

**Policy Forum on
Successful Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders**

June 2008



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Background of the Camden Safer Cities Initiative	3-4
Incarceration and Reentry in New Jersey	4-6
Description of Policy Forum on Successful Rehabilitation	6-7
Policy Forum Evaluation Results	7-8
Recommendations	8-9
Next Steps	9

Introduction

Nearly 60 people from Camden City and County attended a Policy Forum addressing the employment barriers of ex-offenders. This included a diverse mix of policy makers, advocates, service providers, elected officials and criminal justice representatives. The main goal of the Policy Forum was to disseminate information about the needs and obstacles of individuals returning from incarceration, as well as ascertain where offender rehabilitation falls on the City's and County's policy agendas.

The genesis of the Policy Forum came from the Camden Safer Cities Initiative and its experience with a specialized caseload of probationers and adult and juvenile parolees.

This report provides some background on the Camden Safer Cities Initiative, as well as frames the scope of re-entry and supervision in Camden City, summarizes the Policy Forum and recommendations that were offered by the panelists.

Background of Camden Safer Cities Initiative

The Camden Safer Cities Initiative (CSCI) was started in the Fall 2003 to address the pervasive problem of violent crime in Camden. CSCI is modeled after a problem-solving crime prevention process that first started in Boston in the 1990s. In brief, CSCI is a data-driven, problem-solving collaborative that brings together all elements of the criminal justice system, social service providers, and community leaders to devise and implement anti-violence strategies in Camden City. The goal of CSCI was to organize the criminal justice community and local leaders from Camden's faith-based, neighborhood, and social service organizations to reduce violent crime in Camden and help residents feel safe in their city.

The collaborative's objectives were:

- ◆ To collect data that will help identify the problem of violent crime in Camden and help to structure and ultimately evaluate the effectiveness of an Initiative;
- ◆ To design and implement an effective initiative or a set of initiatives to help reduce violent crime in Camden, specifically targeting 18- to 24-year-olds and the crime of aggravated assault with a gun;
- ◆ To encourage communication and collaboration *within* the criminal justice community and *among* local leaders and the criminal justice community.

One of the anti-violence strategies that Safer Cities concentrated on was an offender-strategy program that focused on 18-24 year olds involved in aggravated assaults with a gun--the individuals most likely to kill or be killed in Camden. Probation, adult parole, and juvenile parole identified and notified probationers and parolees under their supervision, who met pre-determined criteria for being at risk of involvement with a violent crime, to the Camden Safer Cities specialized caseload.

Once on the caseload, these participants were assessed to identify needs, such as housing, education, employment, and counseling. The participants' cases were regularly reviewed with assigned parole and probation officers, Safer Cities' case workers, and an array of local social service providers to identify emerging issues and brainstorm solutions. Through this case review process, participants were referred to needed social services and their compliance was tracked.

The case review process brought to light the various barriers that ex-offenders face when attempting to re-enter their communities, but especially when trying to obtain employment, which often was a significant condition of their supervision. A large portion of the employment barriers for ex-offenders are due to federal and state sanctions, such as prohibition of employment in certain licensed occupations, such as gaming/casino, airport, bartending and nursing/health aid fields. Further, other barriers to finding and keeping a job revolve around the other issues that ex-offenders present, such as housing, child care, drug and alcohol abuse, and medication and health. The various social service organizations, as well as the supervisory agencies, involved with the case review process felt it important to force the policy agenda item of employment for ex-offenders with local, county and state officials.

Incarceration and Reentry in New Jersey

In the last 30 years, the New Jersey prison population has more than quadrupled, increasing from about 6,000 to more than 27,000 inmates. More than 95% of this population will one day be released from prison and return to their home communities. Annually, approximately 14,000 adult inmates are both committed to and released from NJ Department of Corrections' (NJ DOC) institutions. This represents an estimated 1,180 inmates committed to and 1,200 released from NJ DOC institutions per month. An additional 1,600 juveniles are released from juvenile detention centers every year. Further, many more transition in and out of county jails on short sentences.¹

Accordingly, supervisory agencies (Adult Parole, Juvenile Parole and Probation) have incurred large caseloads in New Jersey. At any given time, roughly 70,000 adults and 13,000 juveniles are under the supervision of New Jersey State Probation Services Division.² Additionally, more than 15,000 re-entering offenders are supervised by New Jersey State Parole.³

The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates the national recidivism rate at 67.5%.⁴ Further, NJ DOC reports that the overall re-arrest rate for adult offenders previously incarcerated in a New Jersey

¹ NJ Institute of Social Justice

² www.NJcourtsonline.com

³ www.nj.gov/parole

⁴ <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm#recidivism>

state correctional facility is 55%, the re-conviction rate is 43%, and the re-incarceration rate is 31%.⁵

Of the 14,000 prisoners released annually from NJ DOC facilities, 31% (4,350) will return to two counties in New Jersey; this burden is shared nearly equally by Essex and Camden Counties.⁶ According to the NJ DOC, high concentrations of returning prisoners to a single community generate incredible costs to these communities, including costs associated with crime and public safety, greater public health risks, and high rates of unemployment and homelessness.

Further, in Camden County, adult parolees are concentrated in the City of Camden, where they account for both the highest number and highest per capita rate among all other municipalities in the state at 14.3 per 1,000 residents. In Camden City, the neighborhoods with the highest parolee per capita rate are Cooper Poynt with 24.7 per 1,000 residents; Lanning Square with 23.8; Gateway with 23; and Pyne Point with 22.8.⁷

On average, there are roughly 110 new cases of adult parolees every month, or 1,320 annually, in Camden County, with roughly 40% of these new cases residing in Camden City. Approximately, 70 adult parolees complete their parole sentence monthly and are removed from supervision, or 840 each year.⁸

The number of new juvenile parolees for Camden City average 7-8 each month, or roughly 82 each year. The number of Camden City juvenile cases being closed average 11 per month or 136 a year. Furthermore, Camden City juvenile cases total roughly 41% of all cases for JJC in the Southern region.⁹

There are roughly 5,500 adult probationers under the supervision of Camden County Probation (does not include Community Service & Collections or Child Support Enforcement cases) with approximately 40% (2,200) of probationers residing within city limits.¹⁰ The City neighborhoods with the highest probation per capita rate are: Gateway with 34 per 1,000 residents; Bergen Square at 31.2; and Lanning Square at 29.1.¹¹

These statistics clearly demonstrate the need for Camden County and City officials to seriously address the needs of ex-offenders.

A significant body of research exists that links employment to lower rates of recidivism, especially when in conjunction with stable housing, addiction and mental health services, and positive peer associations.

⁵ http://liberty.state.nj.us/corrections/OTS/faq_ots.html

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Travis, J., Keegan, S., and Cadora, E. (2003) A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in New Jersey

⁸ NJ State Parole Office #9

⁹ JJC Southern Region Office

¹⁰ <http://www.judiciary.state.nj.us/quant/cman0808.pdf>

¹¹ Travis, J., Keegan, S., and Cadora, E. (2003) A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in New Jersey

Difficulty in accessing effectual services and programs, such as public assistance, housing, child care, drug and alcohol counseling, and medical treatment has a large impact on the rate of successful employment and community reintegration. The disproportionately high number of offenders in Camden undermines neighborhood stability and strains community resources.

Description of Policy Forum on Successful Rehabilitation

The goal of the Policy Forum was to engage policy makers, elected officials, and practitioners in a discussion about offender rehabilitation, specifically the importance of employment, and to strategize on removing employment barriers for ex-offenders, as well as prioritizing the issue of offender rehabilitation with the City and County governments of Camden.

Additionally the Policy Forum's objectives were:

- **Information Sharing and Strategizing** for better quality of life and service delivery to the ex-offender population in Camden City and County.
- **Establish a Working Group** to increase the awareness of offender rehabilitation and employment issues in order to further impact policy and practices surrounding offender employment in Camden City, Camden County and the State.

The Policy Forum was organized around of two panels consisting of expert speakers on the issue of reentry and the barriers ex-offenders face when returning to their home communities. The first panel focused on the growing prison population in New Jersey and thus its corresponding effects on post-release numbers, the broad landscape of offender rehabilitation, including legislative and procedural barriers, opportunities for inter-agency collaboration, and best practices for offender rehabilitation regarding employment. The panelists for this session were: Richard Greenberg, Director of Strategic Communications & Equal Justice Fellow, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice; Tracy Swan, Project Manager, Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs; Lenny Ward, District Parole Supervisor, Community Programs Unit, NJ State Parole Board, and Mark Hoover, Executive Director, Nicholson Foundation.

The second panel featured local practitioners in the field of offender rehabilitation who spoke about their programs, as well as the obstacles their agencies face in helping ex-offenders gain employment. These panelists also addressed the gaps in services and programs for ex-offenders and provided some policy recommendations for County and City officials to consider. This panel featured Pat McKernan, COO, Volunteers of America of the Delaware Valley and Martha Chavis, Executive Director, Welcome NJ as presenters.

The Policy Forum was meant to be the beginning of a county-wide dialogue about offender rehabilitation and its role in the economic development of both of Camden City and the County. Future discussions and working sessions are envisioned on this policy topic, as well as the greater engagement of the City, County and State policy makers and elected officials.

Policy Forum Evaluation Results

In order to measure whether the Policy Forum accomplished its goal and objectives, participants were asked to complete an evaluation. The evaluation focused on whether the Policy Forum met the attendees' expectations and solicited topic suggestions for future sessions addressing offender rehabilitation.

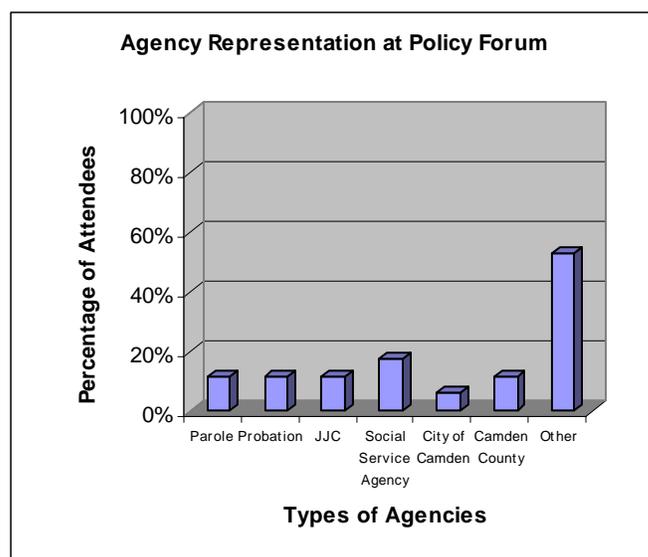
One of the main purposes of the evaluation was more accurately determine the most effective policy options for promoting successful ex-offender transition back into the Camden community.

Highlights from the evaluation results are below.

Agency Representation at Policy Forum

The Forum attracted a diverse representation of criminal justice, law enforcement and social service agencies, as well as local government.

As can be seen by the graph to the right, the second largest percentage of attendees (17.6%), represented the social services community. Interestingly, most attendees identified themselves as representing more than one category, such as 'Local Social Service Agency' and also 'Other' (53%), then listed the name of their organization.



It is also important to note that some county elected officials, as well as government representatives, did attend the Forum; however, most of the invited State elected officials were involved in the State's budget vote and unable to attend.

Expectations and Satisfaction of Policy Forum

The three areas with the highest percentage of attendees indicating expectations of the Forum were:

- Policy recommendations that would encourage employment for ex-offenders (70.6%)
- Policy recommendations that would remove employment barriers for ex-offenders (53%)
- The impact of local economic and workforce development efforts on ex-offender employment opportunities (53%)

It is also important to note again that attendees identified more than one expectation for the Forum.

In terms of meeting attendees' expectations, 70.6% of participants indicated that the Forum fulfilled their expectations 'Well' or 'Very Well', the two highest rankings.

Further, 64.8% of attendees indicated that they were 'Satisfied' or 'Very Satisfied' with the information and recommendations presented at the Forum.

Lastly, 94% of attendees indicated they would attend another policy forum on issues impacting ex-offenders and their rehabilitation.

Usefulness of Policy Forum

The vast majority of the attendees found listening to the panelist's presentations and recommendations the most insightful and useful part of the Forum.

Future Policy Forums on Offender Issues

Many of the attendees expressed a desire and concern to see more legislative City, County and State elected officials in future discussions on offender rehabilitation.

Participants expressed the need for collaboration between elected officials, policy makers, and the community in order to successfully rehabilitate ex-offenders in Camden.

Lastly, attendees indicated a need for more concrete recommendations on how to remove employment barriers for ex-offenders and a commitment on what the next steps needed to be, along with a timeline.

Recommendations

The Policy Forum evaluation results point to the need for greater presence of Camden City and County elected officials, as well as State elected officials in the dialogue of offender rehabilitation.

Panelists also made the following recommendations:

- 1). Join the Second Chance Campaign of NJ (www.secondchancenj.org), which advocates for the safe and successful reintegration of adults and juveniles returning home from incarceration by promoting policies that remove barriers to productive citizenship.
- 2). Remove the box from the City's and County's employment applications that ask if an applicant has ever been convicted, including a background check except only where it is relevant or required by law. In the very least, add a disclaimer to the City's and County's employment application indicating that the organizations do not discriminate based on previous criminal justice history.
- 3). As a State, opt out of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) legislation that bans those convicted of a felony drug-related offense from assessing federally funded public supports like general assistance, TANF, Medicaid, housing and food

stamps. These bans exclude these individuals from necessary educational and vocational training opportunities that are connected with public assistance.

- 4). As a County, expand the number of approved drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, in order to receive general assistance if convicted of a felony drug-related offense, to include outpatient and counseling services.
- 5). Conduct a 'Reentry Inventory' for the City in order to determine the availability and accessibility of services specific to the ex-offender. Based on the Inventory results, devise a plan to meet the needs of those returning to Camden from prison, while building the infrastructure of the City and supporting its economic development plans.
- 6). Partner with the information and referral service, 211, to train operators on ex-offender friendly rehabilitation services.
- 7). Recruit and hire job developers for the ex-offender population.
- 8). Conduct a campaign to educate employers on the benefits of hiring ex-offenders (tax credits).
- 9). Require that all Camden City economic development plans include a provision to hire ex-offenders residing in the city.
- 10). Develop a 'one-stop' center for ex-offenders, where vital rehabilitation services such as welfare, legal, employment placement, are co-located in one easily accessible physical space.

Next Steps

Since the Policy Forum, discussions have begun around developing a 'one-stop' center for ex-offenders with some financial support from the Nicholson Foundation. The next step in these discussions is identifying the necessary partners to determine interest in co-locating at one physical site.

Additionally, the Camden County Workforce Investment Board agreed at the Policy Forum to convene additional forums on the issue of employment for the returning prisoner.