

The Inmate Reentry Support Team
Inmates helping inmates become Returning Citizens

By Tracy Meadows

In my federal prison housing unit, I am a member of a unique program. The Inmate Reentry Support Team was conceived by inmate Victor Jackson. Vic has spent most of his fifteen year prison sentence at five different facilities teaching job skills and business classes to help men prepare for reentry. I have taught classes at two prisons during the first seven years of my seventeen and a half year sentence. Vic asked me to work with him developing his idea in 2013. He already had the support of our corrections counselor, Theron Houston, an eighteen year veteran of state and federal corrections and a staunch advocate of doing all that is possible to help the incarcerated to reintegrate successfully. We wanted to design a program to address in a practical way the needs of inmates in an effort to increase their chances of success. Our teaching experience had taught us that inmates helping inmates is often more effective because of the gulf that exists between inmates and staff.

In November of 2013 we began working with inmates on reentry preparedness. Mr. Houston had already begun searching the internet for reentry resource information and posting it to the TruLinks computer system bulletin board, which inmates can access. We began teaching resume classes, and soon had added three more inmate members to the Support Team. Together with Mr. Houston, the team members wrote a mission statement and created a list of core values. The central tenants of the program are non-judgement and confidentiality. On April 21, 2014 we opened our unit Reentry Resource Center in the central conference room with the permission and support of our Unit Manager. Our Resource Center is open four days a week and we focus our efforts on practical matters like housing, employment, identification, transportation and family support. We also address the specific reentry needs of each man who comes into the center. From the beginning, Mr. Houston told the team members that his goal was to make sure no man leaves prison without being armed with all the information necessary for his success. About a month after we opened our Resource Center, we had our first success story.

For Joby, whose nickname I will use to protect his privacy, the odds for a successful return to society were not good. Joby was physically handicapped, had been raised in foster care, and had been to state prison seven times, finally ending up in the federal system his eighth time down. When Joby came to the Resource Center he filled out our initial reentry survey which we use to

establish a snapshot of a persons reentry needs. One of our Support Team members did an initial interview with Joby, talking over his survey answers and getting a more in depth understanding of his situation. We keep a written record of the help we provide each man we work with. Joby had no family or financial support and had been squatting in abandoned buildings before he got locked up. He wasn't going to halfway house and had no job prospects, so without someplace to live Joby would be homeless the day he was released.

We encourage men to begin getting ready for reentry on the first day of their incarceration. We meet with the men we work with on a regular basis to assess their progress, and find out what else needs to be done. We searched through the Reentry Resource information Mr. Houston had posted on the bulletin board and found a housing program in Joby's release area. In Joby's case time was a problem. Joby had less than fifty days to the door. We have learned that resource providers often move slowly for a variety of reasons. Limited space, unreliable funding, volunteer help, local laws and bureaucracy are some of the causes of a slow response, even with the best circumstances and intentions.

Mr. Houston called the contact number for the housing program and explained Joby's situation. They faxed an application, a Support Team member helped Joby fill it out, and within days of his release Joby received confirmation that not only was he accepted into the housing program, they would also provide him a job at their local Good Will Thrift Store. A few months later Mr. Houston called to check on Joby and at that time he had moved on to a better paying job and was doing well. Joby's future success or failure is up to Joby, but through the work of the Inmate Reentry Support Team, Joby was given a chance to succeed that the system alone would have denied.

Joby is not our only success. His story is more dramatic, but as far as we are concerned anytime we can provide information, find a place to live, help with a resume, or point a man in the direction he needs to go to find job, then we have another success story. Of the forty two returning citizens we have helped in our program, as of this writing none has returned to prison. Our philosophy is to help one returning citizen at a time. If we help just one man, then we have made a difference. Mr. Houston has told us repeatedly in our team meetings that he wants every man in his unit to have all the information and advantages for success that we can provide.

When a man we work with leaves prison, he receives a release packet from the Support Team that

includes reentry resource information specific to his release area. We will include the resume we help him prepare. Also in the release packet is a letter to the Department of Motor Vehicles to inquire about the status of his driving privileges. If needed, we'll include the forms for the Federal Educational Grant. The returning citizen will find in his release packet the forms and information for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the Federal Bonding program, a list of felon friendly employers, as well as information on the Affordable Care Act. We include veterans information when appropriate, and every packet contains motivational material on goal setting and overcoming obstacles.

Our Reentry Resource Center has had over 400 men sign our visitor register. We have resource information for over 40 states, national and regional resource directories, educational and Workforce Center information, as well as weekly local job listings from newspapers around the region. We have information on starting a business, on state licensing for such occupations as barbering, Social Security and veterans information. This is only a partial list of the information we have gathered over the last year, and we are continually adding more.

As members of the Inmate Reentry Support Team, we see the changes that are coming to the correctional system. Prison reform, changes in drug and sentencing laws, and the Restorative Justice movement are some of the many initiatives that will result in more returning citizens. In our work on the Support Team, we have seen the change in the attitude of a man when he finds hope for a successful life outside these walls. It is our goal to reduce recidivism, promote public safety, and provide that hope, one man at a time.

The Helena C Unit
Inmate Reentry Support Team

Current members

Victor Jackson
Tracy Meadows
Terrance Madden
David Beach

Members who have been released

Mike Bills
Harold Manning
Orlando Robison

Theron Houston, Correctional Counselor and Team Supervisor