

Key to Strengthening Reentry Programs? The Former Inmates Themselves

Abstract

When it comes to making the transition back into society, former prisoners lack support programs to smooth the way and, consequently, often boomerang back behind bars. Returning citizens face financial hardship, housing challenges, and other hurdles that can cause an ex-inmate to stumble back into prison. A handful of reentry services like Viapath Technologies, based in Falls Church, VA., aims to provide individualized support to returning citizens. The organization attempts to disrupt the cycle of incarceration by providing multidisciplinary support services beyond production of education tablets that allow returning citizens to earn GED degrees and learn everyday skills. Through extensive research on recidivism and interviews with returning citizen-turned leaders, I examine how increased involvement of the formerly incarcerated in reentry programs plays a role in potential legal and social solutions that can help ex-inmates get out and stay out of prison – and in the process build a successful life beyond bars. I found many organizations lack leadership involvement of the formerly incarcerated. Thus, the priorities of returning citizens aren't met, the support is not personalized, and the effectiveness is not high enough to eliminate the existing reintegration challenges. The proper support is needed from coaches who have first-hand experience in reentry so that they know exactly how to handle prejudice, lack of resources and emotional turmoil. This way, leaders of these support programs empathize with their struggles, but most importantly create long-term personal strategies to avoid a return to prison and to rebuild their lives.

Introduction

The reintegration journey of returning citizens is a difficult one, with recidivism rates reflecting the lack of comprehensive support organizations and programs to smooth the way. Around 1.2 million prisoners are in the US prison system in 2021, at a proportion of around 350 sentenced prisoners to 100,000 citizens (Carson 2020). Around 700,000 prisoners nationwide return from prisons and 2,000 return to DC

each year. However, two thirds of them end up back in prison within three years(CJCC 2013). There are many obstacles that these people face when home, such as no stable housing or source of income and an unfamiliarity with society. These obstacles put them at risk of returning back into prison. While there are some policies like “[ban the box initiative](#)”, “[expungement laws](#)”, and “[fair chance act](#)” that reduce some barriers, the success of reintegration relies on the quality and dedication of the reentry program and how customized it is toward returning citizen’s individual needs and experience. The ideal program establishes the right mindset, provides resources and education, thereby smoothing the job and house hunting process and taking a fundamental step in avoiding recidivism.

The financial instability is in large part due to the consequences of being incarcerated. Besides a prison sentence, being convicted of a crime comes with penalties such as monetary sanctions that continue to impact returning citizens after reentry into society. A study by Andrea Montes discovered that of the ex-offenders questioned, they “each owed an average of \$13,607 to the courts when leaving prison.” Most of them are already struggling to support themselves with finance, health, and housing when returning to society without jobs. Over 75% of them reportedly received financial support from their families (Montes 2021). It is crucial that, if they aren’t financially stable, returning citizens have the resources and support in finding employment and housing. Another study from the DC Policy Center found those who lacked the basic necessities of even housing were employed at a rate of 18% as opposed to those with stable housing at 45% (Selwitz 2018). The bottom line is, returning citizens must be able to find and keep a job, which will allow them to succeed in reintegration without slipping back into crime.

There are reentry programs and services that exist across the US, but the quantity and quality are highly variable state to state. Some might provide the resources, but not actively help connect to them or navigate their options. There also might be personal barriers preventing them from seeking social and health services like lack of tactical experience, negative previous encounters, chronic mental and physical illness, or financial instability.

More sustainable solutions should involve “providing high-quality job training and professional development opportunities to the incarcerated population (Montes 2021). This way, returning citizens

seeking employment not only land a job but keep it. Robin Selwitz from DC Policy Center said many of them lacked the knowledge of building a resume, preparing for job interviews, or enduring the stress of their new job which was one of the biggest obstacles in employment search. As a result they have disagreements, or run into an inability to accomplish an unfamiliar task and quit (Selwitz 2018).

Viapath's goal is to disrupt the cycle of incarceration. The way to accomplish this goal is through not only education on technology platforms for all types of offenders but also professional services for incarcerated people and creating support networks including correctional institutions, job opportunities, and health services. The services are provided by On Global Leadership. It is a company working to provide customized courses for Viapath that explores how leadership can be applied in different fields. We would like to see if this approach promotes a more stable income, improved resource utility, and can lead to fulfillment of goals. Such an approach will help returning citizens acquire basic needs which, in turn, facilitates perseverance through a bumpy reintegration process. This article aims to highlight that to successfully support those returning from prison, reentry programs need to consult former convicts who know the target population's needs and recruit them as coaches to bridge the gap in objectives and promote empathy.

Methods:

Two men and one woman who were previously incarcerated were interviewed. All of them have made a living in helping returning citizens overcome the obstacles of reintegration like housing, professional development, and mental health. The semi-structured interviews were created in a way to collect anecdotal information on their experiences to pinpoint legal and societal factors in their struggles in reintegration and receive feedback for strengthening reintegration programs and improving retention of ex-offenders. The meetings were held virtually. The interviewees are all well-educated, with experience as both support specialists and returning citizens. They are involved in the On Global Leadership program building a course to help Viapath deliver it out to all returning citizens. They are also working in other organizations to reach returning citizens in any way they can.

Alexander Campbell is a peer support specialist helping returning citizens with job, coaching and internal development. He previously served 26 years in Virginia. He spent his time in incarceration attaining an associate's degree, writing ten plays, and tutoring prisoners. Involved in mentoring at-risk youth and training to be a professional coach, Alexander has embraced the goal of advocating for change in the personal narrative of the formerly incarcerated.

Louis Sawyer Jr. has worked as a community outreach coordinator for a housing reentry program which provides traditional housing to returning citizens for a year. He served 25 years in prisons around the US. During his time in prison, he was often in the library educating himself and keeping current with events outside of prison. After his release, he received training at a transitional housing center and from there worked up to an operations manager.

Ashley Smith-works at a crisis center helping people at risk psychologically and physically. Her story is a little different. She served five and a half years in prison and had to support not only herself but also her daughter during incarceration and after she re-entered society. Despite her obstacles, she stayed committed to the community and gave motivational speeches.

Each individual interview encapsulates how reintegration is difficult for all returning citizens but how different their struggles, their experiences, and their needs were. With three interviewees and with different stories to tell, the diverse representation will facilitate formation of comprehensive solutions.

The Interviewee's Struggles

Despite the growing prevalence of reentry programs and some legislative movement in making reintegration easier, there is still a disconnect between the goals of returning citizens and the goals of those in charge of the reentry programs. Returning citizens want a more customized support system. The program priorities are not enabling this to be accomplished at the moment and returning back to society remains extremely difficult.

One of the first struggles is being unfamiliar with the law, not understanding its consequences, and navigating society. Alexander mentions many of those imprisoned are ignorant of the law. Many like

him were “hoping for the best” since the lawyer typically doesn’t explain what those convicted are facing. Alexander was told a certain number of years he would serve, which turned out to be false. Louis had a public defender who worked for a plea bargain instead of fighting at trial. He ended up traveling to more than 30 prison facilities, having no control over where he went. In Ashley’s case, she went to prison charged with armed robbery for a predicament that her charges didn’t reflect. She said it was a case of self-defense and doesn’t feel “every situation should be categorized the same.” However, she followed her public defender's advice in taking a plea deal in which she says the promised sentence length was inaccurate. In order to be successful upon reentry, returning citizens must know why and how they were incarcerated in the first place. A better understanding can come with prioritizing education. Alexander, for example, faced adversity when trying to attain a degree in prison, as the prison ended up eliminating the college fund. This is one of the many examples where returning citizens face challenges because their goals and reentry program’s priorities didn’t align.

Furthermore, the second of many difficulties is the lack of resources and experience coming out of prison, despite existing reentry programs. Alexander recalls how technology overwhelms returning citizens when attempting to return to regular life. This implies that there wasn’t enough effort to help returning citizens adapt to the change in technology during the time they were incarcerated. Both Ashley and Louis encountered these problems too. Behind the lack of resources is the lack of dedication in certain programs. Ashley had to be proactive because her case manager didn’t connect her to the necessary resources to get her driver’s license and didn’t indicate where to go for other crucial documents. She instead sought indirect connections from the program like their drivers and surrounding people. Louis ran into challenges at previous transition houses, where he said the programs were more in it for the money and that there had to be more employees that cared.

The third difficulty is the process of obtaining employment with a record. Alexander knows that depending on the record, returning citizens couldn’t find basic jobs at convenience stores. Ashley spent over 500 dollars in application fees and got accepted to one job. It was not a convenience store but a crisis center. From interviews with returning citizens in previous studies, it’s highlighted that “employers still

conduct background checks that disqualify many applicants” despite it violating DC law (Criminal Record Screening Act). This act states withdrawal can only be conducted if the conviction legitimately affects duties of the job (Selwitz 2018).

What Needs to Change

Although reentry is inevitably a difficult process, there are certain legal and societal changes legislation and organizations can make to align with returning citizen’s needs and goals. One of the biggest changes that take the interest of returning citizens into account is meeting their basic needs. Many men and women do not have appropriate housing. Louis mentions there’s a growing industry in providing reentry services with different corporations putting up seed money to temporarily house returning citizens. However, he says these services can only do so much as individuals who fund them are all tied to where their money comes from.

The second thing that needs to be changed is not only the accessibility to resources when returning citizens are first released from prison but also the extent to which it can be applied. Alexander took reentry classes in prison for six months but exclaimed that nothing he was learning was applicable to where he was going. This again highlights the need of more customized services both provided by prisons and the third-party reentry programs. Louis added that birth certificate, ID, and social security card should be obtained 18 months before release. They insisted these prison reentry programs need to improve in making the appropriate resources within reach. Ashley asks if a person loses everything, how are they supposed to get to a place that’ll help them without connections and transportation?

In addition to changing the problem of lack of resources, there also needs to be initiative to provide more job opportunities for returning citizens because many individuals coming home face a shortage of it. Alexander participated in a job training that paid him quicker than a regular job. Places like automotive classes and DC Central Kitchen offer this experience. Returning citizens not only receive the experiences that’ll prepare them for the professional world but also get financially situated while receiving education. It gives them time to adjust. Ashley suggested a similar idea where reentry programs

could create job opportunities for those with a record since they might not be able to get jobs at stores or government positions. This way it'll create opportunities for felons to benefit financially and not slip back into crime.

According to the interviewees, there needs to be more peer advocates or experienced returning citizens hired through the court system. Alexander points out that they've experienced the same things current returning citizens are trying to break through to start living their life. So, they'll know the best resources out of the limited options they have. Louis wants these advocates to have a slightly bigger role in helping returning citizens by encouraging them to push council members, congressional people, and their agencies to make the needs of men and women coming home known. He says when "the laws are coming up in the books, they have to testify" so that the pockets of reentry organizations are deeper.

There needs to be a more active voice of returning citizen veterans leading the programs so that what they are doing not only pertains to what individuals actually need but also is communicated in a way they understand. In order to make it more targeted towards them, reentry programs should consult returning citizens' first-hand experience and seek out feedback and adjust accordingly. Ashley says there are not enough people in charge of reentry that actually know what it's like to go through the process.

What They Bring to the Table

Many returning citizens like Alexander, Louis, and Ashley, have a lot to offer on how to improve the reentry situation. They have not only gone through the process but have the necessary experience to assume a leadership role next to those running reentry programs. Alexander used to be a tutor in prison, a leader of a prison religious service, and developed communication skills with those in prison. He learned to make adjustments in his language to understand them, speak with them, and motivate them since he said a majority of inmates have the language skills of a 4th grader. This skill will continue to translate into interacting with returning citizens and bridging the communication gap with reentry organizations. As an aspiring coach with On Global Leadership, one of his roles is to make the language applicable so returning citizens know what's going on. He asks, "what is a wealth of information if you cannot

communicate it effectively?” Louis has experience as a peer advocate providing wraparound services that meet returning citizen’s needs and knowledge in providing individuals temporary housing so that they secure employment and take care of their families. Ashley speaks for the men and women incarcerated for self-defense situations and shows them how it’s possible to reenter successfully.

Returning citizens have feedback for the legal and social structures that dictate reentry and psychological advice to overcome the inevitable adversities these very structures bring. Alexander came to understand the consequences his actions brought and decided to take accountability for the obstacles he faced after incarceration. He has learned that the individual is the most important factor in recidivism. They must make up their mind that they aren’t returning and accept that “there’s going to be doors closed.”

A big part of Louis’ growth came from growing closer with Jesus and he can connect to many Christian returning citizens who are walking the same road he walked. He compared his time in jail to Paul’s “Road to Damascus” experience and now he believes helping the returning citizens was what Jesus called him to do.

Ashley’s journey of growth stems from her daughter. One of the biggest challenges she faced with conviction was not only being taken away from her daughter but also figuring out a way to reenter society with the responsibilities of a mother. She knew she had to be strong and couldn’t let down her kid. If she’s involved in a reentry program, she can speak for all the mothers incarcerated that do not have a voice to speak on their reentry struggles, providing more personalized words of advice to keep returning citizens like them hopeful.

Analysis:

We learn of the struggles of incarceration and reentry, the problems in law and society that make reentry still so difficult, and their hopes for how reintegration can change with their involvement. They all agreed that there’s a disconnect between the priorities of returning citizens and the priorities of reentry programs. The disconnect is in understanding the problem through the eyes of the formerly incarcerated and finding the corresponding solutions, valuing the resources that are most fundamental to successful

reintegration, and communicating the appropriate information of the solutions so that it is understood by the target audience. The lack of cohesive objectives contributes to ineffective programs which aggravate recidivism rates.

It can be implied that there aren't many reentry programs that involve returning citizens in its decision making, strategic planning or implementation. There is a lack of employees that have first-hand experience in coming out of prison and trying to find a meaningful place in society whether they are directing the program or on the frontlines coaching with their expertise. Coaches or program leaders that share this experience with new returning citizens exhibit empathy, which is a fundamental aspect of retaining them. The returning citizen will see that the person providing advice and aid came from a similar place as them and saw how they succeeded. Thus, the client will have more confidence in what the reentry program knows is best for them.

The second benefit of having veteran returning citizens in a position where they have a voice in reentry programs is that they are more within reach to make changes in resource accessibility. On a personal level, they've connected with resources in the past that might not have been broadcasted by non-returning citizen led reentry programs. The increased insight into what things or places work in aiding reintegration is an advantage. Alexander was involved in programs that paid him for job training. This resource not only prepared him for his professional road ahead but also increased the chances of reentering society financially stable. Louis was a member of the Baptist church which played a huge role in providing a network of support and resources. Thus, it alleviated many of the challenges he would have struggled with by himself. Ashley realized that a lot of her support came not from the programs but from the people indirectly involved. Her experience could inform returning citizens to keep their eyes peeled in unexpected places and be proactive with every opportunity. On the legislative level, peer advocates and coaches can harness their platform in requesting more funding from the government. Thus, the increased budget of the program could be directed in the appropriate areas of housing, transportation, jobs, and other basic necessities.

Another bonus of having returning citizen-turned leaders be on the frontlines of reentry organizations is that they can communicate with former inmates better than anyone else. Leaders who have not been in their position might have an abundance of knowledge in the sociological, legal, and psychological aspects of recidivism but might not know how to interact directly with returning citizens or speak to them in a way that aligns with their outlook on life. Leaders like Alexander who spent his time in prison tutoring inmates have expertise in understanding them and adjusting the way they communicate to pass their knowledge along. Thus, a coach that can facilitate two-way communication is a must.

The next step to this issue is bringing awareness to the fact that veteran returning citizen involvement to create optimal reentry programs is crucial. Viapath is on the right track in adopting this frame of mind by creating a holistically successful reintegration program for returning citizens. This involves but is not limited to educational courses and employment practice before reentering society. In addition to the general educational courses, the interviewees have large parts in designing and carrying out a suite of interactive courses through On Global Leadership that will not only prepare returning citizens for the professional world but also bring awareness to how capable they are to make a change. The courses start out with everyday leadership, then moves on to entrepreneurship, finance, and accounting, then coaching. This approach is optimal in two ways. Firstly, it starts from the beginning establishing a base of self-belief and motivation. Once that is established it teaches them the skills to thrive in the professional world. This ensures a higher likelihood that the basic need of employment is met. Thus, focusing on what returning citizens need in a way they think it'll work addresses the disconnect many other reentry services have. Secondly, the courses include learning how to coach which promotes a dispersion of knowledge and an expanding network of support. The movement to improve the lives of returning citizens becomes contagious. Hopefully not only will other services adopt this approach but also the U.S. Congress will become aware of the right needs of returning citizens and adopt measures that will eradicate the major factors of recidivism. "Inspiring people to aspire" as Alexander puts it.

Alexander, Louis, and Ashley are among millions of individuals who have faced the consequential side of the law and have been stuck in the process for years. Some of them are incarcerated

deservingly and some of them have charges that do not do justice to their story. Many of them struggle with all the choices they face after decades of regimented living. Nevertheless, for those who are truly committed to learning from poor choices of the past, they deserve a second chance. After all, if we really trust that people have served their time once the sentence is finished, we need to work with them to the best of our efforts to create laws, procedures, and programs that will ensure the same fair shot at success as those who do not share their stories.

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