely by men and women who have served time. The Osborne Association is one such organization. It is staffed predominantly by employees who do not have degrees in criminology. Nonetheless, a staff member's past life of crime and incarceration is the ultimate field study from which he or she could easily pen a thesis.

Wahida Clark is a student of experience who champions reentry in her home state of New Jersey. She spent nearly a decade in federal penitentiaries nationwide. In the solace of a cell, Clark became a best selling author of several books. She returned home and assumed the position of president of Prodigal Sons and Daughters, a non-profit organization which provides various reentry services as well as support groups for the formerly incarcerated and at-risk youth. Clark emphasizes that there is a need for formerly incarcerated people to work with reentry programs.

“My prison experience taught me there were more than 2 million inmates in state and federal prisons. It was then that I became convinced that the only ones who could solve the problem of recidivism of inmates were inmates themselves,” says Clark. “I became the vice president of Prodigal Sons and Daughters after learning about their prison reentry program. Prodigal Sons and Daughters is the only reentry program that offers meaningful incentives for successful completion of its vocation and redirection programs. We can boast of one-hundred successful ex-offenders.”

There are a variety of positive effects of reentry. The obvious effects being the formerly incarcerated receiving a collage of services that paint a portrait of responsible citizenry. Communities become safer, property values increase and the quality of life soars when crime is reduced. Less bodies trickling into prison equates to less tax dollars pulled from the pockets of citizens to finance prison construction and house the incarcerated. When individuals exhibit criminal behavior and serve time, but return home to live within the parameters of the law, they symbolize redemption and hope for youth who skate on the thin ice paving crime-ridden streets.

Reentry is not a panacea for the countless problems plaguing the criminal justice system and society. To reduce recidivism, the formerly incarcerated must possess the ambition, resilience and discipline required to overcome societal hurdles that they once sidestepped through risky shortcuts. Individuals in society must be willing to empathize with people who are commonly stigmatized by virtue of their self-inflicted wounds of criminality. Reentry is, however, a stepping-stone towards raising the standards of society. Parole veterans like Alexander understand that reentry is predicated upon consistency and transcending norms: “We must continue to explore new strategies to drive down the number of individuals who re-offend.”