
Re-Integrating Ex-Offenders Into Communities

CBI Practitioners: [David Fairman](#)

Case Background

Across the country, two decades of effort to “get tough on crime” through increasingly strict sentencing laws, prison conditions, and parole rules have produced the highest incarceration rates in U.S. history. Since very few prisoners serve life sentences, these policies have also led to the highest prison release rates in history.

The rising rate of prison releases strains law enforcement, social service, health, and housing resources at the community level, and creates serious problems for the re-integration of ex-offenders. Most prisoners have few pre-release opportunities to plan for job training, employment, housing or health care. After release, ex-offenders often confront institutional gaps between the corrections system and the locally based jobs and services they need. When ex-offenders apply for jobs and housing, they are often viewed as undesirable employees and tenants. As a result, more than 60% of released inmates are rearrested within three years.

More than 90% of all prisoners in the U.S. are in state prisons. State officials are increasingly concerned about the cycle of imprisonment, release, and recidivism. In 2001, the Council of State Governments (a leading national organization of elected state officials) launched a national Ex-Offender Re-Entry Policy Council. The Policy Council’s goal is to develop bipartisan consensus on policies and principles that would enable state and local government officials to meet the re-integration needs of ex-offenders. At the same time, the Policy Council’s recommendations must ensure public safety and balance the needs of ex-offenders with those of other disadvantaged groups.

To make the re-entry issues more tractable, the Policy Council established three Advisory Groups: criminal justice and law enforcement, job training and employment, and health and housing services. The Council of State Governments contracted with the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) to provide staff support to the Health and Housing Advisory Group. NAHRO had previous positive experience with CBI as the facilitator of two national housing policy consensus building processes, and contracted with CBI to facilitate the work of the Health and Housing Advisory Group.

CBI Approach

The Advisory Group's 21 members are extremely diverse. The group includes Arizona and Kansas state legislators with responsibility for criminal justice and corrections legislation; several state and county corrections officials; leaders of state, local and non-profit mental health, public health, and public housing organizations; an ex-offender now leading a nationally recognized re-integration program in New York state; a victims' rights advocate; and several researchers. All were selected because of their innovative work on re-entry issues.

In preparation for the first meeting of the Advisory Group, CBI Managing Director David Fairman interviewed its members to learn more about their experience and background in ex-offender re-entry, discuss the group's goals, establish ground rules, and develop the meeting agenda.

The group met in Washington in June for a day and a half. They began with researcher presentations on policy issues, and then set priorities for discussion. The group then began to "walk through" the process of re-entry, from sentencing through incarceration to pre-release planning, release, linkage with health and housing services, and stabilization of those services. They explored a number of promising initiatives that Advisory Group members and others have been pioneering: in-prison job and service fairs linked to specific communities; coordinating the transfer of medical and substance treatment records to local providers; and providing transitional housing for ex-offenders linked to job training and other services, among others. The Group also planned joint-fact finding to further its understanding of problems and potential solutions.

Outcomes

The Council of State Governments is currently securing funding for two more meetings to take place over the next 12 months. At those meetings, the Advisory Group will further refine their recommendations on policy principles and strategies, identify promising programs, and ultimately draft a policy report to the Council of State Governments.

For more information on CBI's experience with social issues, please contact Managing Director David Fairman, at dfairman@cbuilding.org