



Strengthening Jail and Prison Reentry through Community Engagement

Lessons Learned from Camden County, New Jersey

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In 2018, change agents in the Camden County Department of Corrections in New Jersey introduced a five-pronged community engagement strategy to reduce the use of jail and improve reentry outcomes for people released from incarceration. Central to this strategy are the county’s NuEntry Opportunity Specialists (NOS), previously incarcerated people who serve as credible messengers to people released from incarceration and who work to reduce the stigma of incarceration through community education and outreach. In this case study, we describe Camden County’s community engagement strategy and examine its implementation and reported impact. We also discuss lessons derived from the county’s efforts to implement and sustain its community engagement strategy and offer recommendations to other sites interested in advancing similar efforts.

Community engagement, broadly defined, is “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people” (CDC 1997, 9). The transformative power of community engagement lies in the ability to “change the way problems are solved and resources invested” as policy and practice recommendations are informed by the experiences and perspectives of impacted communities (Nexus Community Partners 2015, 1). What constitutes “community” is context-specific and may be based on a variety of uniting characteristics, such as geography, native language, or some common experience (Sakala and La Vigne 2019), while “engagement” often exists on a continuum characterized by increasing levels of communication, trust, and power sharing. Outreach anchors one

end of this continuum; at the other end are collaborative partnerships and shared leadership in which the community—however defined—has final or co-equal decisionmaking responsibility (CDC 2011).

Originating in the public health field in the late 1990s, community engagement has been embraced by other policy spheres (including criminal justice) as a crucial mechanism for effective policy formulation, change, and reform. Research on the benefits of community engagement is sparse, but experts routinely cite increased trust, enhanced collaboration, and more effective solutions as key outcomes. Researchers at the Pennsylvania State University identified these benefits and impacts of community engagement:

- It creates more effective solutions. Drawing on local knowledge from a diverse group creates solutions that are practical and effective.
- It increases the likelihood that projects or solutions will be widely accepted. People who participate in community engagement processes show significant commitment to helping make projects (or solutions) happen.
- It improves citizens' knowledge and skills in problem solving. Participants learn about issues in depth, which helps reveal the multiple sides of a problem and more relevant solutions.
- It empowers and integrates people from different backgrounds. Groups that feel ignored or marginalized can, through community engagement efforts, exert influence over issues in their communities. Furthermore, “when people from different areas of the community work together, they often find that they have much in common.”
- It creates local networks of community members. The more people who know what is going on and are willing to work toward a goal, the more likely a community is to be successful in reaching its goals.
- It creates opportunities for discussing concerns. Regular, ongoing discussions enable people to express concerns before problems become too big or out of control.
- It increases trust in community organizations and governance. Knowing what government, community members and leaders, and organizations can and cannot do may reduce future conflict.¹

In this case study, which is part of a series highlighting work supported by the MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge Innovation Fund (box 1), we examine Camden County's multipronged community engagement strategy and explore a key component of that strategy: the role of its NOS in supporting successful reentry for people released from jail and prison through direct services and community outreach and education.² We recount Camden County's efforts to recruit, train, and support the NOS and their work both with newly released individuals and as ambassadors to policymakers and the broader community. We also offer critical insights about how to authentically engage community members directly impacted by the criminal legal system, advance power sharing, and impact local practices and policies.

BOX 1

The Safety and Justice Challenge's Innovation Fund

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Safety and Justice Challenge in 2015 to address the misuse and overuse of jails, a main driver of incarceration in America. In 2016, the foundation established the Innovation Fund to provide jurisdictions small grants to test ideas for safely reducing the US jail population while maintaining or enhancing public safety. Innovation Fund jurisdictions received small grant awards, technical assistance from the Urban Institute, and access to the Challenge's peer learning network. The initial Innovation Fund cohort included 20 competitively selected jurisdictions in 2017, and in June 2018, Urban added 12 sites through a second competition, to expand the breadth and variety of initiatives. Capstone awards, available to both rounds of Innovation Fund sites starting in 2019, provided an additional 12 months of funding or technical assistance to selected sites to expand or enhance their initial Innovation Fund work.

We draw on several data sources in this case study: regular communications between the Urban Institute and Camden County stakeholders over the 18-month Innovation Fund implementation period (October 2018 to March 2020) and the county's capstone work, which began in September 2020 and concluded in November 2021 (the county's Innovation Fund and capstone work is described in box 2); the county's Innovation Fund program materials and progress reports; observation of key activities; and nearly a dozen semistructured interviews with key staff in the county's department of corrections (DOC) and NOS focused on implementation of the county's strategy and the NOS' work.

BOX 2

Camden County's Innovation Fund and Capstone Projects

Located in southwest New Jersey directly across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, Camden County is the state's eighth-most-populous county and one of its most economically distressed.^a Roughly 13 percent of the county's half a million residents live at or below the federal poverty level, and the unemployment rate is nearly 8 percent (Camden County 2019). The county's jail is among the largest in the state with 1,273 beds. In 2017, the year before Camden County joined the Innovation Fund, the county jail released over 13,000 people, 63 percent of whom returned to Camden County (Camden County 2018). With Innovation Fund support, the county sought to implement a comprehensive community-engagement strategy that linked and coordinated the criminal justice system, public health and social services, private entities, and formerly incarcerated people to address the needs of the jail reentry population. In 2020, a capstone award enabled the county to expand its community-engagement efforts, through which it built a robust network of nearly two dozen NuEntry Opportunity Specialists, who assisted over 100 people returning to the community from jail or prison; fostered the Transformative Justice Initiative (TJI) to advance NOS-guided community engagement; incorporated NOS into the county's formal reentry decisionmaking structures (an example of power sharing); enlisted new community-based partners; and held forums across the county to educate and engage residents on the criminal legal system, reentry, and reform issues.



Sources:^a Camden County's 2018 Innovation Fund grant application.

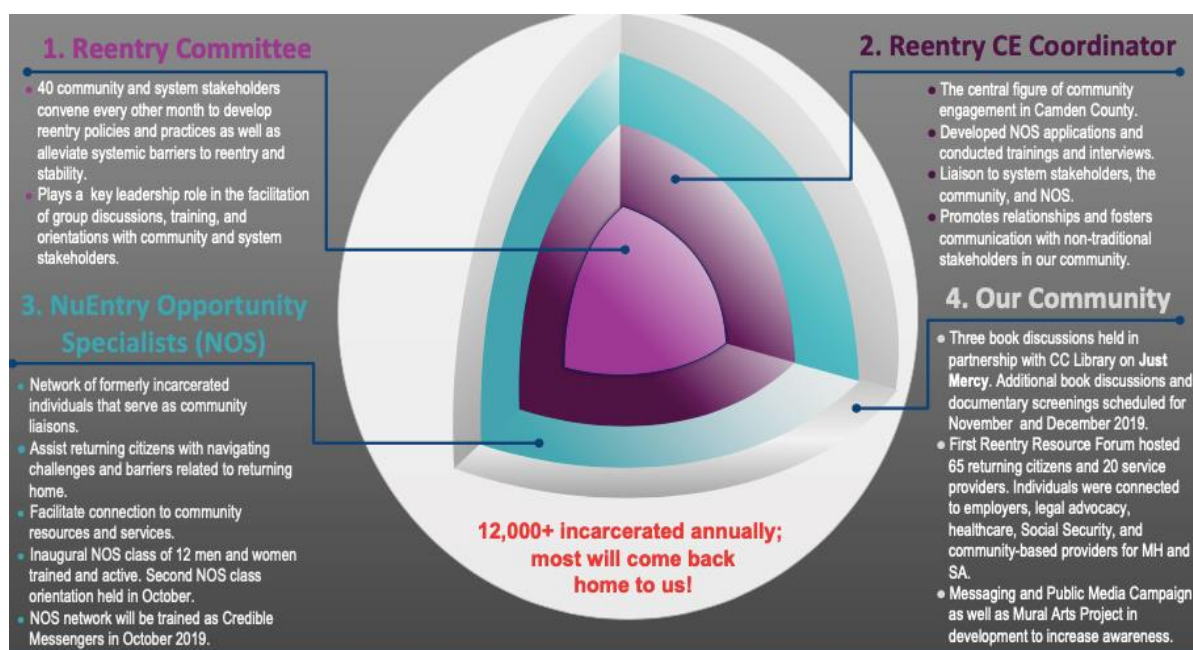
^b Camden County's 2019 Planning Initiative to Build Bridges between Jail and Community-Based Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder grant application.

Camden County's Community Engagement Strategy

Camden County sought to strengthen its reentry efforts and reduce the use of the county jail by engaging the community—often overlooked in and excluded from conversations on this issue—in a partnership to coordinate and link criminal justice, social service, public health, civic, and business organizations with people who had experienced the criminal legal system and thereby better address the needs of people returning to the community after incarceration in jail or prison. Reducing the stigma of incarceration and educating the broader community on the criminal legal system, including barriers to reentry, were related objectives. The county's community engagement strategy consisted of five key components that leveraged and built on existing reentry efforts and infrastructure, as described below and depicted in figure 1. Please note that in figure 1, the “Our Community” component covers two strategies, Reentry Resource Forums and Media Campaign, which we discuss as distinct components (4 and 5) in the sections below.

FIGURE 1

Components of Camden County's Community Engagement Strategy



Source: Camden County's Innovation Fund project.

Notes: CC = Camden County. CE = community engagement. MH = mental health. NOS = NuEntry Opportunity Specialists. SA = substance abuse. In this figure, the “Our Community” component covers two strategies, Reentry Resource Forums and Media Campaign, which we discuss as distinct components in this case study.

Component 1: The Camden County Reentry Committee

In 2017, the county established the Camden County Reentry Committee, which consists of 40 members including local elected officials and stakeholders from across the criminal legal system and the social services, health and behavioral health, housing, employment, and business sectors.³ The committee meets every other month to craft the county's reentry policies and practices and to guide the design and implementation of jail and community-based programming for people leaving the county jail. Under the Innovation Fund, the committee expanded its membership to include two NOS and established a community engagement workgroup.

The Reentry Committee provided critical infrastructure for collaboration and gave stakeholders a vehicle to elevate the county's reentry efforts and to implement several related components of the proposed community engagement strategy, such as the Reentry Resource Forums, community outreach and education activities, and media campaign. Importantly, though the county's community engagement strategy began within the Reentry Committee, the committee's formal system stakeholders realized they were not the best messengers to reach the county's marginalized and underserved communities and proactively supported a transition from a county-led community engagement strategy to a truly community-led strategy spearheaded by the NOS network. In short, system stakeholders realized the NOS were best positioned to deliver critical information about the criminal legal system and reentry efforts to those communities most affected by that system. As such, the committee prioritized developing the NOS network, support for Reentry Resource Forums, and book clubs.

Component 2: The Community Engagement Coordinator

In 2018, Camden County used its Innovation Fund resources to hire a part-time community engagement (CE) coordinator. Stakeholders viewed this hire as a critical first step in advancing the county's community engagement strategy; finding the right person with the skills, experience, and energy to operationalize that strategy was crucial. As such, the county's jail population manager, who also served as the county's Innovation Fund project director, and the Reentry Committee spent significant time developing a job description and conducting the search. As described in the county's CE coordinator job description, the successful candidate would bring a broad skill set centered on cultural awareness and relevance, group dynamics, and human development, as well as an understanding of local governance, policy formulation, intercultural communication, conflict management, consensus building, and the principles of and techniques for designing and implementing effective community engagement strategies. Candidates would have a four-year degree in a relevant field and work experience (volunteer or paid) involving extensive public engagement across diverse groups.

The person the county hired as the CE coordinator had worked extensively as a community advocate in Camden County, including on juvenile justice issues and systems reform. Both community and system stakeholders knew them, trusted them, and considered them to be knowledgeable about the local reentry landscape.

The CE coordinator worked closely with the Camden County DOC jail population manager/Innovation Fund project director to lead implementation of the county's community engagement strategy. By design, the CE coordinator was the central figure charged with advancing this work. This included addressing perceived gaps in the strategy (such as concrete steps for conversations with the broader community) and crafting plans to recruit, engage, and support the NOS. More specifically, they developed the NOS application and recruitment strategy and oversaw NOS hiring and training; served as a liaison to system stakeholders, policymakers, and community members, and helped the NOS cultivate relationships with system stakeholders; attended Reentry Committee meetings; fostered community education and outreach activities, including 12 book clubs in neighborhoods across the county designed to reach a cross-section of people who may not, as one stakeholder noted, "normally embrace the conversation [on justice reform] or have the opportunity to engage with others on this topic;" co-organized Reentry Resource Forums; and helped the NOS launch the first Camden County Mural Arts/Justice Project in summer 2020, which involved a countywide call to artists (in the community and in custody) for a mural at the county jail that reflected the NOS-identified themes of hope, support, justice, peace, community, fairness, unity, equity, inspiration, and engagement.

The Innovation Fund grant provided the county with the initial seed money to hire its CE coordinator. When the grant ended, the county funded the position and made it permanent. With the conclusion of the grant, the CE coordinator's duties expanded to focus on youth in the county's juvenile justice system, as well as adult reentry.

Component 3: NuEntry Opportunity Specialists

Creating a network of peer reentry specialists was central to implementing Camden's community engagement strategy and achieving its jail population reduction goals. As the county's Innovation Fund application explained, "community support is integral [to reentry success] ... Camden's community engagement strategy proposes a number of activities to engage reentrants, the community, and the justice system to reduce recidivism and thus, the jail population" (2018, 3).⁴ Camden County's peer reentry specialists, later called NuEntry Opportunity Specialists, had experienced incarceration and reentry and held unique perspectives and expertise derived from those experiences that were critical to reshaping existing reentry practices, informing the county's outreach, and ensuring reentry services and practices met the needs of people returning to the community. Motivated by a "leave no one behind" mentality, the NOS were instrumental in shaping and implementing the other core elements of the county's community engagement strategy, including the structure, scope, and location of the county's Reentry Resource Forums; the strategy's outreach and education initiatives; and the media campaign, including the mural project and an interactive webpage.⁵

The architects of Camden's community engagement strategy envisioned a network of peer reentry specialists composed of people who had been incarcerated and had dealt with the challenges of reentry. These specialists would mentor people newly released from jail or prison, helping them connect to needed services and supports and navigate reentry, including the stigma attached to a criminal

conviction and imprisonment. Below, we describe the county's approach to recruiting and training its peer reentry specialists and their peer support work and outreach.

ELIGIBILITY AND RECRUITMENT

To form this network, Camden's CE coordinator and Innovation Fund project director collaborated with members of the Reentry Committee's community engagement workgroup to develop a position description and application process in late 2018. The position description likened the role to that of a "community liaison" who "provides guidance to formerly incarcerated individuals navigating life by helping them problem-solve and connect to community resources."⁶ In addition, peer reentry specialists would receive training and be expected to facilitate group discussions, lead orientations, and train others. Eligibility criteria included a history of incarceration; a demonstrated ability to overcome challenges; a willingness to share one's incarceration history and experiences; and the ability to participate in monthly community reentry forums, the trainings required for the position, and at least three community-based reentry events in a six-month period. Applicants were required to complete a two-page form and submit brief written answers (of 250 words or less) to seven questions about their interest in being a peer reentry specialist, their thoughts on the characteristics of effective peer mentors, and the personal qualities that positioned them for success in this role. The application also required candidates to rate their interpersonal skills and ability to follow through on commitments, problem solve, and work with others on a 5-point scale (1=weak, 5=strong).

The first call for peer reentry specialists in January 2019 yielded 15 applicants. Thirteen were selected for interviews and invited into the initial cohort. Peers were added to the network as its work gained visibility and traction in the county. When the county's initial Innovation Fund grant ended in February 2020, around 25 people had been recruited, selected, and trained to be peer reentry specialists. The inaugural group of specialists determined they had collectively spent nearly 300 years behind bars, averaging nearly two decades of incarceration per person. Several had been incarcerated as youth. Some had earned a college degree or made significant strides toward one while in prison; some had earned advanced degrees. Many had also been in the community for some time and were employed. Regardless, each specialist received \$15 an hour, during the grant period, for their time and travel for the group's activities.

The network's identity, objectives, and work evolved as the group coalesced. A first order of business was to solidify the position's title (and network name) and develop a brand. After much discussion, the group settled on NuEntry Opportunity Specialist. "NuEntry" is meant to emphasize opportunity and optimism rather than second chances, and to convey a positive image of reentry.

TRAINING

Training for the group was also a key priority, and one that evolved. The initial NOS cohort received multiple trainings, and their input and experiences shaped the group's training curriculum and schedule. A three-day orientation was delivered annually as new NOS joined the network. Developed in March 2019, the initial three-day orientation (delivered over roughly three weeks) consisted of various workshop sessions covering a mix of evidence-based practices such as Motivational Interviewing and

Stages of Change, and issues like complex trauma and trauma-informed engagement, structural racism and mass incarceration, bias in the criminal legal system, cultural competency and consciousness, health and wellness, resource navigation, mentoring principles, and effective media interactions. Camden's CE coordinator and Innovation Fund project director, along with NOS, drew on their connections to experts at local universities and community-based organizations for many of these sessions. For example, the Healing Team at Hopeworks, a local nonprofit, trained the group on trauma, the Adverse Childhood Experiences assessment, trauma-informed practices, resilience, and cognitive behavioral therapies. The county's director of public affairs spoke to the NOS about developing a communications strategy that effectively messaged their role and reentry goals.

Training and educational sessions were added as issues emerged. For example, in late 2020, a trauma expert in the region held a session to help the NOS process COVID-related trauma. Also in 2020, the NOS team attended a train-the-trainer workshop to facilitate the *RECHARGE Beyond the Bars Re-entry Game*. *RECHARGE* is an interactive card game designed to help people who experienced incarceration reflect on and process their incarceration experiences with others, including family members and friends, "in a safe and fun way while they bond and grow in understanding, connection and empathy."⁷ The game consists of 360 question cards that help participants reflect on how they've been affected by incarceration—their own or that of a loved one. A trained facilitator leads small groups (of three to seven people) in the game, using a brief guide. The emphasis is on authentic communication and connection, and the objective is to aid healing. The NOS planned to use the game in their own support group and their work with the broader community.

In addition to developing a robust training calendar, the initial NOS cohort adopted the Credible Messenger model (box 3) to guide their work. After an informational call with the New York City Department of Probation in March 2019 to learn more about how it had incorporated credible messengers in its work through the Arches program, 10 NOS attended a one-day training on the model focused on implementation; the county's CE coordinator and Innovation Fund project director also attended. Enthusiastic about the model and its application in Camden County, the group then set a goal of training and certifying some of the inaugural NOS cohort by that fall. In October 2019, three NOS, accompanied by the CE coordinator and project director, attended a three-day credible messenger immersion training offered by the Credible Messenger Justice Center in New York City. The immersion training allows delegations from across the country to visit and observe several different credible messenger programs around the city and meet with program partners. Several members of the Camden County delegation credited the training with providing the hands-on technical assistance the group needed to further develop its own training, grow and support the NOS network, and obtain additional funding to sustain the network.

BOX 3

The Credible Messenger Model

Credible messengers are people with “backgrounds and characteristics similar to the populations they serve, who develop robust relationships with program participants built on authentic shared experiences and understanding” (Lynch et al. 2018, 1). Although the concept of credible messengers is widely credited to Black Panther Eddie Ellis, who reportedly coined the term while incarcerated in a New York state prison in the 1980s, the Credible Messenger model for working with people involved in the criminal legal system originated in the late 1990s at a New York nonprofit called Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison (Langness et al. 2021), which provides “college education, life skills and reentry support to incarcerated people.”^a Today, that model is used by organizations nationwide to mentor adults and youth involved in the criminal legal system, including during incarceration, reentry, and community supervision. Two organizations, the [Credible Messenger Justice Center](#) in New York City and the [Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement](#) in Washington, DC, are key leaders in the field. Both offer training and support to people who want to serve as credible messengers and to organizations focused on integrating credible messengers in their service delivery. A growing body of research, including studies by the Urban Institute (Cramer et al. 2018; Lynch et al. 2018; Martinez and McGilton et al. 2022) indicates that credible messenger programs reduce reoffending (rearrests and reconvictions) and increase program engagement among participants who work with credible messengers compared with similarly situated people who do not.

Sources:

^a “About Us,” Hudson Link, accessed September 29, 2022, <http://hudsonlink.org/about/>.

^b Laurie R. Garduque, “Engaging Community Members in Criminal Justice Reform,” MacArthur Foundation, Perspectives Newsletter, February 1, 2021, <https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/engaging-community-members-in-criminal-justice-reform>.

Equipped with this knowledge, the NOS returned to Camden County eager and ready to build key principles of the Credible Messenger model into their work. Indeed, much of the final months of the county’s Innovation Fund work focused on incorporating aspects of the model in recruitment and training of new NOS; it also shaped the county’s subsequent Meet Them at the Gates initiative, which extended the NOS’ work into unreached parts of the county (under its 2020 MacArthur Foundation capstone project) and included meeting and welcoming people exiting prison or jail at facility entrances.

PEER SUPPORT

According to stakeholders, the NOS network became a vital source of support not only for people returning to the community from incarceration but also for the men and women serving as NOS. Because of their connections to the broader community, NOS could effectively connect with people just returning from jail and prison and link them to needed services; importantly, they credited being able to help others by speaking credibly from their experiences navigating reentry and the challenges and opportunities it presented. At the same time, while many NOS had been living and working in their communities for years, nearly all we interviewed spoke to the vital support the network provided in their own ongoing reentry. This included mental and emotional support, such as the unspoken understanding of why it was triggering for some NOS to encounter a police officer at one of the

initiative's book clubs, as well as brainstorming resources for someone just returning to the community who needed housing or employment. The NOS reported having near-daily contact—by phone, text, and social media—with each other and the CE coordinator as they worked to support one another and others.

POWER SHARING AND DIRECTION SETTING

While Camden County had implemented some jail reentry programs and services (box 4) before its Innovation Fund work, stakeholders in the county's criminal legal system recognized that the NOS constituted a community critical to strengthening its reentry practices and engaging in broader reform efforts, and a vital conduit for involving other Camden County community members most affected by the criminal legal system. The county's community engagement strategy recognized and leveraged the NOS' expertise. Foremost, the CE coordinator, though hired by the county, primarily helped clarify and implement the NOS network's vision for reentry and community engagement, not the other way around. Second, county stakeholders added two NOS to the county's Reentry Committee. With a seat at this important table, the NOS not only provide critical perspective to this group but regularly influence reentry practices and procedures as well as broader system reform. For example, in November 2020, NOS joined conversations with Camden County service providers and New Jersey state lawmakers around state-level reentry reforms. Lastly, during the Innovation Fund grant period, the county compensated the NOS for their work, paying each a stipend for all activities, trainings, and events.

BOX 4

Camden County Jail Reentry

The Camden County Department of Corrections implemented its first reentry programming with funding from a three-year Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Second Chance Act reentry grant in 2016. That grant supported reentry services for people with co-occurring disorders, specifically mental health needs and opioid misuse, and funded a reentry coordinator and case managers in the jail; the county's Reentry Committee was also established under that grant in 2017. Through its Innovation Fund grant in 2018, Camden County established a network of community-based peer reentry specialists and the Reentry Committee's community engagement workgroup. Through BJA Second Chance Act and Comprehensive Opioid and Stimulant Substance Abuse Program (COSSAP) grants, as well as grants from the New Jersey Department of Corrections received from 2017 to 2020, Camden County brought medication-assisted treatment into the jail and added peer recovery support specialists to its reentry case management team.

Component 4. Reentry Resource Forums

Reentry Resource Forums, which enabled providers and people in need of services to connect in real time, were another key component of Camden County's community engagement strategy. The forums were structured to be action oriented rather than merely informational. For example, participants in need of benefits would be enrolled on the spot while those in need of identification materials would

leave with ID cards, and in some instances, people in need of employment were hired by the employers invited to the forums.

To ensure the forums reached those most in need, the county used zip code data to identify areas most affected by the criminal legal system, incarceration, and reentry and located the forums in those areas. Community-based businesses and organizations located in the identified zip codes hosted the forums. Locations close to public transportation routes were selected, when possible, to ease access.

The first forum was held on August 8, 2019, at Urban Banquet Hall, a catering facility owned by a community member with whom the Camden County NOS were connected. The county's board of commissioners sponsored the event. Opening remarks by the board's director Louis Cappelli, Camden County Correctional Facility warden Karen Taylor, and NOS Antonne Henshaw underscored the challenges of reentry and the importance of community-based resource forums for assisting people returning to the community from incarceration. Representatives from Senator Corey Booker's office attended the forum, along with several local media outlets. A flyer advertising the event (figure 2) was distributed on social media and the Reentry Committee's web page on the county website in the weeks before the event.

FIGURE 2
Camden County Reentry Resource Forum Flyer, August 2019



Source: "Community Engagement Reentry Event," Camden County, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.camdencounty.com/event/community-engagement-reentry-event/>.

Twenty businesses, employers, community-based reentry providers, and county and state agencies attended the August 2019 forum. Their service areas included behavioral health, workforce development, education, public benefits, and housing. Around 65 people who had returned to the community after incarceration were served. Participants received “reentry passports” that were stamped at each “station” to record their connections with various providers and agencies as they moved from table to table. Many agencies had colorful posters at their stations that offered snapshots of the services or assistance they provide (figure 3) and almost all had informational resources participants could take with them.

FIGURE 3

Camden County Board of Social Services Poster at August 2019 Reentry Resource Forum



Source: Photo taken by one of the authors on August 8, 2019.

A second Reentry Resource Forum was held in October 2019. While Camden envisioned holding quarterly forums after the August 2019 launch, the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 brought in-person activities to a halt. The forums remained on hiatus throughout 2021, the year the site’s Innovation Fund work concluded.

Nonetheless, data collected by Camden County suggest the two Reentry Resource Forums achieved their objectives. Over 100 people with histories of incarceration attended the two events. One-quarter received library cards, which provided access to computers and educational resources at locations across the county. Forty-five accessed legal support on the spot, and 30 researched

outstanding warrants and rescheduled court hearings to avoid further criminal legal system penalties and entanglements. Nearly 20 percent accessed medical records and 30 percent submitted applications to the New Jersey Board of Social Services for needed benefits.

Importantly, 10 percent connected with employers and submitted job applications at the forums; five people were interviewed and two subsequently hired. These numbers may seem small, but the concrete and actionable steps these forums provided participants and the connections they forged cannot be underestimated. Unlike many resource fairs which merely provide information, Camden's forums provided information and enabled participants to take steps that would yield tangible and often immediate benefits (for instance, access to medical records, new ID cards, and completing and submitting benefits applications). Lastly, analysis of exit surveys completed by participants as they left the forums indicates that participants gave the forums high marks. They reportedly rated the forums as helpful but suggested the county hold future forums after regular business hours or on weekends so more people could attend.

Component 5. Media Campaign

A comprehensive media campaign rounded out the core components of Camden County's community engagement strategy. Like the overarching community engagement strategy, the media campaign had multiple elements. Core elements included traditional activities, such as press releases and coverage of key events by and interviews with local news outlets, as well as an electronic reentry newsletter,⁸ countywide book clubs, a movie screening, a community arts project, and an interactive web page. The objectives of the media campaign were twofold: to engage the broader community on criminal legal system issues and to raise awareness around the reentry efforts of the Camden County DOC and its partners.

BOOK CLUBS AND MOVIE SCREENING

Camden County's countywide book clubs and movie screening engaged a broad cross-section of the community and educated residents on the criminal legal system, including incarceration and reentry, and its impacts on individuals, families, and communities. More specifically, stakeholders described the purpose of the book clubs as "starting a conversation" and "opening a dialogue" in a nondefensive way around such thorny issues as structural racism and the criminal legal system, inequity, and collateral consequences of criminal convictions. The county held 12 book discussions under its Innovation Fund and capstone grants, covering these six titles:

- *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson (2014)
- *Becoming Mrs. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women* by Susan Burton and Cari Lynn (2019)
- *Unfair: The New Science of Criminal Injustice* by Adam Benforado (2015)
- *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* by Nicole R. Fleetwood (2020)
- *A Knock at Midnight: A Story of Hope, Justice, and Freedom* by Brittany K. Barnett (2020)

- *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and the Road to Repair* by Danielle Sered (2019)

Conducted in partnership with the county's library system, the book groups were held at local library branches in urban and suburban neighborhoods and included panel discussions featuring some system actors (e.g., public defenders, prosecutors, judges, county jail administrators) and service providers as well as NOS. Two authors, Benforado and Fleetwood, also attended. A screening of the film adaptation of *Just Mercy* in January 2020 was followed by a panel discussion that featured an NOS, an assistant public defender, and a social service provider; it was moderated by a member of the county's board of commissioners. Before the pandemic, book groups and the movie screening occurred in person; during the pandemic, however, book groups were held virtually over an online platform like Zoom. These discussions were reportedly well attended, whether in person or virtual. According to stakeholders, the most common refrain from book group participants was that they had no idea how the criminal legal system worked before attending a book group. In addition to educating the community, the book groups led to new connections. For example, after one book group discussion, staff at a local high school invited the NOS to speak to students about the criminal legal system and its policies, advocacy, and other topics.

COMMUNITY ARTS PROJECT

The community arts project component of the media campaign centered on a mural for the county jail. In summer 2020, under its Innovation Fund project, Camden County issued a call for mural ideas from local artists, including those incarcerated in the county jail, that reflected the NOS-selected concepts of hope, support, peace, community, fairness, justice, equity, inspiration, unity, and engagement. Local artists could submit their ideas along with brief statements explaining their concepts; all designs had to be in color to be considered (black-and-white designs were not accepted). Flyers advertising the project were distributed countywide. Eleven submissions were posted to the county's reentry web page for consideration, and anyone who visited that website could vote for their favorite submission. Over 3,500 votes were cast. The winning submission (figure 4), by a young local artist named Angela Brown, garnered nearly three thousand votes and was announced at a press conference in September 2020.⁹ The county provided Brown the materials and a small stipend to install the mural on an outside wall of the jail. Completed by fall 2021, the vibrant mural is visible as people approach the county courthouse and the jail. According to stakeholders, the mural offers an uplifting message of hope and transformation that invites reflection and conversation.

FIGURE 4

Camden County Community Engagement Mural



Source: Mural by Angela Brown. "Camden County Correctional Community Engagement Mural," Camden County, accessed September 30, 2022, <https://www.camdencounty.com/service/corrections/camden-county-correctional-community-engagement-mural/>.

INTERACTIVE WEB PAGE

Informed by its NuEntry Opportunity Specialists and supported in part by resources from its Innovation Fund grant, the county created an interactive web page designed to help people newly returning to the community and their friends and family members identify and access nearby reentry resources. Located under the "Corrections" page of the Camden County website, the reentry web page offers three options. The first, titled "Sign Up for Reentry Services and Community Outreach," links to a brief online form that users can complete and submit to request reentry assistance. Clicking on the second option, "View Reentry Supports and Resources in Camden County," leads to a comprehensive list of service providers, including mental health, housing, counseling and treatment, general health and wellness resources, and food assistance; users will also find specific information on reentry assistance for people returning to Camden County from the New Jersey Department of Corrections and contact information for the county's NuEntry Opportunity Specialists. The third option, "Hear More About the Camden County NuEntry Opportunity Specialists," provides a brief description of the NOS and their role as peer reentry mentors and a list of current NOS.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Although social media is not an element listed under its formal media campaign strategy, Camden County's CE coordinator, NOS network, and Innovation Fund project director individually and collectively used social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, to engage the community on

reentry issues and advertise events. This core group also used social media to maintain their connections, especially in the early months of the pandemic.

Implementation Milestones and Perceived Impacts

Through its multipronged community engagement strategy, Camden County sought to advance three mutually reinforcing objectives: improve reentry services and reduce the jail population, gather community members' perspectives to inform these two goals, and reduce the stigma around reentry and incarceration by changing community members' perspectives of formerly incarcerated people through outreach and education. Interviews with stakeholders, including the county's NOS, suggest there was significant progress toward achieving these goals. Those stakeholders also identified several factors critical to Camden's progress. Below we recount key milestones, explore the perceived impacts of the county's community engagement efforts, and reflect on factors that contributed to these impacts as reported by county stakeholders.

Camden achieved nearly all its objectives for implementing its five-pronged community engagement strategy. For example, it hired a community engagement coordinator; recruited, trained, and built a dynamic network of more than 20 peer reentry specialists who have provided support and resources to people returning to the community from incarceration and shaped the county's jail reentry strategy; held community-based Reentry Resource Forums that linked dozens of people returning to the community from incarceration to housing supports, employers and jobs, public benefits, and basic resources such as identification documents, food, and clothing; and educated community members and criminal legal system and human services stakeholders on the reentry experience and its challenges, as well as criminal legal system issues and inequities through book clubs, trainings, and the lived experiences of its NOS.

Stakeholders said **the most significant early milestone was hiring the community engagement coordinator**. Hired in early 2019, less than six months after the county received its Innovation Fund award, this person's work was dedicated to advancing the county's strategy. Reportedly, the impact of having someone focused solely on developing and implementing the county's community engagement strategy as outlined in its Innovation Fund proposal meant the work moved forward thoughtfully and cohesively. This person could identify and address the gaps in the strategy—such as how to meaningfully engage the county's different communities in vital discussions—while building structures to sustain this work. Importantly, this role provided critical support to the NOS in implementing their visions for engaging the community. Several NOS identified the support, accessibility, knowledge of local dynamics, and dedication of the coordinator (as well as the Innovation Fund project director) as critical to the group's work.

A second key milestone was recruiting the first cohort of NuEntry Opportunity Specialists. Doing so impacted the scope and reach of services for people returning to Camden County from jail and prison; raised community members' awareness of reentry and the criminal legal system; and engaged previously unreachable communities in critical conversations about justice reform.

As described earlier, the NOS not only provided essential reentry support to people returning from jail and prison and to one another as they continued to process their incarceration and reentry experiences; they also offered critical direction on how to meaningfully engage Camden County's various communities. These communities included the people and neighborhoods most directly affected by the criminal legal system as well as communities less affected, Camden County's elected and appointed officials and criminal legal system and human services agency leaders and staff, and community-based reentry service providers. For example, the NOS recommended trainings, such as implicit bias training for Reentry Committee members, and the community-based book clubs to educate the broader community. Although the bias training had not occurred when we interviewed county stakeholders, stakeholders said the book clubs were well attended and well received, and they credited the book clubs with broadening the community's perspective and understanding of the criminal legal system, its inherent inequities, and the challenges of reentry. Subsequent outreach from local high schools asking the NOS to speak to their students and other groups attest to the impact of these activities. But the impact of the NOS extended beyond Camden County: NOS joined conversations with state legislators on criminal legal system reform and were invited to speak about their work at local and national events, including a JustLeadershipUSA panel in Camden County and a national health care conference in Tennessee.

The NOS also played a pivotal role helping people released from the New Jersey Department of Corrections after the October 2020 enactment of New Jersey state bill S2159, which mandated that more people be released from the state DOC (Executive Order 124 made a similar mandate earlier that year) to facilitate social distancing in state prisons. Nearly 300 people returned to Camden County in November 2020 (approximately 100 in a single day) under the bill's COVID-release provisions. For this event, the NOS met people at DOC facilities as they exited and provided COVID care packages, referrals, and transportation to services including housing.

The impact of the NOS' work on Camden County's community engagement strategy is broad yet deep, and hard to quantify. Based on our stakeholder interviews, we suggest their work had **three broad impacts**: (1) it provided tangible assistance and support to people who had recently left incarceration, including access to resources and safe spaces to process their incarceration and reentry experiences; (2) it reached communities previously unengaged in critical conversations about the criminal legal system; and (3) it broadened community members' perspectives on incarceration and reentry including by making their views of reentry more positive.

A **third key milestone** was **implementing the Reentry Resource Forums**. As described earlier, these forums linked hundreds of people to needed services and, in many cases, employment. The impact of these forums on people's lives is hard to quantify, but anecdotal evidence and exit survey data suggest they helped many find the support they needed.

In addition to these milestones, the county, through its NOS network and the assistance of its community engagement coordinator and Innovation Fund project director, also implemented its jail mural project, an interactive web page with links to reentry resources, and a media campaign that elevated reentry issues.

Sustainability

As its Innovation Fund capstone project concluded in late 2021, Camden County reported several important developments were necessary to sustain and grow its community engagement strategy.

First, the county DOC incorporated the community engagement coordinator position into its budget. In addition, the NOS received a \$10,000 set-aside to advance planning and collaboration activities with other local reentry organizations. The NOS formed alliances with two new organizations in 2020, JEVS Human Services and Oaks Integrated Care, which were instrumental in helping the NOS address the needs of people exiting the New Jersey DOC under S2159. It is also important to note that the work of the NOS network continues in collaboration with the Transformative Justice Institute (TJI) and under the umbrella of the Camden County DOC. As of late 2021, the NOS were continuing to work with people exiting incarceration but had expanded their partnerships to collaborate with local attorneys to help people navigate the criminal legal system; they also continued to educate and inform the broader community about criminal legal system practices that have sustained inequity, racism, and mass incarceration.¹⁰

Second, the county's Reentry Committee established a community engagement workgroup to focus specifically on this work. This formal workgroup provides critical structure for ongoing collaboration, idea generation, and information exchange necessary to ensure meaningful community engagement continues. Relatedly, the committee expanded its membership to include two seats for the NOS. This afforded the NOS access to key county decisionmakers and resources, and as the NOS regularly report on their work, it has provided those decisionmakers with important perspective and expertise for building and refining Camden County's reentry services continuum. Having a formal seat at this table also incorporates the NOS into the county's formal reentry planning and decisionmaking.

Third, in September 2020, the Transformative Justice Initiative launched. Founded by one of the county's first NOS, the TJI has been described by Camden County stakeholders as a step toward more fully transitioning the county's community engagement strategy from a county-directed/county-led effort to one "guided and supported by the NOS"—one more deeply rooted in the community.¹¹ Through the TJI, the NOS have established their own office, grown their relationships with nonprofit service providers, and expanded their work not only into new Camden County communities but to a new county, Mercer County. In addition, as of late 2021, the TJI was hosting events including a weekly "Go Live" online forum every Tuesday for people to share their reentry stories and experiences; this forum has likely expanded the NOS' circle of support. Also through the TJI, the NOS continue to connect with people returning to Camden and Mercer Counties from incarceration and expanded their communications to use JPAY, the New Jersey DOC's email system, to connect with people in state prison. Lastly, the TJI was engaged to provide training to the county's new Peer Reentry Support Teams. Funded by two new BJA grants in 2020, these proposed teams would reportedly blend elements of traditional peer recovery models with the Credible Messenger model.

Challenges

Though Camden County made substantial progress implementing its multipronged community engagement strategy, it also encountered several challenges. Some were persistent. These challenges are described below and range from standard bureaucratic delays to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The county experienced slight delays hiring key positions—namely the community engagement coordinator, as all hiring decisions must be approved by the county board of commissioners—and bringing on the NOS. These delays affected other initial community engagement activities, like recruiting the first NOS cohort and the inaugural Reentry Resource Forums, both of which depended on the community engagement coordinator. But these slight delays were also strategic. For example, the county anticipated holding the first Reentry Resource Forum in February or March 2019 but ultimately postponed it to August 2019 to give the NOS sufficient time to onboard and share their ideas for structuring and conducting the forum. In addition, the county worked with its probation and parole department to pull data on the seven zip codes with the most people on community supervision to identify where to hold the Reentry Resource Forums; the idea was to hold them in neighborhoods that most needed the services and connections the forums would provide.

Beyond those hiring delays, the most persistent challenge Camden County stakeholders reported was tied to the stigma of reentry and educating stakeholders about the role and goals of the NOS. Those at the center of Camden County’s community engagement work came to realize there was misalignment in how many spoke about and understood the definition of “lived experience” and why it was key to engage people who had experienced incarceration rather than people who worked in custodial settings. Interestingly, this misalignment was reportedly most often observed among reentry service providers. County stakeholders reported that significant outreach and education efforts were made to help some partners understand that peer reentry specialists were meant to complement and be resources for other professionals (that is, they were supporting and not supplanting them). These efforts were reportedly ongoing throughout the county’s Innovation Fund grants.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented a significant challenge to the implementation and operations of the county’s community engagement strategy. Weekly NOS meetings, Reentry Committee meetings, and community-based book clubs pivoted to virtual platforms in spring 2020, and in-person Reentry Resource Forums were placed on hold. The NOS may have proved the most adept at quickly pivoting to social media and group texts to keep the dialogue flowing in the early days of the pandemic.

Lastly, the NOS network initially struggled to recruit women to serve in this role. The initial cohort included just one woman. The group worked proactively to connect with other networks, including providers that worked with women who had been incarcerated, to better advertise the opportunity, the group, and its goals. Some more women joined subsequent NOS cohorts, but it remained largely composed of men.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Camden County's implementation of its multipronged strategy to meaningfully engage members of the county's myriad communities in vital conversations about the criminal legal system, reentry, the stigma of incarceration, and justice reform offers the following lessons and recommendations about advancing this type of work.

Invest in a dedicated community engagement coordinator. Although it was only part time, stakeholders consistently emphasized the importance of this position. They saw this dedicated position as critical to getting and keeping things moving; it enabled one person to devote their time, energy, and focus to implementing the strategy. The CE coordinator performed myriad functions: they created the NOS application and developed the new-member orientation; connected with people and organizations in the community that hired people who had been incarcerated; established relationships with other local organizations; and created opportunities for formerly incarcerated people and other community members to come together (e.g., book discussions, community job fairs, community listening sessions). In addition, they kept the big picture in mind while working to support and advance the vision of various stakeholder groups, including the NOS. They also bridged the formal system and the community, cultivating vital relationships that connected the two.

Leverage formal structures when possible. The county's Reentry Committee and community engagement workgroup provided important infrastructure, resources, and connections to implement the vision of the NOS. It also provided the NOS direct access to decisionmakers.

Engage from within key communities. As one NOS reflected, "if you want to build something for the community, it has to be from within the community." Authentic and effective community engagement must start with the people most affected by the issues at the center of reform. Camden County sought to engage those most affected by incarceration and reentry to inform its efforts to refine and improve its reentry policies and practices. NuEntry Opportunity Specialists who were known by the people the initiative was trying to serve lent credibility to the work, as did the NOS' firsthand experience when they spoke to community members about the inequities of the criminal legal system and the need for reform.

Honor the expertise of people with lived experience. Many of the NOS we interviewed credited Camden County's elected officials and system leaders with recognizing and honoring their lived experience and expertise and investing in their priorities. Stated differently, the county recognized the credibility and expertise of the NOS and provided them the latitude to implement their priorities. Honoring the expertise of people with lived experience also means addressing their needs: some NOS took umbrage with the county engaging outside experts for training whom the NOS considered too removed from their lived experience to provide key training in some areas. The county adjusted its approach based the NOS' input and worked to enlist local organizations that were closer to the issues at hand.

Identify and cultivate champions. Stakeholders across the board deemed the support of system leaders, including the county jail's warden, county commissioners, and the directors of other county agencies, critical. The warden's attendance at events like the Reentry Resource Forums communicated support and reportedly lent legitimacy to the effort, as did the attendance of county commissioners and other elected officials at those and other public events, like the book clubs. Camden County leaders also signaled their support by dedicating resources to the NOS and community engagement activities.

Compensate people for their expertise. Through the Innovation Fund grant, the NOS received a stipend for their training and their travel to key events. Though most NOS held other jobs and chose to join the group to give back to the community, this small stipend recognized the value of their time and their expertise. As of this writing, the county planned to compensate the NOS and other peer reentry specialists in its continued reentry efforts.

Consider accessibility. Many of the county's community engagement events occurred on weekends or after business hours to accommodate community members' schedules. This approach was based on NOS input and feedback from the first Reentry Resource Forum. Other communities should follow Camden County's example to meet community members where they are, including at accessible times and locations.

Notes

- ¹ "Why Community Engagement Matters," Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, accessed September 21, 2022, <https://aeese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/why-community-engagement-matters>.
- ² The NOS initially focused on people in the Camden County Jail but expanded to working with people returning from the New Jersey Department of Corrections. The NOS have played a critical role assisting people released to Camden County from state prison during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ³ Criminal legal system stakeholders included representatives of local law enforcement; the jail's warden, population manager, and selected correctional staff; the community engagement coordinator; and the reentry coordinator.
- ⁴ In this case study, we use "criminal legal system" rather than "criminal justice system."
- ⁵ "Corrections," Camden County, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.camdencounty.com/service/corrections/>.
- ⁶ Camden County's 2019 application for the peer reentry specialist position.
- ⁷ "About the Game," Recharge Beyond the Bars Re-entry Game, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.rechargethegame.com/about-the-game/>.
- ⁸ Although the site's [reentry newsletter](#) did not launch until April 2022, about a year after the Innovation Fund and capstone grants ended, its launch could be viewed as a legacy of the initial media campaign.
- ⁹ Camden County 2021 Innovation Fund capstone report; not available online.
- ¹⁰ In 2022, the Camden County DOC cleared the NOS to work with people in the jail prerelease in their roles as peer reentry specialists—a critical step toward further reducing stigma. Also, in April 2022, the county's board of commissioners issued a proclamation recognizing the NOS' work, partnership, and commitment to reentry and passed a resolution that acknowledged April as Second Chance Month consistent with the federal government.
- ¹¹ Personal communication, November 20, 2020.

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