

## Breaking the Cycle

By Ryan M. Moser

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Florida's high recidivism creates a costly burden on taxpayers and is overwhelming the criminal justice system at an unprecedented rate. Statistics vary, but out of the 100,000 men and women incarcerated in the Florida Department of Corrections, approximately 75% will come back as a re-offender in their lifetime. Official records show that 35% of inmates released will return to prison within three years. These numbers are staggering and show that this is a problem which can no longer be ignored. In response, many state politicians, prisoner advocates, and F.D.O.C. executives feel that the time has come for a shift in the paradigm.

Conventional wisdom says that the responsibility of reform rests on the man and not on the system, but oftentimes ex-offenders are sent back into communities without the proper tools necessary to succeed, and the obstacles facing a convicted felon can seem insurmountable. Background checks put limits on job opportunities and housing availability, while many people will leave prison with no support system in place such as family, substance abuse counseling, career training, and mental health services.

When a man walks out of prison or jail, many times they leave with only the clothes on their back and whatever small penance the DOC will give them (typically around \$50.00 and a Greyhound bus ticket). Some would ask why taxpayers should pay anything to a person whom has committed a crime, or try to help someone who has violated the law. The easy answer is that *you're only helping yourselves*. A man who leaves prison with no help will, as a first or last resort, choose to commit another crime in order to get basic necessities, and the next crime could be against you. It's the human condition – we will do anything to survive. It's ingrained in our DNA and evolution has proved its strength. So before we judge and point fingers at the “bleeding heart liberals” who want to lift up and support disenfranchised ex-felons, remember that they may be stopping a crime against you or your loved ones before it happens. The simple truth is that it is possible to succeed and even thrive when leaving prison without assistance, but the odds of every man, or even most men, doing that are very low. The reality is that compassion begets better citizens, and no matter what you do, it will always be up to the individual to change inside and society to change outside.

From a strictly fiscal standpoint, the benefits of lowering recidivism are enormous and cannot be overstated. The FDOC currently has an annual operating budget of 2 billion dollars. It costs \$25,000 a year to house, clothe, feed, and secure a single inmate. If legislators were to enact an initiative to reduce repeat prison terms by 50% over a 5 year period, it would amount to a saving of over one billion dollars. If you take into account the money saved from the judicial system, and the expense of social services stemming from single parent households, that number swells to over two billion dollars. In addition, we would be adding to the workforce and generating tax revenues, while stimulating local economies through spending.

There is no doubt that people who commit crimes need to be held accountable for their actions, and the court system, while flawed, does the best job possible in handing down fair sentences which support victim rights and protect the innocent. The broader question is: Do we have a moral obligation to help someone who has paid their debt to society? If we do, then we must stop the revolving door of repeat offenders stuck in a perpetual cycle of failure, and turn them into productive members of the community and society at large.

A follow-up question would be: Do we ever intend to try and rehabilitate the men who land in prison, or do we continue to use punishment as the only recourse for bad behavior and poor choices? Programs such as Re-Entry, Modality Substance Abuse, Transition, Life Skills, Character-building, Faith-based Initiatives, and the like are all being utilized in some way in most federal and state prisons and county jails, but the real place that we need to start with helping ex-offenders- if that's the genuine intention- is not just with creating resumes or at the gates going home. We need to help men make a meaningful change from *inside* (both figuratively and literally) and live for something bigger than themselves.

One of the most successful methods being used to curb recidivism in Florida is the Re-Entry Program at Walton Correctional Institution. This progressive character building and faith-based program was originally spearheaded by Warden Whitehurst, currently supervised by Warden Mallard, and is facilitated by Officer J.D. Smith—recent recipient of the FDOC *Institutional Employee of the Year* award. By using an innovative approach towards rehabilitation, Officer Smith's unique curriculum challenges men to face their problems, change their lives, and be a better person so as never to return to prison. As evidence of changes actually taking place, one only has to read the countless letters from men who have graduated from the Re-Entry program and been released or look at the walls of the classroom adorned with pictures of reunited families, successful business ventures, and happy faces smiling.

There are many different classes offered to the Re-Entry students, including: Conflict Resolution, GED Development, Budgeting, Bridge Builders Addiction Recovery, Kingdom-Powered Parenting, Writer's Workshop, Resolution for Men Bible Study, Health and Wellness, and more. Each student is also given several difficult therapeutic writing assignments per week which force the men to take a personal inventory of their lives and helps reveal how their actions affect everyone around them.

As Team Leader Charles Lewis explained; “These writing assignments help students to get to the root of their problems, to figure out for themselves what brought them to prison, and what they can do to prevent making the same mistakes again.”

When facing the daunting task of re-integrating into communities which are generally discriminatory against ex-offenders, trying to find gainful employment against difficult odds, and making sure not to backslide into old habits, the skills these students are learning are invaluable. Even the more challenging parts of Re-Entry, such as accepting correction and living a disciplined life, are training for the streets.

“The Re-Entry Program holds men accountable for their past actions,” said Team Leader Randy Young, “while at the same time allows them to accept responsibility and change their way of thinking so they don't come back.”

Ultimately, the goal of Walton C.I.'s Re-Entry Program is to help men get back to their families and stay out of prison so they can lead productive lives, and so far it seems to be working well. Let's hope that others can follow in our footsteps and create better lives and stop recidivism altogether.