Supporting the Digital Aspects of Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

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ABSTRACT

For formerly incarcerated individuals, reintegrating into society and learning to use digital tools for everyday tasks is essential. While reentry nonprofit programs provide social support, there is limited research on the specific strategies they use to help formerly incarcerated individuals overcome digital challenges associated with adjusting to life after prison. To address this gap, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight nonprofit employees to understand how they support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry. Our research revealed that practicing self-reflection, being present, improvised teaching, and leveraging offline networks are important strategies used by these organizations. Our findings offer fresh perspectives on how these organizations aid formerly incarcerated individuals in their digital reentry process.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → **Computing literacy**.

KEYWORDS

reentry, formerly incarcerated, digital literacy, digital reentry

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1 INTRODUCTION

Formerly incarcerated individuals, hereinafter referred to as returning citizens, face multiple challenges while reintegrating into society. To secure resources such as healthcare, returning citizens must often use digital tools, yet, prisons in the U.S. do not offer consistent internet access or support for the digital aspects of reentry. [5, 10, 11].

Reentry nonprofit programs aim to assist individuals who are returning to their communities after serving time in prison. Social support is critical for successful reentry [17]. These programs facilitate social support by connecting returning citizens with local resources and providing necessary services. This helps reduce the likelihood of recidivism. However, there is limited research on how these reentry programs assist returning citizens in navigating the digital aspects of reentry.

To address this gap in the scholarship, we aimed to understand: How do reentry and advocacy programs support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry?

To explore this research question, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with participants that were employed with three nonprofits focused on supporting returning citizens in the United States. We identified four strategies that individuals working in reentry programs use to support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry including: engaging in self-reflection to understand the experiences of the returning citizens they interact with and establishing trusted relationships with them; being physically present to provide emotional support to returning citizens to support their adjustment to society; providing impromptu advice based on the emergent needs or interests of returning citizens; and leveraging offline networks to provide returning citizens with information about resources and services they were unfamiliar with. Our research builds on HCI literature that seeks to understand designing technology for formerly incarcerated individuals and their support systems [6, 10, 11, 13] by examining specific strategies nonprofit employees use to support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Challenges faced by Returning Citizens

Returning citizens face several challenges upon being released from prison. These challenges are often in the areas of employment, housing, family support, community support, and healthcare [2, 3]. While researchers acknowledge that relationships with family members, community members, parole officers are pivotal in assisting returning citizens with a successful return home, reentry programs have been inconsistent in demonstrating their effectiveness in assisting returning citizens through formative and summative evaluations [1, 4, 15]

2.2 Reentry Programs

As returning citizens navigate the challenges of finding employment, housing and other resources, reentry programs become pivotal to facilitate their successful return and integration into society. By connecting returning citizens to existing resources in their community and providing services that address personal and situational risks (e.g., alcoholism, drug addiction), reentry and rehabilitation programs aim to help reduce the likelihood of recidivism [8]

However, there is a lack of consensus around how reentry programs can effectively support returning citizens due to the dearth of evaluation used and the heterogeneity of such programs [4, 15]. In

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a meta-analysis of findings from 53 studies examining the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs, Ndrecka [9] found that program success and reduction of recidivism was tied to factors such as the length of program, the provision of care and support spanning incarceration and post-release periods, and the incorporation of therapeutic communities [9]. In an analysis of 12 reentry programs in 12 states, Visher et al. [16] identified that in-prison services focused on individual change (e.g., training on how to change criminal attitudes, alcohol/drug treatment, anger management) were more beneficial than services that focused on practical skills and needs (e.g., taking a class to prepare for release, having a reentry plan). The aforementioned literature discusses high-level factors of reentry programs that may support successful reentry, and we extend this literature by providing the specific strategies that reentry employees use in their work to support their clients digital needs.

As technology continues to advance and digital interactions become requisite to communication and resource acquisition, how reentry programs navigate the digital aspects of reentry become increasingly important. Reisdorf and Rikart [12] argue that existing frameworks of rehabilitation focus primarily on the offline realms of reentry including employment, engagement with family and community, and civic participation. They argue that digital and offline aspects of society are closely connected. Reisdorf and Rikart [12] advocate for reentry programs that incorporate digital aspects of reintegration, arguing that inclusion of training in how to use digital media effectively and efficiently could help returning citizens integrate into a society that is increasingly technology-dependent[12]. We build on this literature by exploring strategies reentry employees use to support their returning citizen clients with the digital aspects of reentry (i.e., online school application, finding a doctor, etc.).

2.3 HCI Literature on Digital Reentry

Finally, the topic of designing technology to facilitate reentry for returning citizens is a growing area in HCI literature, with a focus on addressing the lived experiences of returning citizens [6, 10, 11, 13]. For instance, Seo's 2021 qualitative study identified opportunities for digital technology to support female returning citizens by addressing their mental health challenges and low self-efficacy [13]. In an earlier study, Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al. [11] explored the challenges faced by returning citizens as it relates to the digital aspects of reentry. Building on this existing scholarship, we contribute a better understanding of the specific strategies used by nonprofit employees to support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry.

3 POSITIONALITY

We, the authors of this paper, both identify as HCI researchers, female, American, with multi-ethnic identities who are based at US R1 institutions. We have varied experiences working with returning citizens and nonprofit, and marginalized populations. We also have diverse experiences navigating issues of race and the criminal justice system. Our experiences cannot and do not represent everyone who shares a particular identity. Additionally, our analysis does not involve the direct participation of formerly incarcerated individuals.

4 METHODOLOGY

To examine our research questions, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with nonprofit employees that interacted with returning citizens as a part of their work.

The majority of our participants were female (N = 7), between 25 to 34 years old (N = 4), and identified as White (N = 5). Overall, five of the participants identified as White, one identified as African American, and two identified as Asian.

We conducted interviews over the phone in October 2019 based on participant preferences and availability. On average, interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour and we compensated participants with a $20 Amazon gift card. The interview protocol included questions about participants' experiences and challenges providing emotional and informational support to returning citizens in the reentry process. At the interview's conclusion, participants completed a short verbal questionnaire about demographics.

We recruited participants through the first author's established relationship with some of the nonprofit organizations and related networks in this study. Furthermore, we recruited additional participants through snowball sampling.

All interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. Additionally, we used thematic analysis using open coding to understand our research question.

5 FINDINGS

This study set out with the aim of understanding how reentry programs support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry. We identified four strategies, which we discuss further in the following sections, that individuals working in reentry nonprofits employed to support returning citizen: practicing self-reflection, being present, improvised teaching, and leveraging offline networks.

5.1 Practicing Self-Reflection to Understand Positionality

We found that participants consciously reflected on their pre-existing biases, attitudes and assumptions and how these impacted their interactions with returning citizens. They valued self-reflection as they felt it helped them better understand their clients' experiences and establishtrust. In some cases, this self-reflection was strictly internal – a vehicle for our participants to better understand the experiences of returning citizens and ensure they were providing adequate support. In other cases, this self-reflection was performative and external-facing, a method to build trusted relationships with returning citizens.

Interview participants reflected on their position, attitudes and relationship to their clients, acknowledging that internal biases or lack of understanding of returning citizens' experiences complicated their ability to provide support.

P1, for instance, described her experiences confronting conflicting internal biases and attitudes towards returning citizens she worked with. While confronting these conflicting perceptions, P1 described her conscious effort to shift her focus from pre-existing assumptions about these individuals to understanding them in the present moment:

> *I feel like this is the battle between me and myself. Often times I feel like yes they are suffering from the*

> *incarceration and they lost a part of their life when they stayed inside. I feel really sorry for their situations but the hardest part is sometimes when it comes to harming people's lives...I feel like incarceration feels like a just move for putting people inside the jail. It's kind of contradicting myself. That's a part of the struggle that I feel I'm still running into...I start realizing people are just as nice as they are...they all have a very great heart...yes I am aware they have formerly incarcerated experiences, but when I'm engaging in conversations with them I don't think I'm focusing on that, I'm just focusing on my conversation with them.*

By describing returning citizens as individuals that "*harm people's lives*" and are "*suffering*", P1 evokes the internal conflict she struggles with as she interacts with returning citizens. By "*focusing*" on her conversations with formerly incarcerated individuals rather than her pre-existing assumptions and biases, P1 demonstrates how she consciously reflects on her attitudes and relationships when interacting with her clients.

Similarly, P3 reflected on whether she had the appropriate experience or position to support her clients, given that she had no prior experiences being incarcerated. P3 indicated that the best people to serve returning citizens were people with shared experiences:

> *One challenge is an identity thing with me never having been incarcerated, working with populations of people who have been incarcerated...that's just difficult for me...because I never ask but I've always wondered...why would they want to receive services from someone who hasn't been in their position or who has never walked in their shoes? Sometimes I feel like I'm in a position I shouldn't be in. I feel like it should be people who were incarcerated helping people with the reentry process because they are the solution...they are closest to the system that put them there.*

While P3 did not express a resolution for this internal struggle, she expressed that consciously reflecting on her own experiences as an African American woman was important to understand her clients' experiences:

> *Well I equate it to myself. I identify as a Black woman. So if I go to see a therapist who isn't black and is trying to talk me through black issues, I would feel some type of way. So I equate it to what our clients are experiencing...what they may be thinking...the people that are trying to help us haven't been incarcerated or haven't been through our struggles but are sitting here trying to help us through our struggles.*

Both P1 and P3 demonstrate the importance of consciously reflecting on their own experiences and assumptions and how these factors may influence their relationships and interactions with their clients.

Overall, interviewees discussed internally self-reflecting on their relationship and positionality as a vehicle to better understand their clients' experiences and establish trust.

5.2 Physically "Being There" for Emotional Support

A common challenge returning citizens faced, according to our interviews, was navigating uncertainty. According to our interview participants, returning citizens experience uncertainty as they traversed job interviews, health insurance requirements, and long lines at the department of motor vehicles when trying to obtain State IDs. Many of their clients were unfamiliar with the extent of this uncertainty upon being released from prison. Our interview participants expressed the importance of physically being present for their clients to provide emotional support as they navigated this uncertainty.

For example, P4 describes her clients' anxiety as they navigated an online application to receive food benefits:

> *And there's just a lot of anxiety because you know after he did 45 years, you want to make sure you have all your ducks in order and even something as simple as an online application for SNAP benefits that seems simple to some people..it's anxiety for some people. Do I press YES or NO for this question? Is my bridge card coming? When is it going to come? How many days? There's people that...no one gives you those details...and so he was just feeling a lot of anxiety about all that stuff.*

As P4 echoes questions that her clients have as they fill out the SNAP benefits application like "*When is it going to come,*" she evokes the sense of uncertainty her clients face as they navigate the online applications for certain resources. P2 similarly echoed frustrations her client faced when trying to find a job:

> *I think it was also a really frustrating time for him because he couldn't get a job. That was the first time in 30 years he had been unemployed. I think it's very frustrating to be out in the world and be less active than he's been in prison. That was very difficult for him. I think I was able to be a support person for him in dealing with the emotional implications of the practical problems if that makes sense.*

To alleviate the anxiety and frustration experienced by their clients, interview participants expressed the importance of physically "being there" for their clients to provide emotional support. P4, for instance, described the importance of waiting with her clients at the Secretary of State while assuring them that the lengthy wait times were expected:

> *I think people that have spent a lot of time in prison need one-on-one mentorship like to the max...Even if I give someone exact directions, there's just something about having someone there. Even just having someone next to you, I think it's so important. And to be like 'It's a 4 hour wait at the Secretary of State but they have text message services so we could go out to eat. Don't worry, don't get frustrated. Everybody waits at the secretary of state for a long time.' I don't know, I think there's just a lot of emotional support that's important that people don't necessarily think about or may they minimize how important it is to have somebody next to you.*

P3 similarly discussed sitting down with clients to condense large problems that seemed initially insurmountable into smaller, more manageable steps. When asked to describe how she supported individuals going through emotional frustrations, P3 mentioned:

> *There's only so much I can actually do. I think a lot of people just need someone to listen to them. I do that. If there is some way I can help, I do that. I think breaking down big problems into more manageable steps is one strategy is important for people to keep in mind. Things that seem insurmountable...trying to break them into more surmountable parts is helpful.*

Lastly, P8 reflects on her role of assisting one of her clients with finding an apartment. She states:

> *So he was physically filling out all the applications. Um, I try, I don't like to interfere with people's abilities if they are capable of it. So he did most of, if not all of the talking all of the filling out of applications. Um, really what I was there for is just emotional support and being a chauffeur, honestly.*

As described above, interview participants echoed the anxieties and frustrations their clients faced as they navigated different situations. Support for their clients often meant emotionally and physically being present as they navigated reentry challenges. While being present was a key strategy used by participants in the study, it often meant they did not become directly involved in a situation – allowing their clients to find the best solutions that worked for their circumstance.

5.3 Improvised Digital Literacy Training

We uncovered several examples of participants teaching returning citizens various tasks based on their interests and needs. These ad hoc lessons often happened at the discretion of returning citizens. They were often not pre-planned, but provided the individual who self-identified as a returning citizen the autonomy to engage with topics of their choice.

For example, P1 discusses how she has assisted a volunteer returning citizen on how to perform an artistic technique:

> *Sometimes when we do sketches, we would draw the circles or putting the human body into circles or triangle type of shapes just to help us structuring the character - the basics. That's what we did when we were instructed to do 1 minute sketches. So we did that. The person who was a returning citizen...he is a returning citizen and he asked me about "Oh that looks interesting. How did you do that?" So I just shared my thoughts with him. Cause he was actually an artist and was curious why I do that.*

P6 also shared how a client reached out to their organization to learn about banking options. She states:

> *He originally contacted [the organization] for help with starting a bank account. So we worked a lot online and then....Well we went in person to set up his bank account.*

In their quotes, P1 and P6 provide examples of improvised learning experiences nonprofit employees may have with returning citizens based on their needs and interests.

5.4 Leveraging Offline Networks to obtain Resources

Several participants also discussed using their own networks to learn of individuals, companies, or resources that are "friendly" to returning citizens. These conversations often happened offline and references to online websites were rarely discussed.

For example P7 discussed relying on offline networks when searching for resources. When asked whether the organization used online resources or had a list for individuals who may request resources, he stated:

> *...we just work with so many folks that are resource providers or, um, or have experience navigating, um, that, that we, we, we don't currently have a, have a list that we're just pulling out, you know, um, because we work with people from [Organization One], [Organization Two], um, churches, um, trying to, you know, so it's, it's, it's just not that explicit.*

While online systems were available to find resources, most interviewees leveraged their network of other reentry organizations to support returning citizens.

6 DISCUSSION

Employees of reentry programs employed several strategies to support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry, these included: (1) self-reflecting on their individual perceptions of and interactions with returning citizens to understand the experiences of the returning citizens and establish trusted relationships, (2) physically being present to provide emotional support to returning citizens as they navigated the challenges of reentry, (3) providing advice or training on an impromptu basis, and (4) sharing offline information about resources and services.

While reentry employees strive to use the aforementioned strategies to support returning citizens, their support is bounded by their individual expertise, their years of experience working in a particular organization, their location, and organizational policies. In some cases, participants indicated that the location of their clients restricted (or enhanced) their ability to provide support, especially their ability to provide local connections. In other cases, participants perceived themselves as lacking in experience and expertise to provide certain types of instrumental support (e.g., providing digital literacy support) for returning citizens, contrasting themselves with other colleagues that had more experiences providing these types of support.

Returning citizens reached out to reentry organizations for assistance on a variety of topics. Our interviewees shared a diversity of requests for assistance such as how to sign up for a bank (P6), applying to graduate school (P5), or sketching techniques (P1). Their varied requests sheds light on the importance of flexibility to support returning citizens in their reentry. Even though several of the requests were out of scope of the work the nonprofit employee performed, our participants shared stories of assisting and going above and beyond their general work duties. From a policy perspective, nonprofits should be prepared to support returning citizens impromptu needs.

Our findings also highlight the importance of "presence" (section 5.2) and leveraging offline networks (section 5.4). Even though

much of the reentry work that needs to be accomplished is now facilitated, at least in part, by digital systems administered by the state, in many ways, this presence and use of offline networks are filling in for parts of the "reentry guidebook" that aren't written down anywhere.

We contribute to the Reisdorf and Rikard Digital Reentry Model [12], showing that the impact of offline reentry and digital reentry is less significant than initially thought. While Reisdorf and Rikard [12] argue that for every offline aspect of reentry there is a digital aspect of reentry, we demonstrate that the presence of a supportive network and offline connections play an equally crucial role in digitally-mediated reentry, as they do in the offline aspects reentry.

Our findings suggest that reentry organizations are a vital source of information to returning citizens in learning about nuanced information on navigating digital systems. Overall, non-digital sharing of resources provides returning citizens access to information, especially second-hand information related to navigating various personalities and systems.

Furthermore, our findings support prior research that suggests individuals working in reentry-focused programs have their own perceptions of what successful reentry looks like [14]. A majority of our interviewees expressed that "successful" reentry constituted not hearing back from their returning citizen clients. While our interviewees primarily discussed working with clients who were willing to ask for help, all returning citizens may not be comfortable eliciting certain resources from nonprofits. Future research is needed to examine the trajectories of returning citizens that receive support from reentry programs and what, if any, challenges they face that they choose to not bring forward to reentry programs. Additionally, future technology should be designed to help uncover the hidden aspects of digital reentry in an accessible manner [7].

It should be acknowledged that a key limitation of our study is that our participants were a biased sample. Our recruitment strategy involved working with the first author's partner organizations which often meant that their returning citizen clients were the ones with support required to respond appropriately and find transportation to these nonprofit locations. As a result, our participants often worked with clients who had some form of support; the majority of returning citizens may likely face even harsher realities.

Finally, we extend HCI literature that is focused on the design of technology for formerly incarcerated individuals and their support systems [6, 10, 11, 13] by highlighting the offline aspects of support nonprofit workers used to assist their returning citizen clients with the digital aspects of reentry. We also contribute to growing literature that explores the experiences of navigating digital reentry [7, 10, 11] by understanding the strategies reentry employees use to assist their returning citizen counterparts in the digital aspects of reentry.

7 CONCLUSION

In this study, we sought to understand the specific strategies reentry programs employ to support returning citizens in the digital aspects of reentry. Through interviews we identified four strategies that reentry-focused and advocacy programs used to support the digital aspects of reentry. These included: self-reflecting on their identities, physically being there for clients, improvising instruction, and leveraging offline networks to to obtain resources to support their clients. Towards fostering support that aids the digital aspects of reentry, reentry and advocacy programs should be prepared to support returning citizens' ad hoc digital needs. Our research raises future questions for research including further examination of the trajectories of returning citizens receiving support from reentry programs.

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