
Working Together to Improve Reentry: Bridging Budgets and Programs, Public and Private, Prison and the Community

Planning and supporting a successful return to community living for individuals who have been incarcerated can be a complex process. Certainly, successful transition involves more than corrections agencies. Many public and private agencies have responsibility for parts of it, yet no agency has responsibility for all of it. In fact, the successful reintegration of prison inmates into the community requires the efforts of multiple state and local agencies. No single agency can accomplish this goal.

In June 1999, the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC) formed a transition steering committee comprised of DOC employees and members from county community corrections agencies, the Board of Parole and Post-Prison Supervision, law enforcement, a variety of state and local social service agencies, the Oregon Youth Authority, inmate families, and victim advocates.

The group first defined “transition” as a process that begins immediately upon entering the criminal justice system and extends through release from prison to community supervision.

More than 300 people representing over 70 organizations participated in the project. Subcommittees and design teams developed detailed plans for initiating and implementing effective, consistent, transition-related policies and practices. The work of this group resulted in many collaborations, both large and small, to improve the transition process. A few of the improvements they created are described in this article.

Department of Human Services—The Oregon Trail Card

The Oregon DOC and the Department of Human Services developed a partnership to make financial resources available immediately to offenders leaving prison. The old process for disbursing inmate trust funds, or the minimum \$25 “gate money” provided to inmates at release, involved issuing a check to the inmate. Many newly released inmates did not have proper identification or a bank account, so it was difficult for them to access to these funds when the money was most needed.

Through this partnership, the Department of Human Services made the Oregon Trail Card technology available to support reentry. The Oregon Trail Card is a debit card used to issue state benefits such as welfare and food stamps; it works like the electronic gift cards that can be purchased from many stores. The funds in the inmate’s trust account are made available via the card. This gives ex-inmates

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instant access to their money to pay for food, transportation, and other immediate transition needs.

Department of Motor Vehicles—Identification Cards

The Oregon DOC and the Department of Motor Vehicles developed a partnership to expedite the process for offenders to obtain identification and driver's licenses as soon as possible after release. Tightened security requirements had resulted in changes at the DMV and, for a time, created a huge obstacle for offenders needing state-issued identification. The DMV would no longer accept a DOC ID card in their process of issuing licenses or IDs. After a long negotiation, the two agencies developed a process whereby the DOC can take agreed-upon steps to verify inmate names while they are incarcerated. Today, the DOC Release ID card does serve as proof of identity for released inmates who have a verified name. Consequently, they are immediately eligible for the state ID they need to find a job, rent a house, establish a bank account, and so on.

Oregon Housing and Community Services—Transitional Housing

This partnership is based on the recognition that the successful transition of offenders from incarceration to community living is a community and public safety issue, and not just a corrections system responsibility. Oregon Housing and Community Services allocated \$500,000 to increase transitional housing for offenders and committed to working with the DOC in this effort. Projects have been funded in several counties throughout the state. This initiative is focused on more than increasing the availability of transitional housing—successful projects must include wrap-around services and case management.

This initiative is remarkable in terms of the multiple partners involved, both public and private:

- ◆ DOC and OHCS are involved at the state level.
- ◆ The county community corrections office acts as the lead agency.
- ◆ The local public safety coordinating council represents the entire local criminal justice system.
- ◆ Local service providers are involved in services and case management.
- ◆ Local transitional housing providers work with local corrections agencies (in some cases even owning and operating the housing).
- ◆ Local service providers and corrections agencies are invested in the program, operating the housing, providing case management, and providing wrap-around services.

Criteria for transitional housing programs were developed by the DOC Transition Steering Committee and incorporated into the request for project proposals. Each program must offer:

- ◆ 24-hour staff support and case management services;
- ◆ Wrap-around services delivered directly or by referral;
- ◆ Residences that are accessible to public transportation (where available), social services/treatment programs, and employment;
- ◆ Extensive drug screening services;
- ◆ Properties that are well maintained and presentable in the neighborhood;
- ◆ A safe and structured, clean and sober residential environment with written program rules;
- ◆ Case management staff skilled at intervening with criminal thinking and substance abuse problems; and
- ◆ Minimized daily fee assessments during the first 60 days of housing and a requirement for mandatory savings that are used for housing upon release.

Oregon Health Division—Family Planning

The DOC partners with the Oregon Health Division to distribute the “Smart Start” packet to inmates on release. Each released inmate receives health information, samples of health-related products, a variety of over-the-counter birth control devices, and information about how to access public health services in his or her community.

Faith Based Reentry Program—Pro-Social Supports

This statewide program works with hundreds of volunteers and faith- and community-based organizations. It provides offenders with a pro-social support system, gives them opportunities to develop their spirituality, and models pro-social attitudes and behavior.

In this initiative, the DOC’s Religious Services unit has moved beyond traditional government partnerships. The unit has identified volunteer community chaplains in most counties in Oregon, it provides support and training to community volunteers, and it has been a catalyst to link area churches with community corrections agencies and to link offenders with a support network that many would not otherwise have at the time of release.

The Future: Governor's Re-Entry Council

Oregon's Governor Ted Kulongoski has signed an executive order creating a state-level Re-Entry Council. He created this group out of an understanding that reentry is not solely a corrections issue.

The Governor's Re-Entry Council is envisioned as a state-level, statewide leadership group that will work collaboratively on improving the success and safety of prison-to-community transition. The Governor's Re-Entry Council will include those state agencies that contribute to successful reentry, including the Department of Corrections, the Board of Parole and Post-Prison Supervision, the Department of Human Services, the Employment Department, Oregon Housing and Community Services, the Veteran's Department, the Department of Transportation, and Oregon's system of community colleges. The Council also will include representatives from local government agencies that contribute to the success of offenders after release, such as community corrections, community services, the judiciary, district attorneys, and law enforcement.

Council members are charged with guiding system-wide policy and implementing corresponding changes in their own organizations to support the changes in corrections' reentry approach. Implementing reform will require the commitment, dedication, and persistence of many working together.

The role of the Council includes:

- ◆ Providing coordination at the executive level of reentry initiatives across the state;
- ◆ Conducting a thorough review of existing state-level policies and practices that need to be corrected and making specific recommendations for system improvement;
- ◆ Removing or minimizing barriers that impede successful transition and reintegration;
- ◆ Reviewing agency budgets and priorities to ensure they are aligned with policies that support successful transition and with evidence-based practices; and
- ◆ Establishing implementation groups to work on the operational aspects of system reform—the procedures and practices that will need to be changed in the many agencies involved in the reentry process.

For more information:

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It is clear both nationally and in Oregon that the number and nature of the barriers to successful reentry are many, and that they extend far beyond the boundaries of any one corrections agency. It will take collaborative leadership to first identify the systemic barriers to successful reentry and then to find creative and cost-effective ways to overcome them. ◆