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Evidence-Based Practice and Jail Transition

We as corrections professionals are faced many times with adversity. We manage crowded jail facilities and debate various perspectives regarding how our jails should be led and managed. Many inform us what is right or wrong for the inmates transitioning to our communities. Yet, we have never endured these difficulties amidst a fiscal crisis like the one we are currently experiencing. Despite difficulties associated with the current national economic crisis, this situation also presents opportunities to advance our profession.

The vast majority of people think that new jail construction is simply too expensive. By no means does this imply that regular people do not recognize the need for well-run jail facilities. It simply means that the public has developed an interest in options other than financing new jail construction. If new jail facilities are not to be built, then we, as corrections professionals, need to learn different ways of conducting business so that we may still manage our jail facilities safely, yet do so in a manner that makes the most sense for our respective constituencies.

We must consider what happens when an offender leaves our jail. We need to formulate policies that accommodate a better transition of offenders to our communities. While this may seem a daunting task, the good news is there are now well-researched models and practices available to guide us.

There also is a relatively large amount of Federal resources to help with the evaluation and change of our respective systems of sanction, incarceration, and release.

Fundamental to such a change is the reality that jail crowding is due to policy rather than an increase in crime. Indeed, the overall number of crimes committed within our Nation has actually decreased by 19 percent since 1995. The number of violent crimes committed within our country has also decreased by 27 percent despite a 16 percent increase in our country's population during the same period of time. Even more telling is the fact that the number of people incarcerated within our jails during the same period increased by 32 percent. One might make many inferences regarding these disparities; however, one fact is certain, our crowded jail conditions are

not a result of growing crime, but of more punitive policies of incarceration.

If these policies actually increased long-term public safety, they may be deemed effective; but recidivism rates of those released from jail commonly exceed 50 percent, and from prison, 67 percent. Eighty percent of all recidivism occurs within six months of release, and rapid inmate turnover within our jail facilities finds nine million individuals per year occupying our nearly 830,000 jail beds. Average length of stay within a jail facility is often less than 30 days and pretrial populations are rising to an all-time high of 63 percent. Despite these daunting realities, many within our profession have waited for the day when changes in policy and practice actually "correct" or prompt inmate behavioral change, thus enhancing long-term public safety.

The urgency created by all of the aforementioned realities has prompted significant Federal cooperative agreements to develop models and best-practices with experts in the field of corrections. One such agreement between the National Institute of Corrections and the Urban Institute has resulted in the Transition from Jail to the Community (TJC) Model. Currently, the TJC Model is being piloted in two diverse

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jails—a large, 2,500-plus bed system in Denver and a small, less than 200-bed system in Lawrence, Kansas—to determine its viability as a model that is widely applicable. Four additional systems will work with the TJC project later this year.

The fact that the TJC model is designed to apply the latest research within a local system of corrections makes its potential benefit enormous to communities both large and small. Decreases in expenditure and recidivism, coupled with increases in long-term public safety and pro social behavior, can be expected with the implementation of system-transition planning such as that called for by the TJC model. However, changes must be made throughout a local system of criminal justice and its associated system services to build a solid, measurable system of transition and reentry and, as we know, change within any system does not come easily.

Regardless of the innovative, exciting models and practices that are available to corrections professionals, leaders within our field must see the urgency to do more than operate safe, secure jail facilities. Correctional leaders need to be well-informed in proven best practice in order to lead change in a jail and system-organizational culture. Evidence-based practice must be foundational to such an effort. All-too-often we make organizational and system policy reactively in response to an event that has already taken place. We must consider the many stakeholders with whom we are connected and lead system change to realize

reductions in recidivism that are both cost effective and increase local long-term public safety. We must move away from the initiation of scattered, unrelated jail programs and move toward the strategic implementation of reentry systems in which initiatives and programs align with one another and are grounded in solid evidence.

Perhaps most importantly, for the benefit of taxpayers, we must take advantage of new opportunities to initiate and sustain a system change that provides superior outcomes. Actions called for by such an approach are neither representative of “get tough” nor “soft on crime” policies. Evidence-based approaches call for accountability of all concerned: inmates, officers, and system practitioners alike. Proactive policies, practices, and decisions must be made based upon careful, scientific evaluation of their effectiveness and an alignment with a larger, shared system mission.

Although it is an exciting premise, having large potential benefits, it must be realized that we often can be the largest barrier to the implementation of such an approach. We spend our careers protecting our jails and competing with others for resources. Most commonly, we operate closed systems and are blind to the benefits of engaging our staffs fully with stakeholders within our local systems and communities to develop systems of reentry.

Much of this is understandable given the reality of jail leadership, its diverse, reactive nature, and its often unfair portrayal by the media and others. However, the time has come for jail leaders to take respon-

sibility and lead. We can and should be the ones to advance evidence-based transition and reentry planning within our local system of criminal justice. Indeed, it is abundantly clear that this time of economic crisis desperately needs educated jail professionals who will act as local system experts to realize the many benefits to all within their respective communities of an evidence-based, fiscally sound system of offender transition and reentry.

Named 2007 Jail Administrator of the Year by the American Jail Association, **Gary Christensen, Ph.D.**, has been employed in the correctional field for 31 years. He initiated the nationally-recognized Dutchess County (New York) Jail Transition Program, and chaired the Dutchess County Criminal Justice Council. As principal of Corrections Partners, Inc., Dr. Christensen works with correctional leaders to enhance the implementation of evidence-based practice. He is a core member of the Transition from Jail to Community Initiative team. Gary Christensen may be reached at 914-489-1584 or gchristensen@correctionspartners.com.

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