

Opportunity Reconnect Center – Camden

Introduction

The successful reconnection of ex-offenders returning to their communities from a term of incarceration is proving to be one of the most important and critical challenges of our time. The Governor’s Strategy for Safe Streets and Neighborhoods plan on Reentry reports that in 2006 9.4% of adult offenders released from state prison returned to the City of Camden. The report also states 65% of adult offenders will be rearrested within five years of being released from prison. Existing services for this in-need population are mostly disjointed, and in general, the outcomes are poor. The engagement of the Nicholson Foundation and commitment of key stakeholders to the project presents an opportunity to develop a more effective approach to the delivery of reentry services.

Through the financial and technical support of the Nicholson Foundation, The Rutgers – Camden Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs is taking the lead in developing a new center for ex-offenders returning to the community of Camden County following a term of incarceration with the NJ Dept. of Corrections. The Opportunity Reconnect Center – Camden is modeled on the successful reentry center in Newark that has been operating at Essex County College for the past 4 years. Our goal is to improve the collaboration of critical partnering agencies in Camden County through their co-location of resources at one site that will support a more effective system of service delivery for returning ex-offenders.

The day to day operations of the center will be overseen by the Opportunity Reconnect’s Director Joseph Cassisi of the Walter Rand Institute. During the past 24 years Mr. Cassisi has been involved in delivering reentry services with the Administrative Office of the Courts Intensive Supervision Program, the Juvenile Intensive Supervision Program, and finally the past twelve years serving as the Southern Region Manager for the Juvenile Justice Commission’s Office of Juvenile Parole and Transitional Services.

Additionally, WRI will look to utilize Rutgers graduate or upper level undergraduate students to support the operation of the center. The Opportunity Reconnect Center will be located at a facility being refurbished by Volunteers of America at 1812 Federal St., Camden NJ. This site is on a bus route with a bus stop at its corner, and is located just 1 ½ blocks from VOA’s Community Resource Center.

We in fact consider this to be a public safety initiative. Providing the efficient and effective delivery of services to the offender population should help reduce their rate of recidivism. Successfully reconnecting recent offenders with their communities builds stronger, healthier communities and mitigates recidivism.

Service Delivery

WRI has previously observed the challenges of case management for ex-offenders returning to the community. WRI made some positive inroads in case management with this population in a two year

long project of supporting specialized caseloads from three separate supervising agencies. Aside from working to identify and overcome barriers to employment, WRI convened a group to discuss and direct multi-agency case plans. Opportunity Reconnect Center - Camden offers the opportunity to begin to eliminate barriers of service provision by co-locating resources at one site.

In keeping with the model developed in Newark, WRI is in the process of recruiting a group of dedicated partners to support and co-locate staff at the center.

- Camden County Board of Social Services
- Camden County College
- Camden County Workforce Investment Board
- Camden County One-Stop Career Center
- Volunteers of America
- Legal Services of NJ
- New Jersey State Parole Board
- Rutgers-Camden School of Law

The Camden County Board of Social Services is an essential checkpoint for making resources available to the offender population. BSS will be represented in a strong partnership in order to ensure that the intake process and determination of the availability of services precedes in as smooth a manner as possible.

Central to the theory behind Opportunity Reconnect and similar programs such as the federal Prisoner Reentry Initiative, is the outcome of employment. To this end, employment services will be provided at the center with a substantial presence by Volunteers of America (VOA). VOA will provide center clients with assistance in locating and preparing for employment. VOA staff will be on site on a regular basis beginning with the opening of the center. An important element of the employment initiative is assisting the clients with obtaining their birth certificates, picture ID's, and social security cards.

Efforts are ongoing to negotiate an arrangement with the One-Stop Center to station a case manager at the center, at least on a part-time basis. The Camden County WIB is supporting WRI in these efforts. Access to the One-Stop Center's resources and information will assist in preventing the ex-offenders from getting lost in the rush of activity at the One-Stop, hopefully leading to better employment outcomes.

Camden County College has agreed, at the request of WRI, to take the lead in convening an ad hoc committee to identify the educational needs of ex-offenders returning to Camden County, identify existing educational resources that can be utilized to address those needs, and then to identify the gaps in services and develop a plan of action to address those unmet needs. Specifically we anticipate that while

some ex-offenders may be college ready, the majority will require remedial work utilizing Adult Basic Skills (ABS) to address programming towards earning a GED, literacy classes, as well as ESL classes. Again, not all of these resources can be co-located at the Opportunity Reconnect Center, but we hope to establish a readily accessible network of appropriate educational resources for our clients.

The provision of legal services has been highlighted as a substantial gap in servicing the ex-offender population in Camden County. The addition of this resource has been seen by our stakeholders as a significant value-added component to the service delivery provided to the returning ex-offenders. We are currently working with Legal Services of NJ to have a regular and consistent presence at the center. We are also seeking to secure funding so that the Camden-Rutgers School of Law can assign students to the center under the supervision of Legal Services of NJ or the School of Law. We also are investigating the feasibility of utilizing furloughed attorneys from large firms in the area to provide additional legal services resources. We expect the clients will be assisted in resolving child support issues, driver's license reinstatement, employment discrimination, expungement, and public entitlements.

The New Jersey State Parole Board will have a regular and consistent presence at the center. The District Office will send newly released parolees to the center via a referral process. Essential client information will be provided by the Parole representative, augmenting service plans.

Research for this initiative will be aided by the utilization of the Business Access reentry database that has been developed for this purpose by The Nicholson Foundation. Each partner agency will be required to enter information regarding the progress of the individual cases.

We believe that one of the critical factors in the success of Newark's Opportunity Reconnect Center has been the leadership of Newark's city government, particularly the support of Mayor Booker. Reentry efforts are also receiving important support from Mayor Palmer of the City of Trenton. WRI believes that the City of Camden's administration has an opportunity to also make a significant impact on eliminating the barriers to successful reentry in the City of Camden.

For further information on Opportunity Reconnect - Camden, contact Joe Cassisi with any additional questions at 856-225-6068.