RESEARCH REPORT

Safer Return Demonstration
Implementation Findings from a Research-Based Community Reentry Initiative

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## Contents

Acknowledgments v

Executive Summary vi

Introduction 1

**The Planned Safer Return Model** 5
   - The Justice Intermediary 6
   - Services to Individuals and Families 7
   - Systemic Reforms 12
   - Improved Community Conditions 13

Evaluation Methodology 15

**Implementation of Individual and Family Services** 19
   - Recruitment of Safer Return Participants 20
   - Family-Inclusive Case Management 29
   - Employment 40
   - Mentoring 52
   - Housing 61
   - Engaging Participants with the Community 65

**Implementation of System Reforms and Enhanced Community Conditions** 68
   - Justice Intermediary 68
   - Neighborhood-Based Parole 74
   - Policing 77

Overall Implementation Challenges 79
   - Management Challenges 79
   - Service Delivery and Coordination Challenges 81
   - Challenges with the Design-Build Model 83

**Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Building Stronger Reentry Efforts** 84
   - Responsiveness to Changing Policy and Political Landscapes 84
   - Sensitivity to Differences in Organizational Structures and Hierarchies 85
   - Understanding Potential Trade-Offs in Comprehensiveness versus Cohesiveness 85

Conclusions 87

Notes 88
Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

The Safer Return demonstration began with the basic premise that, on three fundamental levels, necessary policies and procedures to adequately support prisoner reentry were lacking:

- First, the journey from prison life to community reintegration was not seamless and was often complicated. On the *individual and family* level, returning prisoners were ill prepared to navigate routines in their home communities, and their families were similarly unprepared to proactively support them in achieving positive outcomes.

- Second, on the *systems* level, public state, county, and city agencies and private service organizations were ill prepared to provide coordinated supports for individuals returning from prison. Without such supports, public safety, community stability, and individual outcomes remained at risk.

- Third, on the *community* level, entire neighborhoods were unable to meet the complex needs of returning individuals; communities were weakened by the individuals’ past criminal activities and their ensuing absence during incarceration, and then burdened by their return.

By augmenting and leveraging existing community-based public and private services, Safer Return was intended to focus on promoting successful reentry and reintegration by (1) addressing key individual needs, (2) introducing system reforms, and (3) improving local (community) conditions. Key services and elements that were envisioned included comprehensive family-inclusive case management, prerelease and postrelease transitional planning, housing, mentoring, physical and mental health treatment, and substance abuse treatment. The program would also focus on skills to enhance employability, transitional employment opportunities, and job placement, and would provide opportunities for participants to engage with community residents to build prosocial informal support networks and redefine community norms that limit opportunities for reintegration. Finally, Safer Return would use neighborhood-based parole agents, graduated sanctioning, and reward practices to reduce reincarceration for technical violations.

Safer Return operated with a clear understanding that not every participant would receive the same set of services; instead, services would be recommended based on individuals’ risks and needs. Family members were regarded as secondary beneficiaries of the program who could receive limited assistance, particularly where family strengthening seemed a promising avenue for improving the outcomes of participants.
The demonstration was co-designed by researchers in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute and staff members of the Safer Foundation, in consultation with other reentry experts, under a six-month planning grant in 2006. As described more thoroughly by Rossman, Fontaine, and Perry (2014), the design drew on extant programs that were often cited as innovative or effective approaches in the mid-2000s, as the demonstration was taking shape. The Safer Foundation, among the nation’s oldest and largest providers of employment services to individuals with criminal histories, was the lead service agency for the demonstration. The development of Safer Return was at least partially an outgrowth of Urban’s earlier work on reentry issues in Chicago and other places. As a result of these efforts, Urban researchers developed a keen interest in working with the Safer Foundation to design and test a community-based reentry model. The planning, program implementation, and evaluation were all supported with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

East Garfield Park, on the west side of Chicago, was selected as the demonstration site since it was (and is) a high-density prisoner reentry community with high levels of economic and social disadvantage. Shortly after Safer Return began, eligibility boundaries for program participation and service delivery were revisited and expanded to include West Garfield Park—the neighborhood situated immediately west of East Garfield Park.

Based on a thorough process evaluation, this research report describes the implementation of the Safer Return demonstration, including how specific program elements were conceptualized and operated; what worked from the perspectives of stakeholders, program participants, and researchers; and challenges that gave rise to program modifications. The report concludes with lessons learned and recommendations for future reentry initiatives.

Using the demonstration plan as the foundation of the process evaluation, Urban researchers collected various data to understand whether and how the demonstration led to increased and more coordinated services for formerly incarcerated individuals. Data collection for this evaluation included routine teleconferences with core Safer Return staff and their partners; focus groups with participants and their family members; reviews of the case management database; and field work that included reviews of program documents, observations of program activities, and semistructured interviews. Data were collected from Safer Foundation staff, their subcontracted partners, and other stakeholders. In addition to the data collected for this evaluation, other data were collected for outcome, impact, and cost evaluations using a quasi-experimental design, as described in a second evaluation report (see Fontaine et al. 2015).
Through the efforts of core Safer Return staff and its partners, several program elements operated over the course of the multiyear demonstration, including prerelease and postrelease enrollment, family-inclusive case management, mentoring, and employment services. In general, Safer Return made greater progress on implementation of key individual services than it did on the implementation of system reform components and efforts to improve local conditions. Safer Return program managers made several modifications to program components over time, as they encountered challenges. The challenges to implementing specific program components varied—ranging, for example, from trouble identifying participants for prerelease reentry planning as a result of inadequate data, to difficulty engaging families in participants' reentry plans, to struggles finding housing supports in the community.

Implementation of the Safer Return demonstration faced several hurdles that were beyond Safer Return program managers’ direct control (e.g., changes in the economic context that affected the service delivery landscape and difficulties in the accurate prerelease identification of eligible participants in the Illinois Department of Corrections), as well as hurdles that should have been more easily or quickly overcome by the program managers (e.g., engaging community volunteers and family members and finding a local housing provider and community-based program location). Implementation challenges faced by the demonstration can be summarized in three main categories:

1. **Management issues.** The number of partners involved in the demonstration and their respective expertise in serving the population created some management challenges and tensions across the partners.

2. **Service delivery and coordination problems.** The number of partners involved in the demonstration and the lack of special service agreements with external partners for nondemonstration-provided services led to some participants not receiving all the services they needed.

3. **Frustrations with the “design-build” model.** There was some frustration among the partners since the model was being conceptualized and developed while it was being implemented and serving participants.

These three challenges should be understood within the dynamic context of the multitudinous implementation activities Safer Return tried to achieve. Overarching lessons from these challenges for organizations trying to implement multifaceted comprehensive reentry initiatives include the importance of

1. being flexible and responsive to changing policy and political landscapes by understanding and working within the local context and adjusting to the concerns of all stakeholders;
2. being sensitive to differences in organizational structures and hierarchies, since agencies with different missions and cultures may have processes that do not neatly align; and
3. understanding the potential trade-offs in comprehensiveness versus cohesiveness, since efforts to be comprehensive may come at the expense of being cohesive.

In the end, from April 2008 through January 2013, Safer Return engaged 727 individuals in a suite of community-based services by working with various criminal justice and community-based partners. It succeeded in creating new opportunities for participants; linking them to services, jobs, and prosocial activities; forging new connections between community-based partners assisting the reentry population, including a strong relationship with the parole department; and working within the challenging criminal justice context. The outcomes, impacts, and cost-effectiveness of these efforts are discussed in the second final report of the evaluation. This report’s discussion of Safer Return’s implementation successes and challenges provides important context for those findings.
Introduction

This research report—the first of two final reports from the Urban Institute’s evaluation of the Safer Return demonstration—describes the implementation of Safer Return, based on a thorough process evaluation. This report includes information on how specific program elements were conceptualized and operated; what worked from the perspectives of stakeholders, program participants, and researchers; and challenges that gave rise to program modifications, lessons, and recommendations for designing or improving reentry initiatives. Though this report is extensive, it does not comprehensively document all the multitudinous details of Safer Return as it evolved to meet emerging needs of program participants, mitigate real-world circumstances that threatened to undermine program success, troubleshoot existing shortcomings, and strengthen program operations. This narrative does, however, attempt to fully capture the flavor of the demonstration over time, with the intent of highlighting information that practitioners and researchers might find useful in light of the many unresolved issues surrounding reentry and ongoing interest in improving reentry policies and practices.

This report develops over several sections. First, it discusses the Safer Return demonstration model as it was planned. Next, it describes the methodology used for understanding and assessing the demonstration’s implementation, as well as the methodologies used to assess its outcomes, impacts, and costs (detailed findings around outcomes, impacts, and costs are described in this report’s companion, the second final evaluation report [Fontaine et al. 2015]).

The report then describes implementation in detail, highlighting departures from and concurrence with the demonstration model discussed in the first section, as well as strategies that program staff and core partners used to mitigate challenges. It is important to note at the outset that this document discusses a litany of challenges faced in program implementation. Our documentation of these challenges is ultimately intended to provide insight for program planners—in Chicago, Illinois, and beyond—who are seeking to develop their own reentry initiatives that build community capacity and expand on business-as-usual reentry programming. While some of the challenges can certainly be attributed to, for example, a shortage of funds, staff, or adequate planning, other challenges clearly demonstrate just how difficult it can be to execute comprehensive, multipronged initiatives successfully. The final sections include discussion of overall implementation challenges and lessons, recommendations for future reentry efforts, and conclusions.

Before turning to a discussion of the model, we provide an overview of the demonstration. Safer Return was a multiyear research-based demonstration originally initiated in the East Garfield Park
neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, in April 2008. By augmenting and leveraging existing community-based public and private services, Safer Return was intended to address the reentry challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals and their families as well as their communities, which are affected by high rates of crime, incarceration, and recidivism. Key services that were envisioned included comprehensive case management; prerelease and postrelease transitional planning; housing; mentoring; physical and mental health treatment; substance abuse treatment; soft-skills training to enhance employability, transitional employment opportunities, and job placement; and opportunities for engagement with community residents to build prosocial informal support networks. East Garfield Park, located on the west side of Chicago, was selected as the demonstration site since it was (and is) a high-density prisoner reentry community with high levels of economic and social disadvantage. Shortly after Safer Return began, eligibility boundaries for program participation and service delivery were revisited and expanded to include West Garfield Park—the neighborhood situated immediately west of East Garfield Park. Over the course of the five-year demonstration, Safer Return engaged 727 individuals in the community, offering them a host of prerelease and postrelease services and activities.

The demonstration was codesigned by researchers in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute and staff members of the Safer Foundation, in consultation with other reentry experts, under a six-month planning grant in 2006. The planning, program implementation, and evaluation were all supported with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The Safer Foundation, among the nation’s oldest and largest providers of employment services to individuals with criminal histories, was the lead service agency for the demonstration. The Safer Foundation delivered some of the services provided through the demonstration directly and oversaw the delivery of other services provided by organizations that worked with Safer Return participants. The development of Safer Return was at least partially an outgrowth of Urban’s earlier work on the Returning Home project (La Vigne et al. 2003), some of which was focused on individuals returning to Chicago from the Illinois Department of Corrections (state prison). As a result of that work and other ongoing studies, Urban researchers developed a keen interest in designing and testing a community-based reentry model that would reflect widely shared beliefs about and evidence-based practices for successful methods to improve outcomes.

Safer Return operated from April 2008 through January 2013, as did activities associated with the process evaluation that provided the information described in this report. The demonstration began with the basic premise that, on three fundamental levels, necessary policies and procedures to adequately support prisoner reentry were lacking:
First, the journey from prison life to community reintegration was not seamless and was often complicated. On the individual and family level, returning prisoners were ill prepared to navigate routines in their home communities, and their families were similarly unprepared to proactively support them in achieving positive outcomes.

Second, on the systems level, public state, county, and city agencies and private service organizations were ill prepared to provide coordinated supports for individuals returning from prison. Without such supports, public safety, community stability, and individual outcomes remained at risk.

Third, on the community level, entire neighborhoods were unable to meet the complex needs of returning individuals; communities were weakened by the individuals’ past criminal activities and their ensuing absence during incarceration, and then burdened by their return.

From the outset, the objectives of the demonstration were to leverage community capacity, reform institutions, and address the needs of returning prisoners and their family members while maintaining public safety.

Specifically, Safer Return was planned to (1) identify and mitigate or resolve the key individual needs of formerly incarcerated people (and, to a more modest extent, their families) by providing a suite of services; (2) introduce systemic reforms that would facilitate more coordinated reentry supports, such as prerelease and transitional service planning and neighborhood-based parole agents; and (3) improve local conditions by increasing former prisoners’ access to jobs, prosocial activities, and positive role models that are critical to successful reentry. As described more thoroughly in a report by Rossman, Fontaine, and Perry (2014), the design drew on extant programs that were often cited as innovative or effective approaches in the mid-2000s, as this initiative was taking shape. The following were key among these programs:

- Civic Justice Corps (Bend, Oregon) focused on furthering the health, safety, and livability of communities while viewing people who were incarcerated and transitioning home as assets to help this occur. Former prisoners were offered opportunities to be accountable for their transgressions and to engage in “earned redemption” through voluntary participation in capital improvement projects that visibly benefited the public and were specifically wanted and requested by the community.

- La Bodega de la Familia (New York City), developed by the Family Justice Institute, used comprehensive family case management as a mechanism to create webs of support for
individuals on probation. Family case management used a strengths-based, participant-driven four-stage approach (initial contact, engagement and assessment, creation and implementation of a Family Action Plan, and transition from family case management to family self-sufficiency) to help participants and family members navigate larger systems (e.g., criminal justice, child welfare, employment, health, and legal systems) to access treatment and services, maintain employment, tap existing networks for support, and create long-term family well-being and community safety.

- Maryland Reentry Partnership Initiative (REP) (Baltimore) used prerelease and postrelease programming, such as assessment, case management, substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, vocational and occupational services, education, and other training, to prepare individuals to successfully reenter the community (Roman et al. 2007). Exit orientations were a key REP feature: as inmates neared their release dates, members of the community and representatives of social service organizations went to the release center to speak with potential participants about the reentry process and services available to them.

- Oxford Houses (national and international) are community-based group homes where 5 to 15 individuals live, pay rent, and practice self-government and substance abuse recovery principles. The model is lauded as affordable and self-perpetuating: it is an economical approach because no professional staff live on site and residents share the costs of rent and household expenses; their payments eventually replenish start-up funds and enable funding of additional houses.

- Southside Initiative “Call Ins” (High Point, North Carolina) was a community-based approach to crime reduction designed by David Kennedy and applied as a drug-market intervention. The model brought together law enforcement, service providers, and community members to deliver three messages. Law enforcement stakeholders told offenders that if they immediately ceased their drug operations, the assembled partners would offer and provide help. Alternatively, if they continued or later resumed dealing, they would immediately be arrested and charged, and would receive special prosecutorial attention to ensure conviction. Service providers told offenders and their families that any help they needed (e.g., drug treatment, education, job training and placement, transitional assistance) would be provided. Community members (e.g., ministers, activists, and local residents) told the offenders that, while they were loved and cherished and the community needed them to succeed, their wrongdoings were destroying the community and had to be stopped (Kennedy 2004).
The Planned Safer Return Model

The Safer Return design anticipated that the demonstration would focus on promoting successful reentry and reintegration through the following:

- **Addressing key individual needs**, such as stable housing, substance abuse treatment, employment with opportunities for career advancement, and physical and mental health treatment. Program services would be voluntary and available to any adult—regardless of offense, criminal history, age, or gender—returning from prison to the Garfield Park community. There was a clear understanding that not every participant would receive the same set of services; services would be recommended based on individuals’ risks and needs. Family members were regarded as secondary beneficiaries of the program who could receive limited assistance, particularly where family strengthening seemed a promising avenue for improving participants’ outcomes.

- **Introducing system reforms**, such as a justice intermediary and other structures to enhance cross-institutional, multisector collaboration and coordination; prerelease and transitional reentry planning; comprehensive case management; neighborhood-based parole agents; graduated sanctioning; and reward practices to reduce reincarceration for technical violations.

- **Improving local conditions** that presented barriers to successful reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals and their families, through such activities as increasing access to prosocial activities and positive role models, redefining community norms that limit opportunities for reintegration, and increasing local employment opportunities.

Figure 1 presents the proposed model for Safer Return. The Safer Return model intended to reduce recidivism and reincarceration without sacrificing public safety by implementing evidence-based and promising approaches to build capabilities, changing policies and practices that undermined success, and achieving strategic objectives. Central to the Safer Return model was the belief that returning individuals should not be treated in a vacuum, but rather ought to be supported in the context of their families, peer networks, and neighborhoods. To affect participants in meaningful ways, Safer Return expected to include the participation of families, employers, service providers, faith- and community-based organizations, and volunteers from the Garfield Park community.

The remainder of this section outlines each of the planned Safer Return components, including the rationale for each component’s inclusion as a primary Safer Return service.
One frequently cited challenge to promoting successful reentry and reintegration is the apparent lack of coordination and collaboration among correctional facilities, community corrections authorities, and community-based public and private providers. In other fields, the use of intermediaries has been tried as a mechanism for bridging gaps between entities that have not historically worked well together but could benefit from enhanced collaboration and capacity building. Such collaboration could result in more effective partnerships, enabling the entities to provide seamless support for returning individuals and their families. The justice intermediary, perceived as a key system reform, was an innovative application of the intermediary concept (see Travis [2005] for further discussion of the justice intermediary concept). To meet the goals of Safer Return, the Safer Foundation elected to serve in a
dual capacity as the justice intermediary and as a direct provider of select services. As depicted in figure 1, the justice intermediary was intended to be the hub in a broad network of relationships, partnerships, and institutional arrangements.

**Services to Individuals and Families**

At the individual and family level, Safer Foundation staff would either directly provide or subcontract and oversee prerelease and postrelease services for individuals and families. These services included prerelease orientations, program enrollment, transition planning in the correctional institutions, and postrelease case management and wraparound services crucial to reentry success. Importantly, the Safer Return demonstration was not expected to fund all needed services, since the model envisioned leveraging existing services rather than introducing duplicative delivery systems. It was not expected that every participant would need the full complement of available services. While formerly incarcerated individuals were defined as the primary recipients of Safer Return services, their families could receive limited assistance, largely to enable them to provide better support for the formerly incarcerated participant.

**Orientation and Enrollment**

Recruitment of individuals was expected to be facilitated by a partnership between Safer Return and the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), through which eligible individuals would be identified roughly 90 days before release and invited to attend small-group enrollment sessions. Eligibility was determined by anticipated return to specific zip codes within the program service delivery boundaries (60612 and 60624). Approximately 45 to 60 days before returning home, potentially eligible individuals would be invited to participate in Welcome Home panels, or exit orientations, that were modeled after REP exit orientations. The purpose of these exit orientations was twofold: (1) to deliver messages of support for individuals returning to the community, and (2) to provide details on the specific services available through Safer Return, including those provided directly by the program and its partners and those available through referrals to other community resources. Community service providers were expected to communicate positive messages: their intent to welcome returning individuals home; their willingness to help formerly incarcerated individuals take advantage of local opportunities for prosocial interaction to avoid recidivism; and their commitment to providing the kinds of assistance that would help individuals access needed services, engage in prosocial activities, and achieve self-sufficiency.
Parole agents (who are part of IDOC) and police officers would explain that reentry supports were helpful to public safety and that they intended to support people reentering their communities, as long as those people remained free of criminal involvement.

Ideally, group meetings would be face-to-face interactive sessions attended by soon-to-be-released inmates; family members; case managers; community service providers; and possibly community members, police officers, or parole agents. However, from the outset, Safer Foundation staff and Urban researchers recognized that the large number of prisons in Illinois and their distance from Garfield Park would likely present logistical hurdles. The Illinois Department of Corrections agreed to consider prerelease transfer of Safer Return participants to facilities that were more accessible to the Garfield Park community, when feasible. Additionally, Safer Foundation staff recognized that some of the Welcome Home panels and prerelease communications between inmates and case managers may have to be conducted using videoconferencing, which could be accommodated by IDOC in some facilities.

Case Management

Case managers, who were called reentry coaches for the demonstration, would be trained on the Family Justice Institute’s family-inclusive case management techniques and expected to

- reach out to eligible individuals and their families to offer assistance before and after release;
- work with individuals to assess their strengths and needs for services and support to develop customized reentry plans;
- link individuals to services identified in their reentry plans; and
- monitor individual progress, including periodic reassessment and case planning to reflect issues that had been resolved or service needs that had emerged.

Families would be able to receive limited services through the reentry coaches. Following the Family Justice Institute’s La Bodega de la Familia (Bodega) model, family was broadly defined to include relatives, close friends, and others who were significant sources of social support for participants.

In addition to the Welcome Home panels, key prerelease activities that were envisioned included the following:

- **Screening and assessment.** Safer Return anticipated using an intake tool developed by the Safer Foundation, which included risk assessment measurements found in the Level of Service
Inventory—Revised and what staff perceived as the best alcohol (CAGE Screening Test for Alcohol Dependence), drug (Drug Abuse Screening Test), and mental health (K6 Mental Health Screening Tool) treatment screening tools for the targeted population. The intake instrument, embedded in Safer Foundation’s Axiom database, was intended to be revised to include additional information on criminal risks and family status, based on suggestions made by staff of the Family Justice Institute and La Bodega de la Familia. Additionally, based on guidance from former staff of the Maryland Reentry Project, a mini checklist was to be developed for use during prerelease Welcome Home panels.

- **Transitional and reentry planning.** After attending Welcome Home panels that provided program orientations, eligible inmates who decided to enroll in Safer Return would meet individually with their reentry coaches before release—and, concurrently, reentry coaches would meet with key family and household members in the community—to complete screening and assessment leading to the development of individualized reentry plans. Individuals and family members would be coached to establish their own priorities. In essence, reentry plans were expected to provide a blueprint for service referrals and provision. While the planning was to be a joint process, reentry coaches were expected to ensure that the plans were complete and did not omit the kinds of activities strongly associated with successful reentry outcomes (e.g., compliance with substance abuse treatment mandated as a condition of parole).

- **Greetings at the gate.** When feasible, arrangements would be made for the reentry coach or other individuals, such as family members or citizen volunteers, to meet former inmates at the prisons to provide critical support at the time of release.

Safer Return anticipated providing each participant with postrelease services for up to one year in two locations in Garfield Park. Participants who failed to meet their specific reentry benchmarks in the one-year time frame would be invited to continue participating until they achieved those benchmarks. Reentry coaches would meet with participants at the community office location or in the participants’ homes. Participants were expected to have more frequent contact with their coaches during the initial postrelease period (at least weekly for the first two months), followed by more limited contact as they became increasingly self-sufficient and successful in terms of the reentry benchmarks in their specific reentry plans. A 24-hour hotline was envisioned to enable participants to request immediate assistance in the event of a crisis.

Reentry coaches would have moderate resources at their disposal to intervene when participants experienced tangible barriers to successful reentry, such as work-related circumstances that impeded
employment placement or retention. Critical or emergency supports that reentry coaches would be able to access and use included transportation passes for job interviews and the first two weeks of work; interview clothing vouchers; workplace support vouchers (e.g., for steel-tipped boots or tools); and emergency funds (e.g., housing assistance) for crisis situations, usually issued as loans that participants would be expected to repay. Safer Foundation program planners estimated that each participant might require approximately $150 in supports of this nature.

Because incentives and related supports and rewards have been found to generate more steady employment and increased wages for individuals who are low skilled and low earners (Holzer and Martinson 2005), Safer Foundation planned to use a job placement incentive structure with Safer Return participants. At certain employment benchmarks, such as 30, 60, and 90 days of employment, Safer Return participants would receive $25 gift cards. Additionally, at the 90-day benchmark, participants’ photos would be placed in a visible location in the planned community office, along with a brief narrative about them. Such recognition was intended both to congratulate successful participants and to motivate others to follow suit.

Nine months after program entry, participants who had not achieved their self-sufficiency objectives would be expected to participate in exit-planning meetings to develop strategies and identify additional resources needed for successful program completion.

Wraparound Services

Wraparound services available from Safer Foundation, through subcontracted providers under the Safer Return demonstration or leveraged through existing community or local government services, would include the following:

- **Career planning and employment** would be an essential program component. Safer Return program planners recognized that returning individuals were a heterogeneous population. Some would have work skills, employment histories, and job-seeking networks to draw on, while others would not. Thus, the program vision included several pathways to employment: (1) job readiness training for those who needed to address nonemployment issues (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, or anger management) before they entered the workforce; (2) transitional jobs that would provide time-limited subsidized employment and combine actual work, skills development, and supportive services to help participants overcome barriers to permanent employment; and (3) placement in permanent jobs.
All program participants who lacked strong job histories would participate in job readiness workshops focused on how to look for jobs, prepare applications and résumés, conduct interviews, and monitor progress in interacting with employers and other workers. The Oregon Civic Justice Corps model for juvenile offenders was to be adapted for Safer Return participants—primarily those without high school diplomas or their equivalent, those without work histories, and those returning from extensive periods of incarceration—who would engage in community service projects as transitional jobs. The expectation was that these individuals would acquire skills and provide needed community services while holding résumé-building jobs. This component was expected to place participants in visible roles as people who were making active contributions to their community, enabling them to build self-respect while providing a visible form of restitution to the community and establishing new bonds between themselves and the community.

- **Housing** was recognized as one of the most critical and most often unmet needs at the point of reentry. Because substance abuse treatment was determined to be a significant issue, Safer Return participants would be screened and, if needed, placed in inpatient drug treatment centers or recovery homes provided through partner resources leveraged from IDOC and the Illinois Department of Human Services’ Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse. For those who did not require significant residential substance abuse treatment but needed stable drug- and crime-free housing, Safer Return intended to seed several Oxford Houses in the Garfield Park neighborhood. As with other services, it was anticipated that Safer Return would also leverage existing temporary housing in the community for those without substance abuse treatment needs who were homeless or without a stable and safe home.

- **Mentoring** was expected to be offered as a voluntary activity for all program participants. It would take place largely in small-group settings with four participants to one mentor, using a culturally relevant framework. The framework was focused on transformative relationship development and was based on training from the Mentoring Center in Oakland, California. Community volunteers, some of whom would be formerly incarcerated individuals who had demonstrated success reintegration into the community and could provide peer support, would be recruited and supervised by faith- or community-based partners.

- **Treatment for substance abuse and mental illness and other health services** would be provided by leveraging existing resources in the area. Participants with substance abuse or mental health issues would be referred to community-based treatment partners for assessment, creation of service plans, and treatment as needed. The Illinois Department of Public Health was expected
to work with Safer Return to identify public health grantees to provide health services, including medical and dental check-ups. Reentry coaches were also expected to work with local health care providers as another avenue for serving individuals and families (particularly those lacking insurance) with special health issues, such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS.

- **Legal assistance** would be made available as needed for orders of protection, expunging or sealing of records, clemency, and other matters.

**Systemic Reforms**

At the systems level, Safer Foundation, as the justice intermediary, would

- lead efforts to institute comprehensive, coordinated responses to the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals and their families;
- identify and coordinate policy levers for institutional and system reforms;
- facilitate and oversee local partnership formation within and across institutional domains and the public and private sectors;
- provide training and technical assistance that would build community and institutional capacity and forge a learning community;
- advocate at neighborhood, city, and state levels for public and private policies and practices that would enhance opportunities for successful reentry and reintegration;
- serve as a fiscal administrator for partner organizations that received subcontracts to perform specific aspects of service delivery; and
- lead efforts to ensure the sustainability of Safer Return beyond the demonstration period.

Additionally, as the intermediary, Safer Foundation would press for criminal justice reforms, such as

- the introduction of Welcome Home panels composed of service providers and community residents that would reach out to prisoners before release and help connect them to formal and informal community support networks after release;
- neighborhood-based parole agents who would be dedicated to Safer Return parolees and able to engage in co-case management with the reentry coaches;
• changes in parole decisionmaking, policies, and practices and implementation of graduated sanctions and rewards to limit technical violations that contribute to high reincarceration rates;
• enhanced prerelease transition and discharge planning and preparation; and
• possible relocation of prisoners to IDOC facilities closer to home before release to facilitate more intensive prerelease preparation and more opportunities for connectedness to family and community support networks.

Similarly, Safer Foundation would facilitate service reforms, such as the introduction of a Service Cabinet composed of professional and paraprofessional organizations that were interested in serving formerly incarcerated individuals and their families and households and in creating new or expanded services (e.g., transitional housing) to fill gaps in meeting the needs of this population.

**Improved Community Conditions**

At the local and community level, Safer Return would work with neighborhood representatives to (1) assess the local landscape for assets and deficits that could affect the overall success of the initiative, (2) determine what systems of informal support could be created or leveraged to help those returning from prison establish long-term, meaningful prosocial relationships in the immediate area, and (3) establish viable community justice partnerships that could effectively deter or respond to criminal behavior. To these ends, Safer Foundation began facilitating the formation of Community Advisory Councils during the planning grant. The councils were intended to serve multiple purposes during the initiative’s implementation, including identifying gaps in services and needed resources; setting priorities for community action; providing community feedback and guidance to the justice intermediary; and recruiting residents to support the Safer Return efforts that required community involvement, such as the transitional employment, mentoring, and exit orientation components.

Safer Return anticipated that community- and faith-based organizations within the targeted community would be integrally involved in creating a seamless process of coordinated reentry. In particular, the model hoped that community organizations would partner with Safer Return to

• welcome released prisoners back to the neighborhood;
• encourage their constituents and members to serve as mentors;
- support neighborhood improvement projects where residents would work alongside formerly incarcerated individuals and their families to complete beautification initiatives or public works projects identified by the City of Chicago; and

- provide other informal supports, such as transportation assistance or recreational activities, to help returning individuals follow through on their reentry plans and readjust to community life.

Finally, the model anticipated that business leaders would be engaged in developing and implementing employment services, promoting hiring of former prisoners, and increasing employment opportunities in existing businesses or in new businesses and jobs that they would help attract to the Garfield Park community.
Evaluation Methodology

Using the aforementioned demonstration plan as the foundation of the process evaluation, Urban Institute researchers collected primary and secondary data on the implementation of Safer Return to understand whether and how the demonstration led to increased and more coordinated services for formerly incarcerated individuals. Data collection for this evaluation included routine teleconferences with core Safer Return staff and their partners; field work that included reviews of program documents, observations of program activities, and semistructured interviews; focus groups with participants and their family members; and reviews of the case management database, Axiom. Data were collected from Safer Foundation staff, their subcontracted partners, and other stakeholders (e.g., parole agents).

Throughout much of the demonstration period, Safer Return management and Urban researchers held biweekly teleconferences to discuss design and implementation status and issues. In addition, partner meetings took place on a monthly basis. Safer Return staff, subcontracted partners and other stakeholders, and Urban researchers joined these meetings in person or by telephone to discuss program status, implementation challenges, and suggestions for strengthening program operations. During these discussions, Safer staff and partners often reported on such program performance metrics as the number of individuals invited to Welcome Home panels, the number enrolled, and the number released and actively participating in one or more of the service components. In addition, Safer Return management monitored a set of three performance measures and reported these program outputs to the group; these measures included (1) participant engagement, defined as the percentage of participants in program components; (2) employment, defined as the percentage of participants demonstrating consistent attendance in transitional jobs and other work assignments; and (3) recidivism, defined as the percentage of participants who returned to state prison. These performance measures were also provided to partners during monthly partner teleconferences. As the program evolved, staff and partners shared data extracted from Safer Foundation’s Axiom database.

Teams of two or three Urban researchers conducted multiday site visits at least twice a year (and sometimes more frequently) from 2008 through 2012. Field work typically included

- review of program documents, such as training materials, manuals of standard operating procedures, and announcements of program activities;
- observation of program and management activities, including training sessions for staff and partner agencies, Welcome Home panels and exit orientations, transitional employment
activities, mentoring group meetings, and meetings of Safer Return’s National Advisory Board; and

- semistructured interviews with Safer Return staff, subcontractors, and key stakeholders to gain an in-depth understanding of case management and service delivery to program participants.

Stakeholder interviews were conducted at least twice a year with the entire Safer Return management and staff team, including the program director, program manager, administrative assistant, Welcome Home panel coordinator, reentry coaches, sector managers and their supervisors (staff focused on job opportunities for participants), job readiness trainers, and work crew supervisors. Interviews were also conducted with other key staff of the Safer Foundation who oversaw the demonstration, as well as mentors, community members and volunteers, and partner staff working under subcontracts with the Safer Foundation to implement components of Safer Return. Parole staff members, including supervisors and agents assigned to the Safer Return demonstration, and representatives of City of Chicago departments working with the Civic Community Works employment component were also interviewed.

Focus groups were conducted with Safer Return participants to gather their views about the nature of program services; whether their needs were being met; program strengths and weaknesses; and opportunities for improving program policies, practices, and service offerings. Similar focus groups were conducted separately with participants’ family members. Focus group discussions generally occurred early in the evening in accessible community locations. Individuals who attended these discussions were offered light refreshments and provided $20 cash incentives to thank them for their participation. A total of eight focus groups, comprising 5 to 20 individuals each, were conducted with Safer Return participants and their families.

The Urban evaluation team also conducted reviews of the case management database. The Axiom database underwent limited modifications over time to accommodate the aspects of Safer Return that differed from Safer Foundation’s business-as-usual routines, such as the transitional job component that was specific to the Safer Return demonstration. Axiom was used by Safer Return case managers and employment staff to document all the case management activities relevant to the programs, including intake, risk, and needs assessments; services rendered; referrals provided; and the outcomes of services and referrals (i.e., successful or unsuccessful completion). The Axiom database also included an open-ended field for case notes.
Urban researchers intended to use Axiom to reliably document program performance and outputs for the process evaluation. Unfortunately, the Axiom database was not available for ongoing monitoring and assessment for several reasons: (1) the retooling of Axiom to make it suitable for the demonstration specifically took a considerable amount of time to complete; (2) during the retooling process, Safer Return staff, including reentry coaches and others, kept paper files that had to be entered manually into the Axiom database once retooling was completed; and (3) the manual data entry and ensuing quality control process executed by Safer Return program managers to ensure accurate data entry took a considerable amount of time to complete.

Although Axiom was completed to the program managers’ satisfaction by the end of the demonstration, and its output was provided to the evaluation team, Urban researchers determined that Axiom was not suitable as a reliable indicator of program performance and outputs. Axiom was inconsistently used by reentry coaches, who used Axiom to document their case management activities in different ways and acknowledged that their use of Axiom also differed from case to case. In the end, no firm conclusions about program performance or outcomes could be made from the Axiom database, though it was used for general descriptive purposes and, to a limited extent, to inform the cost evaluation because it was helpful in identifying the range of program staff members’ activities.

In addition to the primary and secondary data collected for the process evaluation, other data were collected for the outcome, impact, and cost evaluations using a quasi-experimental design. These data included:

- two waves of former prisoner surveys drawn from a sample of Safer Return participants and a sample of individuals released to the evaluation’s comparison community, West Englewood, at four months and sixteen months after release;
- two waves of family surveys drawn from a sample of family members of the Safer Return participants and West Englewood comparisons who completed the former prisoner survey at four months and sixteen months after release;
- three waves of community surveys of Garfield Park and West Englewood residents, in November 2009, May 2011, and November 2012;
- program and cost data from the agencies providing services to Safer Return participants; and
- administrative records from IDOC on two-year reincarceration outcomes, and from the Illinois Department of Employment Security on two-year employment outcomes, for the sample of
Safer Return participants and comparisons in Garfield Park and West Englewood released during the demonstration’s enrollment period.

Findings using these data are described in the second report on the Safer Return evaluation (Fontaine et al. 2015).
Implementation of Individual and Family Services

The Safer Return model envisioned meeting the needs of returning individuals and their families with a suite of extant city, county, and state resources, blended with new services provided by the Safer Foundation, its subcontractors, and its partners with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Safer Foundation estimated that in the planned two-year demonstration period approximately 660 men and women would receive supportive services before release and during their first year of transition from prison to the community. In December 2007, the Safer Foundation, in its role as justice intermediary, issued solicitations for community- and faith-based organizations interested in partnering with a wide network of agencies, systems, advocates, and community members to implement the Safer Return vision of a coordinated reentry model that would saturate the Garfield Park community by enrolling every returning prisoner in a suite of services specifically arranged to meet his or her individual needs.

The Safer Foundation hypothesized that its effectiveness as a justice intermediary could be hampered if other community- and faith-based organizations perceived the organization as commandeering all the resources available under MacArthur Foundation funding. As a result, the Safer Foundation elected to deliver some services within the employment domain (services it is well known for) and to share a large portion of the MacArthur resources by subcontracting with qualified organizations for some of the program components. A formal solicitation requested services in five domains: Welcome Home panels ($15,000 a year), mentoring ($24,000 a year), job readiness training ($20,000 a year), Oxford House coordination ($10,000 a year with a $6,500 revolving loan fund), and case management (budget to be determined). The following sections on recruitment, family-inclusive case management, job preparation and employment services, mentoring, housing, and other supportive services describe implementation efforts of these partnerships, as well as the services provided directly by the Safer Foundation, its subcontractors, and other providers.

The program components were not all launched at the same time. Safer Return began with a lean set of activities—Welcome Home panels, basic case management, one initial transitional job project, and employment services—and added to this set as time went on. Approximately six to nine months after the first participant returned to the community, case management was expanded to include family-inclusive elements, and mentoring was introduced. Some program components continued to evolve
through the life of the demonstration, and others never reached fruition (e.g., housing and the planned police and parole protocols), as described in the following sections.

We refer to “Safer Return program managers” throughout this report. These were the core individuals charged with implementing the overall initiative and managing its day-to-day activities. While there was one Safer Return program manager, several individuals were critical to the overall implementation and management of the demonstration—including the program director, program manager, and administrative assistant who supported the director and manager, as well as two executive staff members at the Safer Foundation who oversaw the director and manager.

Recruitment of Safer Return Participants

Safer Return was planned as a reentry program that would identify and begin working with inmates shortly before release from prison to enable as smooth a transition as possible and postrelease access to needed services. The Safer Foundation established a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with IDOC to arrange prerelease access to inmates. The Illinois Department of Corrections agreed to use information in its database to identify inmates expected to return to the Safer Return target community based on zip codes.

During start-up, Safer Foundation conferred with the deputy director of IDOC’s Department of Programs and Support Services to determine the best way to reach and recruit inmates returning to the target community. For IDOC, reentry counselors and field service representatives in each facility finalize inmates’ postrelease housing plans. As the program was beginning in April 2008, Safer Foundation staff provided an overview of the program model and Welcome Home panel structure at the biannual IDOC field service representative training session. Additionally, Safer Foundation staff created program flyers to heighten the program’s visibility among inmates, and IDOC placed these flyers in heavily trafficked areas within its facilities. Information from the flyers was also included in messages streamed over the institutional television channel.

In April 2008, IDOC designated reentry counselors and field service representatives as Safer Return liaisons; these individuals were tasked with providing an essential layer of support in the recruitment and enrollment process by facilitating the internal communication needed to identify and engage potential Safer Return participants during the Welcome Home panel process. Safer Foundation staff visited each facility to meet reentry counselors and field service representatives and orient them to the Safer Return program.
Additionally in April 2008, the IDOC mainframe applications department began providing the Safer Foundation with weekly Offender Tracking System (OTS) reports of individuals who would be returning to the 60624 zip code (which includes East Garfield Park) within 90 days. This weekly report listed the inmates’ names, their current institutional location, their mandatory supervised release date, and their postrelease address (called the “host site”). Safer Foundation staff would use this information and run it through a mapping system to identify which potential participants were scheduled to return to East Garfield Park within 90 days. Potential participants were then invited to attend Welcome Home panels, as described in the next section.

Welcome Home Panels

Safer Foundation anticipated that up to three community-based partners would receive awards to coordinate Welcome Home panels composed of community members, mentors, and staff from other partner organizations (e.g., reentry coaches and parole agents), who would visit Illinois prisons at least quarterly to orient and enroll potentially eligible inmates. The panels would also welcome participants back to the community after release. The community Welcome Home panel partners would be responsible for recruitment, training, and scheduling exit orientations through IDOC contacts.

Selected nonprofit organizations were expected to:

- Maintain a continuous flow of communication and feedback with reentry coaches.
- Recruit and retain 10 to 30 community members who were at least 21 years old, including formerly incarcerated individuals who had been out of prison and off parole for a minimum of two years.
- Conduct background checks on all Welcome Home panel members to ensure that they had no current criminal charges, and submit applications for institutional clearance to IDOC before finalizing membership for those receiving IDOC approval.
- Schedule initial and periodic member meetings to plan for and debrief after exit orientations.
- Facilitate exit orientations of 10 to 12 inmates and 3 to 5 Welcome Home panel members in 90-minute sessions convened as in-person meetings within a correctional facility or via videoconferencing.
- Coordinate the attendance of Welcome Home panel members, service providers, and police and parole agents at exit orientations.

- Ensure that all volunteers received the Mentoring Center training provided or organized by the Safer Foundation.

Safer Foundation selected the only applicant that applied to the solicitation, and developed an MOU with the People's Community Development Association of Chicago (PCDAC) of the People’s Church of the Harvest (located in East Garfield Park). The MOU detailed requirements regarding coordination, scheduling, and follow-up for the Welcome Home panels that would take place at least quarterly in each IDOC prison facility, in person or via videoconferencing (depending on the geographic proximity of the IDOC facility to East Garfield Park). Each panel was expected to be constituted of at least four members: a reentry coach, a parole agent, and two community volunteers (e.g., mentors or community residents recruited by PCDAC).

In-person presentations were to take place at 30 IDOC facilities, the majority of which were three to five hours from Chicago; 14 of these facilities were four or more hours from Chicago and would require overnight trips. Hence, parole agents would not be expected to participate in the panels that were not within three hours of Chicago. Fifteen additional IDOC facilities were slated to have videoconference Welcome Home panels. Safer Foundation reported that Welcome Home panels were held quarterly at more than three dozen IDOC institutions: 22 facilities received in-person panels and 18 received videoconference panels.

Safer Return staff developed standard operating procedures for Welcome Home panels and a manual for implementing a Welcome Home panel or exit orientation program. The standard operating procedures detailed

- the function of the component;

- steps to form the panels (e.g., logistics of member clearances to enter IDOC facilities and requirements for fingerprinting, drug screening, and tuberculosis testing);

- volunteer assessment summary sheets, acceptance and rejection letters for candidate volunteers, and volunteer file checklist; and

- the Welcome Home panel presentation plan that outlined activities to be accomplished and information and messaging to disseminate before and during Welcome Home panel sessions.
The manual covered:

- panel formation, including designating a panel coordinator; panel design; and how to recruit, prepare, support, and retain panel members;
- coordinating with IDOC to schedule panels, facilitating exit orientations, communicating with reentry coaches, and community follow-up;
- communication procedures and administrative program expectations and deliverables; and
- sample forms, maps, and charts.

Welcome Home panels at IDOC facilities and through videoconferencing were launched in May 2008. Community Welcome Home panels were introduced after initial implementation, around July 2008. Program recruitment through Welcome Home panels continued through December 2011. From May 2008 through December 2011, a total of 363 Welcome Home panels were conducted, including 190 within IDOC facilities, 40 through videoconferencing with individuals in IDOC facilities, and 133 in the community.

In 2009, reentry coaches described the referral and Welcome Home panel process as follows:

1. There was always at least one reentry coach at the Welcome Home panel; parole agents, mentors, and community members rarely attended, though parole agents and community members did attend community-based Welcome Home panels.
2. After Welcome Home panels, letters were sent to those who attended, thanking them for coming to the panel.
3. For those who enrolled, a consent form requested permission to talk to a family or social-support member, directing those who agreed to provide contact information, particularly a telephone number where the family member could be reached.
4. Thirty days before a participant’s planned release, the reentry coach called the family member to introduce himself or herself and the program.
5. Reentry coaches received lists updating them on the status of individuals who had indicated interest in program participation. When inmates were released, Safer Return administrative staff would check their addresses to verify that they had returned to Garfield Park, and reentry coaches would try to make telephone contact within 72 hours of release.
6. Reentry coaches used the Axiom database intake form that asked about medical history, work history, family, and criminal charges; however, the intake did not specifically include a validated risk and needs assessment.
7. A reentry plan would be developed with the participant’s parole agent. Sometimes reentry planning was initiated before release, particularly for individuals in facilities that were reasonably close to Safer Return or when reentry coaches were conducting in-person Welcome Home panels in the prison. For individuals enrolled by videoconference Welcome Home panels, reentry plans were formulated at the time of intake—ideally within 72 hours after release—or shortly thereafter.

8. Reentry coaches scheduled weekly meetings with participants upon their initial release to the community, and these meetings would gradually taper off over time; initially, there were no formal guidelines specifying how often reentry coaches should meet with participants or the stages of change in the process.

Recruitment Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Over the course of the demonstration, the program encountered several recruitment challenges that program managers tried to address through various strategies. We discuss these challenges and the strategies employed to overcome them in the order in which they were encountered over the course of the demonstration.

Safer Return initially encountered lower enrollment than anticipated within the first six months of the program. Program managers and the research team began examining possible reasons for the low enrollment figures. Shortly after start up, Safer Return staff began to see a gap between projected returns based on forecasts that used zip codes at prison entry and IDOC’s information on pending returns to the East Garfield Park community. Two early corrections were made to the OTS queries that generated the list: the time frame was expanded from 90 days to 180 days prerelease to minimize the possibility that individuals who were released before their projected release dates would not be identified, and a second zip code (60612) was added. The added zip code covered the part of the East Garfield Park neighborhood not contained within the first zip code (60624), as well as the West Garfield Park neighborhood.

Nonetheless, there were other problems with proper identification of eligible parties that were beyond the control of the program managers. Inmates self-reported the entry and exit data inputted by IDOC. Some inmates did not know where they were going to live after release; others knew where they intended to reside but did not want to share accurate information with IDOC. Addresses and zip codes were often incorrectly identified, and therefore valid lists of those planning to return to the community were not always available. For Safer Return, the result of these inaccuracies was that many individuals
who attended Welcome Home panels and enrolled before release ultimately did not return to the target community and were therefore ineligible to receive postrelease services. Conversely, some individuals who returned to the target community were not invited to prerelease Welcome Home panels because their zip codes recorded in IDOC’s database placed them outside the program’s service boundaries.

In addition to those errors, IDOC’s system for validating home plans made it difficult to confirm where inmates would be residing after release. As individuals prepared to leave IDOC, they provided a field service representative with their postrelease address (host site). Two release plans exist:

- The R plan is the first step. The plan is approved by an IDOC counselor once he or she confirms that the person is welcome and permitted to live at the address after release. IDOC does not validate these addresses until a parole agent makes a home visit approximately 72 hours after release.

- S plans require a parole agent to physically visit the host site before approval.

The majority of individuals in IDOC’s OTS system have an approved R plan. Because several IDOC facilities are far from Chicago, IDOC facility staff members were unfamiliar with all the addresses and communities in Chicago, and did not verify the addresses. Therefore, IDOC staff did not flag invalid street addresses or addresses not associated with the host name provided, resulting in host site locations that were incorrect or did not exist. Often, correct addresses could not be determined until parole agents attempted home visits. Additionally, home visits made by parole agents sometimes resulted in failure to approve the host sites; in some of these cases, individuals were relocated out of the target community and rendered ineligible to participate in Safer Return.

Because of IDOC’s inability to validate the accuracy and acceptability of self-reported information, within the first six months of program operation only 34 percent of the inmates who enrolled in Safer Return before release were eligible to participate after release. An additional 4 percent of this same early cohort left postrelease planning when they relocated to adjacent communities within 30 to 90 days of their return home. This had significant implications for the program since it meant that staff time and resources were being used inefficiently, and it likely also had implications for the morale of individuals who were eager to participate in the program but were later deemed ineligible.

Safer Return program staff and the National Advisory Board felt this was an important topic for consideration in terms of systemic reforms. Discussions centered on what other states do to avoid this type of problem. One suggestion was to assign parole agents approximately 90 days before release so they could validate home plans in time to enable better transition planning, especially housing
arrangements. Another suggestion that had been broached with IDOC during the MacArthur-funded planning grant was to bring Chicago inmates back to a transitional location in the community (like the federal prison system). Several National Advisory Board participants indicated that the mayor and several aldermen found that idea appealing, and thought that closed city facilities or foreclosed properties could possibly be put to such a use. However, this reform never gathered enough momentum to move forward.

In an effort to increase the recruitment of eligible program participants, Safer Return staff sought other means to identify and reach out to inmates. The Illinois Department of Corrections helped Safer Return staff increase their efforts to reach potential participants in the institutions. Staff began quarterly presentations in the classes of the Statewide Partnership to Increase Safety through Employment (SPISE) program (a Safer Foundation–operated program), which was a job readiness class held at each of the 38 facilities where Welcome Home panels were presented in person. By collaborating with SPISE, staff hoped to saturate the IDOC facilities with Safer Return’s presence.

Two other remedies were subsequently implemented following consultation with the Urban research team, and with the permission of the MacArthur Foundation:

- Expanding the neighborhood boundary: Safer staff became increasingly convinced that individuals being released to East Garfield Park did not differentiate between East and West Garfield Park. Potential participants regarded the community as a single entity: Garfield Park. This perception aligned with focus group information gathered when Safer Foundation convened Community Advisory Councils during the planning grant and the early days of the demonstration. Thus, the geographic boundaries for Safer Return were expanded to include the neighborhood immediately west of East Garfield Park: West Garfield Park. Safer Return’s eventual community boundaries were Governors Parkway (north), Talman Street (east), Taylor and Arlington Streets (south), and Cicero Avenue (west). The characteristics of West Garfield Park were almost identical to those of East Garfield Park. Based on the OTS data, this expansion was expected to significantly increase the number of eligible individuals who could be recruited into Safer Return. In early 2009, when the decision to expand the boundaries was made, Safer Return was averaging approximately 15 enrollments a month. The addition of West Garfield Park was expected to increase the enrollment number to 20–25 a month.

- Allowing community enrollment: Program eligibility was also expanded to include recently released inmates living in Garfield Park who had not been invited to participate in Safer Return during incarceration. This change was made based on parole staff members’ observation that a
significant group of individuals living in East Garfield Park within 90 days of release from prison had not been identified as returning to East Garfield Park according to OTS reporting. In operational meetings, parole staff advised Safer Return staff of this pattern and recommended permitting postrelease enrollment of individuals—identified by parole agents—who relocated to the target community within 45 days of release. Postrelease enrollment would be limited to those individuals who missed the opportunity to sign up for Safer Return via prison-based Welcome Home panels; postrelease enrollment would not be accommodated for those who had rejected a prelease enrollment opportunity.

As for the coordination of the Welcome Home panels, PCDAC identified a coordinator who was trained on the Safer Return model and was able to lead the scheduling effort by May 2008. Early during the implementation period, PCDAC recruited community volunteers, particularly individuals who had criminal records, for the Welcome Home panels; community volunteers with criminal records were intended to demonstrate successful reintegration and success for those who would be returning to the community to participate in the Safer Return program. However, because IDOC restricted who could enter the facilities based on criminal background, it proved exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to obtain IDOC clearance for such individuals to participate in the in-person Welcome Home panels conducted within IDOC facilities.

By May 2009, approximately 27 community volunteers had been recruited and 13 had received training to participate in the Welcome Home panels. However, many individuals who initially volunteered subsequently withdrew because of delays in obtaining IDOC-required clearances or changes in their personal circumstances. Additionally, the economic downturn that occurred as Safer Return was organizing its early Welcome Home panels made it more difficult for PCDAC to recruit additional volunteers. Recruiting community volunteers and working with various facility liaisons to schedule Welcome Home panels composed of Safer Return staff, professional partners, and community volunteers entailed considerably more effort than PCDAC had anticipated. Safer Return and PCDAC arrived at the mutual decision that the function of coordinating Welcome Home panels should be reassigned to full-time program staff, employed by Safer Return via the Safer Foundation. After the change, PCDAC remained affiliated with the program in the capacity of organizing informal community support for Safer Return participants and their families.

Although the program’s design anticipated that Garfield Park’s distance from many IDOC facilities would make in-person Welcome Home panels infeasible in some locations, no one questioned whether the quality of the experience would be deleteriously affected by videoconferencing. In reality, while videoconferencing technology was often beneficial, the results of Welcome Home panels using
videoconferencing were not wholly satisfactory. Those who staffed Welcome Home panel videoconferences felt that inmates were less likely to engage in conversation or even ask questions about the program than potential participants who were recruited through in-person panels. There were often technological limitations such that the entire panel of staff could not be seen by the potential participants. In other cases, some potential participants were out of range of the cameras and could not be viewed by panel staff members, resulting in stilted interactions.

Safer Return enrollment was originally planned to occur through exit orientations (modeled on the Maryland REP project) delivered before release by Welcome Home panels. However, as mentioned, the unreliability of IDOC data regarding where inmates would reside after release made it difficult to accurately identify a sizable pool of eligible candidates until individuals had returned home. Additionally, individuals who were in segregation or those who had the advantage of an early release missed attending prison-based Welcome Home panels and the opportunity to enroll in Safer Return before release. Taken together, these difficulties resulted in significant recruitment challenges: 58 percent of those enrolled before release during the demonstration’s first year did not return to the target community, and 78 percent of those paroled to the target community were not identified before release. These recruitment difficulties and lower program enrollment than anticipated led to the decision to expand Welcome Home panels to recruit potential participants after release through community-based group (and later individual) orientations.

Over time, Safer Return management and partners began to question the wisdom of Welcome Home panel teams traveling hours to meet with only one or two potential program participants; program managers struggled to strike the appropriate balance between making good use of staff time and program resources and maintaining fidelity to the program model. Although there was discussion during the planning period about the possibility of transferring soon-to-be-released inmates to a common location proximate to Chicago to facilitate reentry planning and transitional preparation, staffing changes at the highest level of IDOC resulted in that effort being abandoned. Additionally, the model assumed that reentry coaches would make prerelease arrangements for participants to commence community-based service delivery upon their return home, and that those requiring such assistance would be met at the gates at the time of release, but neither of those expectations was realized during implementation.

In the end, Safer Return staff engaged many more individuals than the number of actual participants suggests. An example of the tremendous effort it took to recruit Safer Return participants and the identification, enrollment, and engagement challenges is illustrated through the following. Over the five years of the demonstration enrollment period, Safer Return engaged 727 individuals in the
Garfield Park community, where engagement was defined by the program as an individual who participated in at least one Safer Return service in the community. Across the three exit orientation types—in-prison, videoconference, and community panels—approximately 1,450 individuals attended orientations, and approximately 1,120 of those enrolled in the program. While this shows that the overwhelming majority of individuals who heard about the program were eager to sign up for Safer Return, it also shows that some who enrolled did not actually engage with the program in the community. Of course, some individuals may not have been motivated to engage with the program in the community for various reasons, but a sizable percentage of those who did not engage in the community did not return to Garfield Park and were therefore ineligible to participate.

Challenges with prerelease identification also hampered the program’s prerelease transitional planning efforts. Although Safer Return program managers tried to conduct prerelease transitional planning for a limited number of participants who were identified before release toward the second half of the demonstration enrollment period, the aforementioned challenges with prerelease identification undermined their efforts to truly accomplish prerelease planning. Safer Return was implemented to address the challenges associated with prerelease planning. Although the program was unable to accomplish this goal, its deep engagement with these challenges meant that it was well-positioned to develop a realistic problem-solving strategy. It is unfortunate that its managers and staff were unable to devote focused attention to such an undertaking. Staffing changes at the highest levels of IDOC and the parole department occurred during the demonstration period, making it difficult for Safer Return program managers to identify firm solutions to prerelease identification challenges. And some of the problems—such as inmates not revealing or not knowing their community of release—were simply outside anyone’s control.

Family-Inclusive Case Management

Safer Foundation solicited a single organization to offer comprehensive strengths-based case management services to Safer Return participants using the family case management model developed by the Family Justice Institute as part of its La Bodega de la Familia intervention services. The basic family case management model entails

- having the participant identify his or her family or support network;
- having the case manager engage with the family support network at the point of participant enrollment;
- designing an individualized reentry plan from a strengths-based perspective, based on input from the participant, parole agent, and family support network; and

- tapering the intensity of case management as individual and family sufficiency increase.

It was anticipated that the provider would begin enrollment and reentry coaching of eligible individuals up to 90 days before release and continue services for up to one year after release, unless more case management was required in specific circumstances. The case management partner was expected to maintain a coach-participant ratio of 1 reentry coach to 30 participants and to

- Ensure that all project-related staff received training from the Family Justice Institute, provided and organized by the Safer Foundation.

- Reach out to eligible incarcerated individuals and their families to offer assistance both before and after release.

- Participate in exit orientations by assisting the community partner with logistics coordination and by attending in-prison Welcome Home panels to enroll prospective participants.

- Work with participants before release to assess their individual strengths, identify their service or support needs, and determine their priorities for accepting needed services, while developing individualized reentry plans.

- Arrange and link participants to services according to their individualized reentry plans, and rely on the integrated providers’ Service Cabinet to coordinate service delivery or identify solutions to delays occasioned by gaps or limited availability in service.

- Implement a motivational framework that included engaging participants about their reentry process; attending joint staffings with participants and parole agents; conducting periodic reassessments of participants’ progress and ongoing or emergent needs; and advocating on participants’ behalf with other treatment or service providers, families, parole agents, employers, and, potentially, the police.

Further, in soliciting a subcontractor to deliver case management services, Safer Foundation defined family-inclusive case management as minimally including the following features:

- Prerelease reentry planning with the participant and his or her self-identified family.

- Regular and timely participant staffings (with participants, parole agents, and others as appropriate) to develop trusting and consistent relationships.
Timely assessment, intervention, and Service Cabinet referrals to meet participants’ needs and to address identified issues and barriers to employment and reentry success.

Engagement of participants in other Safer Return components, such as employment, mentoring, and civic involvement opportunities.

Administrative record keeping to ensure accurate documentation (in Safer’s Axiom database or in hard-copy files) of intake forms, assessment results, reentry plans, program status, accomplishments relevant to individualized reentry planning, employment verification, and retention status.

Box 1 provides an overview of common family-inclusive case management goals and practices.

**BOX 1**

**Family-Inclusive Case Management**

In family case management, the unit of assessment and intervention includes both the participants and their family members, with family members broadly defined as relatives, close friends, and others who play a significant support role in participants’ lives. Family case managers help participants and families navigate within larger systems (such as criminal justice, child welfare, and employment) to access treatment and services, maintain jobs, tap support networks, and create long-term family well-being and community safety. Core elements of family-inclusive case management include the following:

- Demonstrating cultural sensitivity and respectfulness in working with families
- Focusing on identifying family strengths and priorities.
- Providing case management services that address a range of supports for families.
- Delivering services in community-based, accessible settings where participants and families live and work.
- Using family-engagement tools and techniques and regular home visits to learn about participant and family context.
- Having capacity to respond to participants’ and families’ needs quickly.
- Using group interventions, which are a cost-effective approach to promoting community-building and fostering individuals’ and families’ abilities to learn from and support one another.
- Making resources available to all community members to destigmatize services while strengthening the community.
As it did with several other components of the Safer Return model, Safer Foundation developed a manual to guide implementation of the family-inclusive case management activities.

**Reentry Coaching**

One of the two organizations that responded to the Safer Foundation's solicitation, Treatment Alternatives to Safer Communities (TASC), was subcontracted to offer family-inclusive case management modeled after the Bodega approach. Initially, TASC hired and trained seven reentry coaches, some of whom were certified in mental illness and substance abuse treatment and counseling and three of whom had criminal histories. Concurrent with ongoing training from the Family Justice Institute, reentry coaches began meeting with Safer Return participants before family-inclusive case management was fully implemented.

Initially, reentry coaches were expected to meet with participants for at least one hour of direct engagement a week. The original program design anticipated that reentry coaches would perform risk and needs assessments in addition to gathering basic intake information. Using that information, reentry coaches were to develop flexible individualized reentry plans that identified goals and objectives for future activities. Reentry coaches would also link individuals to services provided directly by Safer Return (e.g., mentoring and the transitional job component, job readiness training, and employment placement) and broker services by referring participants to other providers that had agreed to work with Safer Return participants (e.g., transitional housing providers, food banks, mental health providers).

Caseloads varied among reentry coaches depending on enrollment, the cases they were working with, and their other administrative duties. The coaches estimated that their average caseloads ranged from 12 to 20 individuals at any given time. The amount of contact between the reentry coaches and the participants also varied. Typically, reentry coaches saw "stable" participants once every two to three weeks to check in. There were also, however, many minimally engaged participants. Those who rarely engaged included individuals who no longer needed help or simply didn’t want to accept assistance. The coaches indicated that although the standard operating procedures defined minimal engagement that could lead to program discharge (e.g., no face-to-face or phone contact for 30 days, no contact at all for 45 days, or failure to act according to the reentry plan), the formal definition was not always used in practice. Instead, reentry coaches exercised their judgment on a case-by-case basis. If they felt that they could not engage an individual or that an individual no longer needed Safer Return services, they would close the case. On the other hand, even if they had 45 days of no contact with the
participant, they were willing to keep trying to engage the individual if they believed it was a valuable time investment because the participant might benefit.

Reentry coaches’ daily and weekly schedules varied dramatically, depending on what participants needed at any given time. Activities reentry coaches said they did for participants include transporting them to enroll in GED classes, obtaining clothing, helping them build résumés, helping them find housing, visiting their family members, finding and transporting them to physical and mental health and substance abuse services, advocating for them in court, meeting with their parole agents, crisis intervention (crisis was a loosely defined term, including criminal acts, violations, relapses, and other stressors), conducting intake assessments, performing home visits, helping them get ready for employment, providing general life coaching and mentoring, and completing substance abuse assessments (if the reentry coach was certified to do so).

In addition to addressing participants’ service needs, reentry coaches were to conduct monthly case meetings with parole agents and participants. Reentry coaches were also expected to meet weekly with transitional job crew supervisors and monthly with mentors to monitor the participation and progress of participants on their caseloads. Although case staffings with parole agents occurred, the participants were not always present for them.

Referrals for Service

Reentry coaches were positioned to directly link participants with services provided by the program (e.g., transitional jobs), by the Safer Foundation (e.g., job readiness training), or by Safer Return subcontractors (e.g., mentoring). Additionally, reentry coaches could refer participants to Service Cabinet agencies Safer Return had formal or informal agreements with, or other community-based resources. From the outset, Safer Foundation recognized that participants would likely need referrals to at least four types of services: substance abuse assessment and treatment, mental health assessment and treatment, medical care, and housing.

The program design anticipated that participants’ substance abuse issues (if any) would surface during the intake assessment or later. These individuals would then be referred to a Safer Return treatment provider that served the East Garfield Park neighborhood (e.g., Haymarket, Thresholds, or The Bobby E. Wright Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center Inc.) for full treatment assessments and treatment service plans that identified the need for inpatient, outpatient, recovery home, or medical treatment, or comorbidity interventions. Thereafter, reentry coaches were expected
to coordinate with IDOC and the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to ensure that the assessor’s recommendations were met through the IDHS-funded treatment services that were made available to meet participants’ needs. Reentry coaches would continue to maintain contact with the treatment providers, ideally on a weekly basis, and would use that feedback in case management meetings and other meetings with participants and to update participants’ reentry plans.

Participants whose intake interviews revealed mental health issues would be handled much like those with substance abuse issues. Reentry coaches would refer such participants to treatment providers in the community for assessment, and then, after receiving treatment service plans, reentry coaches would try to coordinate appropriate service delivery through IDOC, IDHS, or a host of other agencies, including the Social Security Administration and the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

For medical care, Safer Return staff planned to work with the Illinois Department of Public Health to identify health care providers funded by the state who were in a position to allocate slots for physical and medical care. Additionally, they planned for reentry coaches to work with health care providers that routinely treated individuals who lacked health insurance, and for reentry coaches to help participants access state-funded insurance (e.g., Medicaid). Beyond that, Safer Return program managers planned to have at least one specialized health care reentry coach and reentry coach manager in place to offer wellness support groups and workshops, particularly for those with special needs such as diabetes and HIV/AIDS.

As anticipated, reentry coaches made concerted efforts to broker services by referring participants to clothing assistance, housing assistance, assistance in obtaining identification cards, substance abuse or mental health assessment or treatment, and medical services. Over time, in response to the changing landscape of service providers as a result of government cutbacks and the changing economic landscape, they put together a resource book with the goal of systematically organizing services that were available in the community and beyond. However, reentry coaches often expressed frustration with the dearth of resources and the barriers they encountered in linking participants to services provided through Safer Return directly as well as those brokered by leveraging community resources.

While the model intended for reentry coaches to create transition, discharge, and reentry plans using prerelease risk and needs assessments conducted by the reentry coaches and information discussed with participants during prerelease meetings, there was limited assessment of participants based on their risks and needs. Safer Foundation’s Axiom database contained intake information, but it did not provide a standard, validated risk and needs assessment. The lack of a standard, validated risk and needs assessment meant that reentry coaches had to link participants to qualified service providers
for risk and needs assessments. After these assessments, reentry planning could be completed. However, the risk and needs assessments were conducted chiefly for individuals with parole-board orders. While they were sometimes conducted for individuals who did not have parole-board orders, this was not a standardized practice. Later in the demonstration, reentry coaches introduced the Texas Christian University criminal risk assessment and began using it for all Safer Return participants. By October 2011, reentry coaches were administering this assessment within 30 days of participant enrollment. The coaches felt that the instrument was useful and thought that IDOC ought to routinely administer it to inmates before release and share the results with postrelease reentry programs and service providers. Around this time, reentry coaches also established protocols for how often they were expected to meet with program participants and monitor their stages of change.

The Role of the Family Justice Institute

An MOU was not in place with the Family Justice Institute (FJI) at the beginning of the program, but was eventually established in November 2008. The Family Justice Institute agreed to

- review Safer Return interim case management forms and standard operating procedures to recommend enhancements as to how the tools could better reflect a family-inclusive, strengths-based approach;
- review Safer Return’s data collection methods to recommend best practices on tracking family well-being;
- facilitate bimonthly teleconferences between leadership from Safer Return, TASC, and FJI, with the purpose of developing the Safer Return family-inclusive case management model;
- conduct training for Safer Return staff and partners on the FJI approach; and
- provide training and technical assistance and make FJI’s clinical director available for one-hour technical assistance sessions with Safer Return management and staff twice a month.

While the MOU was under discussion, FJI presented a two-day training in May 2008 (two months before the first participant was expected to return to the community). The training was attended by Safer Return staff (e.g., the project director, project manager, administrative assistant, Welcome Home panel coordinator, and sector manager), as well as five parole agents who had volunteered for assignment as the neighborhood-based agents, five TASC case managers (including the supervisor), and two volunteers who would be serving as mentors. The sessions were interactive with ample time for...
participants to role play and talk through various scenarios; also, participants were given handouts with examples of how to manage caseloads using family-inclusive case management techniques.

Subsequently, FJI training was provided to help reentry coaches use two key family case management tools: ecomaps and genograms. Ecomaps display government and community resources, including informal and formal organizations the participant and his or her family use. Formal resources are typically government and private agencies that play a role in the lives of participants and families. These may include schools, community-based agencies providing preventive services, clinics, or drug treatment programs. Informal resources might include a local barbershop or local basketball league.

The ecomap is a tool intended to help case managers identify sources of support that participants, family members, and staff may be able to tap in new ways. Sometimes ecomaps help case managers uncover agencies’ conflicting goals or demands, and, in so doing, highlight the need for better coordination to assist participants and their families. The kinds of connections that might be identified on a participant’s ecomap include

- faith-based institutions;
- child care providers;
- schools and teachers (participants’ educational resources or their children’s contacts);
- workplaces, employers, supervisors, and coworkers;
- spouse, partner, or girlfriend or boyfriend;
- coparent of a child;
- vocational training programs;
- mentors and sponsors;
- substance abuse and mental health treatment programs;
- medical care providers;
- child protective services and parenting classes;
- entitlement programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, or Supplemental Security Income;
- probation or parole departments or the courts;
- landlord or public housing authority;
- gang or peer group;
- neighbors;
- mutual aid groups, such as 12-step programs and Rational Recovery; and
- social clubs, sports teams, and the like.

Treatment practitioners use genograms in clinical settings sometimes, but FJI found that they can also be useful for community corrections professionals. For example, genograms can help reveal multigenerational incarceration histories. Genograms are essentially family trees that depict elements of family networks and the nature of familial relationships. Common information about people depicted in a genogram includes

- gender;
- date and location of birth and status as adopted or foster child;
- marital status;
- current location;
- living or deceased (and cause of death);
- primary language;
- chronic illness, including mental illness, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and hypertension;
- education, including attendance at college or high school and graduation;
- occupation, including retirement and disability information;
- religion, and whether individual is observant; and
- criminal justice involvement, history, and status.

Genograms are flexible and can be adapted to incorporate and support strength-based practices. For example, connections that might be depicted on a genogram include who lives together, who is speaking to one another, healthy alliances, and long-term relationships. Additional information that can be included on a genogram to help identify potentially supportive individuals includes languages.
spoken, computer literacy, homeownership, whether individuals own a car or have a driver’s license, and whether they are employed or own a business.

The Family Justice Institute recommended that participants and their families be engaged to play active roles in creating the maps. The genogram is more likely to be accurate with participant and family engagement. The collaborative process is also intended to reduce the shame that is often attached to telling a stranger about life events and situations that are typically stigmatized. The process also can help individuals and their families recognize strengths and see connections and patterns within their families for the first time or in new ways, which may give rise to opportunities for them to consider how these patterns can be altered to support future success.

The Family Justice Institute did not expect ecomaps or genograms to be completed in a single sitting. Safer Return reentry coaches indicated that they used the ecomaps and genograms when appropriate, but not necessarily at intake. They tried to implement discussions about these tools with participants within the first two weeks. The reentry coaches felt the forms were cumbersome because the ecomaps were not electronic. However, some reentry coaches found that the tools were helpful in getting information from participants and building a foundation for services. The consensus seemed to be that the ecomaps were more useful than the genograms. Nonetheless, reentry coaches did not always use these tools, and it took considerable reinforcement from both Safer Return program management and TASC supervisors to have these approaches adopted in even a moderate way.

Although the FJI contract allowed for the possibility of ongoing training and technical assistance from FJI case management experts, the reentry coaches made limited use of that option.

Additionally, FJI staff members advising Safer Return reentry coaches recommended the use of a third instrument they had recently developed and tested: the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT). The RIT, composed of eight questions, was created to help correctional staff provide case management and develop reentry plans. The RIT is intended to complement standard risk and needs assessments by helping staff build rapport with participants. The tool relies on a user-friendly method of identifying and reinforcing positive connections to family and social networks during and after incarceration. Reentry coaches were exposed to the RIT early on and in 2010, when program planners decided to use the instrument for transitional planning. However, the RIT was never used routinely by the reentry coaches.
Family-Inclusive Case Management Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Among the basic tenets of family case management is including family members in developing and supporting individuals’ reentry plans while extending offers of services to meet families’ critical needs. As explained on page 23, individuals enrolling in Safer Return received consent forms requesting contact information for and permission for reentry coaches to talk to family or social support members.

Reentry coaches reported that they provided minimal services to family members. In general, the services extended to family members included helping them with transportation to facilitate reunification, providing counseling and life-skills coaching, providing material resources (e.g., money and baby strollers), providing mediation between the participant and family member, advocating for the family with government agencies and social services, and providing information about services. The reentry coaches believed that by helping Safer Return participants, they would be helping their family members indirectly.

Though Safer Return managers encouraged the reentry coaches to increase family engagement with the program, they met with little success. The program tried several approaches to boosting family engagement, including having supervisors contact family members of incarcerated potential participants to discuss needs and engagement options, holding family orientations for newly enrolled participants, and allowing families to come into the office to use Safer Return computers and meet with reentry coaches as resources for job searches and the like. Safer Return staff members also considered implementing informal support groups for family members, and were prepared to train family members so the groups could be peer-led and sustainable beyond the demonstration, but they were unable to generate sufficient interest from family members to pursue this idea.

Reentry coaches perceived that a few issues beyond their control may have undermined their success in engaging family members. Some family members preferred for reentry coaches to focus on working with the participants rather than themselves; reentry coaches felt they had few resources that might induce these family members to develop a relationship with the program. Quite a few families were not living in the area and therefore did not feel that they were in a position to engage with the reentry coaches in any meaningful way. Beyond these challenges, some reentry coaches thought the Bodega model might have been successful because it was culturally competent for the Hispanic populations it was used with, but was not as suitable with the African Americans who constituted the overwhelming majority of Safer Return participants.

Implementation of the family-inclusive case management component was challenging. Reentry coaches had difficulties implementing this component for several reasons, including
lack of clarity as to what services could be given to family and social support members, as well as to how often and in what form those services should be extended;

- lack of clarity as to how to leverage family and social support members who were not immediately supportive of Safer Return participants upon release;

- family and social support members’ inability or lack of desire to engage with the Safer Return participant; and

- inability to engage family members since there were limited services available for family members and program participants.

While assistance from FJI might have helped the reentry coaches address some of these questions and concerns, the coaches did not make full use of FJI’s technical assistance. It is possible the reentry coaches did not see the point of using FJI assistance because they were consumed by the concern that they were offering false hope: they did not want to promise more than they could deliver, and they felt that they had limited tangible services to offer to participants (discussed below), and much less to extend to their family members. In summary, use of the family-inclusive case management model was inconsistent across reentry coaches, though Safer Return program managers made a concerted effort to implement the model.

**Employment**

Safer Return established two main employment strategies. The first was a transitional jobs strategy, called Civic Community Works, for the roughly 40 percent of participants who Safer Foundation anticipated would return home without high school diplomas or equivalents and without significant work histories, or who had experienced multiple or lengthy incarcerations. The second strategy consisted of job readiness training and permanent job placements that would be secured through Safer Return sector managers for the remaining 60 percent with more extensive work skills and histories: those who were expected to be employment ready at program entry. The training and placement would also be extended to individuals who were not job ready when they entered Safer Return but achieved that status during the course of their participation in the program. Throughout the course of the demonstration, there were times when the employment component did not include staff specifically dedicated Safer Return; the program did not have job readiness trainers or sector managers who worked exclusively on Safer Return participant cases. This affected the number of participants who
could participate in the job readiness training and subsequent permanent employment placement activities more than it affected the number of participants in Civic Community Works.

Civic Community Works

As noted previously, Safer Return managers intended to adapt the Oregon Civic Justice Corps model as an approach to offering transitional jobs under Safer Return. The idea was to provide transitional employment in supportive work crews that focused on public works and improvement and restoration efforts that would benefit the community and tie into local labor opportunities. This approach would afford Safer Return participants the opportunity to acquire soft and hard skills while receiving weekly stipends for up to 12 weeks. Safer Return staff would implement the program activities with guidance from quarterly meetings of the Civic Community Works subcommittee, which was composed of key leaders and stakeholders in municipal government departments, local business leaders, representatives of faith-based organizations, and community members. During the first year of the demonstration, the subcommittee identified a number of potential venues for transitional employment of the work crews; these included data entry for the Chicago Department of Transportation; maintenance of potholes; viaduct cleaning and maintenance of medians (although painting fire hydrants, curbs, and viaducts was eliminated from consideration because of possible union issues); removal of dilapidated garages and sealing of abandoned buildings; and tree trimming, pruning, and removal of vegetation, generally and with a particular focus on alleys.

Plans called for three work crew supervisors to monitor and supervise work crews of approximately 10–15 individuals on a daily basis from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Reentry coaches would identify the participants who were eligible for assignment to a work crew. Work crew supervisors provided an orientation to the purpose and operations of Civic Community Works and answered any questions participants raised, giving potential candidates the opportunity to decide whether they wanted to join. The crews worked on multiple projects that required a variety of skills. Safer Return provided equipment for the jobs and transportation to and from the Safer Return program office. Crew members received weekly stipends of $125. Safer Return program managers ordered basic work equipment such as gloves, boots, and goggles in bulk and made these available to crew members when they joined or needed replacements. Additionally, crew members were provided with Chicago Transportation Authority bus cards for their first few weeks to enable them to cover costs of transportation to and from the Safer Return program office.
The first work crew participated in a three-day training delivered by the city’s Department of Streets and Sanitation in summer 2008, which enabled them to begin the tree trimming and pruning transitional employment project. Over the course of the demonstration, 240 Safer Return participants were assigned to one of the transitional job work crews. Crews received basic training on hand tools, painting, hammering, debris removal, and the like. A second work crew was added in spring 2009. The City of Chicago provided the second crew with training and certification on power tools as part of the rail and viaduct maintenance project, in partnership with the City of Chicago and CSX Transportation. Safer Return made plans to start a third crew, working on demolition, in spring 2009, in partnership with the city.

Participation in the work crews was designed to teach, among other things, such soft skills as punctuality, responsibility, and consistency in showing up for work. Safer Return was training people with limited educational and work experiences in the skills needed to maintain full-time positions. Crew members were allowed a single excused absence; after that, their pay would be docked. After three missed days, the team would conduct a staffing; if there was no legitimate reason for the absences, the participant was excused from the job. Individuals working on city projects were tested for drugs before they were permitted to join the work crew. Subsequently, work crew supervisors could have workers tested for drugs; failed drug tests were considered cause for dismissal from the crew. However, the door was left open for individuals to return once they could demonstrate satisfactory treatment compliance and sobriety.

During the initial years of the program, work crew supervisors tried to start each day with a pep talk for the crew to keep morale as high as possible. Once the crew was transported to the work site, supervisors would try to keep the crew in a group not only to make sure they were staying where they were supposed to be, but, more importantly, to ensure their safety and to ensure that they were not drifting into old habits and old networks. The temptation to revert to old ways was still palpable for many crew members; working in the neighborhoods where they had previously gotten into trouble put these participants at risk (box 2 provides an example of supervisors’ efforts to reduce the crew members’ exposure to negative influences).
BOX 2

Work Crew Accomplishments and Risks: Restorative Justice and Community Beautification

Between August 2008 and May 2009, Safer Return work crews cleaned up 87 alleys and collected more than 900 bags of trash. The areas they cleaned were often used by street hustlers to hide drugs. Because the work crews were removing debris that hustlers might be using to stash drugs, program staff notified hustlers of the spaces they would be cleaning in advance (while also letting them know that the work crews were not associated with the police). The hustlers generally removed their property without pushing back.

Subsequently, Safer Return’s community-saturation model afforded the program opportunities to secure additional funding from other sources, creating more avenues to employ Safer Return participants in transitional positions. Safer Return placed participants who had completed Civic Community Works assignments in jobs managed by Safer Foundation’s staffing agency, Pivotal Staffing LLC. These positions paid individuals $8.50 an hour.

The first employment opportunity, under a special services agreement (SSA)\textsuperscript{11} with the Chicago Loop Alliance, employed approximately 12 individuals to provide basic maintenance (e.g., removal of litter and debris, recycling, and snow removal) to Loop Alliance businesses along the 18 blocks of State Street from Congress to Wacker Drives in downtown Chicago between 6:00 a.m. and 10:30 p.m. This opportunity encouraged employees to act as “ambassadors of good will” as they performed their tasks. All participants employed through this 12-month contract had previously been engaged in the Civic Community Works crews and had demonstrated success in those roles.

The second employment opportunity, with the Chicago Department of Environment/Green Jobs (called the DOE Landscape Project) was a stimulus-funded project ($1.3 million) that enabled 50 employees over a two-year period to receive advanced landscape training in two green-industry areas aligned with Chicago’s climate action plan: sustainable landscaping and local agriculture and community horticulture. The projects, designed and supervised in part by Christy Webber Landscaping and the Garfield Park Conservatory, focused on establishing community agricultural gardens in East Garfield Park and the surrounding community. Safer Return participants maintained 12 lots, where they removed litter and debris and performed landscape maintenance. They also participated in weekly field trips to the Morton Arboretum, the Chicago Botanic Garden, and similar venues. The work day started at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 4:30 p.m., with a half-hour break for lunch. During the mornings, the crew worked on the gardens; in the afternoons, the team worked on litter removal. The work crew supervisor
trained the team on a range of landscaping techniques, including safety operation, horticulture, landscape maintenance, energy efficiency, weatherization, and CPR and first aid.

Crew members were outfitted with Civic Community Works t-shirts and other gear that identified them as Safer Return participants. The program also implemented marketing activities to promote the presence of the work crews and the ways in which their activities were beneficial to the Garfield Park community. Staff attended community meetings to discussSafer Return, and the Department of Streets and Sanitation included comments on the program in quarterly briefings to the mayor, aldermen, and police commanders.

Job Readiness

Safer Foundation originally solicited one partner in the East Garfield community to offer job readiness training to all Safer Return participants who lacked strong job histories; applicant organizations were required to meet qualifications similar to those developed for other potential partnerships. It was anticipated that this component would focus on preemployment job readiness activities, including assessing participants for academic skills, vocational skill development, employment experience, and vocational goals and interests. The job readiness training itself would cover (1) soft-skills training, including job search strategies, completion of applications, construction of résumés, and interviewing skills; (2) development of short-term employment goals; and (3) assistance with the development of long-term career plans. Additionally, job readiness staff would be expected to communicate individuals’ short- and long-term employment goals to their reentry coaches and sector managers, who help participants find suitable employment.

Safer Foundation ultimately elected to offer the job readiness training directly using its own proprietary curriculum. Safer Return participants were eligible for the job readiness training if they had no documented employment six months before their last incarceration or if job readiness training had been identified as a goal on their individualized reentry plan. Individuals who took job readiness training in IDOC before release through the SPISE program (which used Safer Foundation’s proprietary curriculum) were not required to take job training again in the community. Some work crew members were also expected to take job readiness training, ideally before they began the work crews.

Safer Foundation’s job readiness training included 10 units that covered 25 topics, including such issues as self-esteem and self-management, time management, handling stress, building a support network, understanding common employer policies and practices and workplace expectations,
conducting a job search, constructing a résumé, completing job applications, preparing for and conducting job interviews, learning how to be successful on a job, and managing money. The job readiness training took one week, with sessions offered Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. While participants did not receive stipends to attend these classes, they were provided transportation to and from the class as well as $5 for lunch each day. It was expected that by end of the training, participants would feel comfortable completing résumés and job applications, as well as addressing their employment and incarceration histories during job interviews.

Although Safer Foundation had planned to offer job readiness specifically for Safer Return participants, enrollment could not support a full job readiness class for the participants, and Safer Return program managers decided not to duplicate services that were already offered. The training was offered at Safer Foundation’s main location at 571 West Jackson Street in downtown Chicago. In the beginning of the demonstration, there was a backlog of participants waiting to enroll in the job readiness training program because of communication issues between Safer Return program managers and case managers and job readiness trainers at the 571 West Jackson location. While participants were waiting to complete the job readiness training, they could not be referred to job openings through Safer Return’s sector managers. At one point, to keep participants engaged while they were waiting for job readiness training, a Safer Return sector manager put together activities to teach lessons not covered in the classes. These activities were planned for one day a week and were open to all Safer Return participants. Eventually, the communication issues were addressed and processes were put into place so that spots in the job readiness training were reserved for Safer Return participants.

Job Placement

Safer Foundation has established processes both for identifying employers with job openings and for referring participants to job opportunities; Safer Return participants were treated essentially the same ways as other Safer Foundation participants. Safer Foundation sector managers identify employers that have job openings and are willing to hire individuals with criminal histories. Sector managers communicate with these employers to learn about specific prerequisites for each position. Sector managers then match prospective job applicants with the job orders by providing participants with job leads. They then follow up to help participants get and keep the jobs. Sector managers are focused on employers rather than participants (participants are the focus of the case managers). Retention is measured from the perspective of the employer. Sector managers do not spend time trying to find jobs for specific participants. Rather, their time is spent finding employers with job openings.
As a result, participants must be deemed job ready before they are referred to sector managers. Sector managers carefully vet potential applicants before referring them to employers with job openings. “Hiring halls” are a form of prescreening that sector managers complete. Distinct from job fairs, hiring halls are a venue for matching job candidates to potential job orders secured by sector managers. Case managers can refer individuals to hiring halls. While employers are occasionally present at these events, hiring halls are primarily opportunities for sector managers to hold group interviews with participants looking for job placement. After the hiring halls, sector managers match top candidates to the job orders.

Throughout parts of the demonstration, there was no dedicated sector manager working with Safer Return participants because of staff turnover. However, there were always arrangements in place to enable Safer Return participants to receive job placement assistance through Safer Foundation’s team of sector managers (who also worked with non–Safer Return participants). Safer Foundation sector managers were aware of the demonstration and knew about the overall program model and the goals it was trying to achieve.

Sector managers kept in touch with employers after participants had been hired to ensure that employers were satisfied. One of the sector managers indicated that she considered it critical to build a friendly, trusting relationship with employers and to let them know she was always available to help troubleshoot difficulties with her participants. The demonstration intended for reentry coaches to maintain engagement with employed participants, particularly in the first 30 days of employment, to ensure job retention and to address work-related interpersonal issues or substance issues that may have arisen when participants received their first paychecks. A $25 gift card was provided to all participants who achieved the 30-day job retention benchmark.

Sector managers were aware of job market conditions; they noted that conditions began improving toward the end of the demonstration, when the economy slowly began to rebound. Nonetheless, sector managers repeatedly pointed out that placing formerly incarcerated individuals in jobs was difficult, even in healthy economies, for various reasons. The sector managers considered lack of skills to be the biggest hurdle formerly incarcerated individuals faced in their job searches. This challenge has two dimensions: first, participants simply don’t have much education or job training that can make them attractive applicants; and second, they don’t realize what transferable skills they have and are unable market themselves accordingly. Sector managers also found that some participants were unwilling to take the jobs offered to them.
Safer Return provided some skills training, and many of the participants also received some sort of training during prison. As such, sector managers were responsible for trying to teach the participants how to sell themselves by highlighting their best attributes. Participants needed to learn soft skills and interview skills. The sector managers saw themselves as sales agents for the participants—selling them at no cost. However, several sector managers articulated that they perceived their jobs as dependent on their abilities to manage relationships and establish strong positive employer relationships. For that reason, they were honest and open with employers and did not sugarcoat candidates’ backgrounds.

Consistent with other reentry initiatives, sector managers reported that getting a job is challenging for former offenders, and that retaining a job is equally daunting. Sector managers viewed this barrier as often related to such unresolved issues as poor attitudes, mental health issues, and substance abuse. Regardless of the problem, it often fell to sector managers to help participants realize that they must fundamentally change their outlook to keep their jobs and avoid repeating past mistakes.

As a result of their experiences, sector managers were favorably disposed to Safer Return because they believed that coupling social services with employment was the right approach. However, sector managers also noted that it was unwise to place people in jobs before they were ready to shoulder such responsibilities. Sector managers indicated that they felt Safer Return was very progressive in addressing necessary lifestyle changes (rather than just focusing on getting someone a job, and then considering the case closed). However, the sector managers still felt that at times there needed to be more focus on slowing down and truly evaluating whether an individual was ready to commit to employment. This is a common tension in reentry: returning individuals may not be ready to meet job requirements, but they are unable to sustain themselves without some source of income, so they must seek work and try to balance whatever other kind of healing must take place with learning to shoulder job responsibilities.

Safer Return reported that participants were placed in varied jobs, including positions as cooks, laborers, telemarketers, cashiers, guest-service representatives, assembly line workers, food servers, phone technicians, sales associates, custodians and maintenance crew members, and stewards. Retention was monitored at 30 days, and then again at 90 and 180 days.

**Employment Services Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them**

Civic Community Works. One of the earliest issues that Safer Return leadership encountered was finding contracts that would enable participants to be placed in stipend positions that were not opposed
by labor unions. Unions were vigilant in trying to ensure that no work that could go to union members was being diverted to others. Because of its positive long-term relationship with the Safer Foundation, the City of Chicago was willing to work with Safer Return. The liaison at the city Department of Streets and Sanitation was also personally committed to finding ways to successfully address this challenge. This liaison was instrumental in identifying a need to clean viaducts—a need that was not being addressed by city workers and could be allocated to Safer Return’s Civic Community Works crews.

Another challenge arose early in the program when work crew supervisors and workers themselves began to question the pay the crew members were receiving ($125/week). They perceived the work being done by the crews as virtually identical to that performed by city workers for considerably greater compensation ($16 an hour). Safer Return managers had to explain what they perceived as legitimate reasons for the compensation differentials: staff and participants were reminded that the crew members’ compensation was a stipend, not a salary, and that it was given in return for participation in a kind of work-study program during which crew members received soft and hard skills training while performing some work that enabled them to apply the training and gain hands-on experience. However, many of the Safer Return staff, particularly the reentry coaches, were dissatisfied with this arrangement, especially in regard to participants who were living in Jack Clark Family House and being charged $125 a week for housing.

A third difficulty with Civic Community Works projects was that they often required hard labor. Not every Safer Return participant was capable of participating in such work crews. There were no options for those whose physical health or other impairments prevented participation in these training activities.

Compliance was also a difficulty encountered with some participants. Some individuals enrolled in Civic Community Works were simply not ready for the transitional employment experience. One supervisor was concerned about crew members who needed substance abuse treatment: many relapsed on the job, and it was difficult to address such issues one-on-one. Others met the work crew requirements, but did not meet all the other program requirements. Although Safer Return was a voluntary program, participants who elected to participate in the Civic Community Works component were required to engage in at least a limited amount of case management and to routinely attend mentoring reentry circles.

Staffing became a concern in two ways. When the staff members who originally supervised the first two work crews left Safer Return, new supervisors were put in their places; however, the new staff members did not have the skills to offer the trainings on power tools that had initially been part of the
As a result, participants who had very limited skill sets to begin with lost the opportunity to acquire marketable skills and experience using tools that had broad application for entry-level positions. Additionally, the SSA and DOE Landscape Project components faced the very real possibility that they would be unable to satisfy the manpower requirements of their contracts by staffing them with Safer Return participants. Both SSA and DOE projects drew their participant workers from the pool of individuals who had completed the two lower-level Civic Community Works crews. As a result, Safer Return program managers had to broaden the pipeline; they decided that participants from other Safer Foundation programs would be considered if no Safer Return Civic Community Works participant was eligible for promotion and that individuals with violent convictions would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

One of the most critical unresolved issues was related to the external context. Although crew members were learning transferable skills that could have led to employment by the city, a budget crisis across the city led to difficulties finding permanent public-sector employment for trained workers. Generally speaking, from the perspective of the participants there was some disconnect between the Civic Community Works training they received and the jobs available to them—the work crew training prepared them particular tasks and there were often no public- or private-sector jobs available for candidates with the skills they acquired. The Civic Community Works component was modeled after the Civic Justice Corps in Oregon, in which the overriding goal of transitional jobs was to create a visible presence of formerly incarcerated individuals who were giving back to the community. The aim of the Civic Justice Corps was not necessarily to provide work crews with skills that were easily transferred into permanent employment.

Safer Return program managers and work crew supervisors identified project work in the community through residents. Overall, community residents thought favorably of the work in the neighborhood, and several contacted Safer Foundation to offer thanks and appreciation. It was easy for community members to identify work completed by Safer Return participants since program managers and work crew supervisors used signs to explain that the program was responsible for the work.

**Job readiness training.** During the Safer Return planning period, it appeared that job readiness training would be offered to Safer Return participants at Safer Return’s community office to ensure accessibility. While some job readiness classes were offered in the community site, Safer Return reentry coaches also had to negotiate for slots for Safer Return participants at Safer Foundation’s main office, which was located downtown. At various times during the demonstration, Safer Return participants would be allocated two, four, or eight slots in ongoing job readiness classes in the downtown Chicago location. This gave rise to a waiting list that was frustrating for participants and their reentry coaches,
who felt that job readiness training had become a bottleneck preventing participants from receiving job placement assistance.

Communication between Safer Return reentry coaches and sector managers was less than optimal, in part because the sector managers were not managing Safer Return cases exclusively. This challenge led to confusion between reentry coaches and sector managers as to who had completed the job readiness training that was required before participants could attend a hiring hall and receive sector managers’ services. Reentry coaches did not fully understand the job search process and felt that the process had inconsistent rules. Reentry coaches were concerned that participants waited too long to get into the job readiness training and that the training was too short. They questioned the training’s adequacy for individuals who had never held a job (some of whom should have been referred to the Civic Community Works component but were not) and were returning to the community either as chronic criminals or after years in prison. Communication issues between reentry coaches and job readiness trainers were addressed eventually and processes were put into place so that spots in job readiness training classes were reserved for Safer Return participants.

**Job placement.** Sector managers tried to find employment opportunities with the potential for career advancement, but were not always able to do so. Job placement and retention were the obvious objectives of the employment component, and at times during the demonstration program managers were concerned with the low number of job starts. Safer Return program managers saw several possible explanations for low job placement numbers. Reentry coaches expressed confusion about the placement process in general and the process for hiring halls in particular. They were confused about who could refer participants to the hiring halls, when they were held, who managed them, and what they entailed. One of the reentry coaches’ biggest complaints was the short notice they received when hiring halls were held. Reentry coaches indicated that they had only two to three days to encourage as many people as possible to attend. They viewed the short notice as disrespectful toward staff and participant time. They also felt that attendance at hiring halls was lower than it ought to be because they did not have time to notify enough people, and the people they were able to reach did not have enough time to adjust their schedules. They recommended that participants be given more notice (e.g., two weeks instead of two days) to plan for logistics and transportation, to make other necessary arrangements (e.g., reschedule standing appointments or child care), and to work with reentry coaches on wardrobe and presentation of self.

The supervisor of the sector managers mentioned similar concerns. He felt that job starts for Safer Return participants were low compared with the same sector managers’ placements for other participants because too few Safer Return participants were job ready and eligible to be in the sector
manager pool. He also noted that there were challenges with Safer Return placements because reentry coaches and sector managers were not in the same building. Once reentry coaches moved from the 808 South Kedzie Avenue location, sector managers did not have the opportunity to contact participants when they were working with their reentry coaches. If sector managers had been colocated with reentry coaches, not only could they have forged more collaborative relationships, but they also could have also had more participant contact and enabled participants to be better primed for the hiring halls.

Participants expressed disappointment with the hiring halls because they thought they would be interviewed by onsite employers and because the meetings did not result in job interview referrals. From the participants’ perspectives, the hiring halls offered job listings pulled off the Internet that they felt they could pursue on their own.

Sector manager supervisors felt that participants engaged in the Safer Return project had poor follow-up rates. Participants tended to disengage if they perceived that the program was taking too long to place them in employment and other services. Program participants would get impatient because they wanted to get jobs—which might help them reunite and reengage with their families—immediately, often before sector managers determined that they were ready. The goal was for participants to be placed in jobs approximately 30 to 45 days following enrollment in the program, but that goal was not always achieved.

Some participants were reluctant to "graduate" from their Civic Community Works jobs to more permanent jobs. Although the Civic Community Works positions were transitional jobs, participants frequently saw them as better opportunities than longer-term part-time employment or even permanent full-time employment. Participants rejected potential opportunities on the grounds that the job was in an area where they did not want to work or in a location too far to travel (even when Safer Return staff had arranged transportation). Sometimes participants’ reasons for rejecting opportunities appeared so flimsy that reentry coaches and work crew supervisors began to question whether they feared leaving the relative comfort of the Safer Return nest: in the Safer Return context, all their coworkers were former prisoners, and they could speak freely about themselves and their experiences with their work crews. That might not be the case in a new job. One supervisor noted, “while many are psyched to get a full-time job, there are those who use their background as a crutch. . . . The work crew is kind of a supportive or sheltered environment. It’s difficult for some people to leave something comfortable and nonthreatening to go someplace where they might be judged.” At the other end of the spectrum, a small number of Safer Return participants with histories of good employment and relatively high wages were unwilling to accept the placements sector managers could find at considerably lower wages.
Aside from these issues, it was difficult for Safer Return participants to find or keep jobs. Throughout some of the demonstration, the national economy was declining and, even as it began to recover, the local economy—particularly in Garfield Park and other disadvantaged neighborhoods—lagged behind. Because jobs, especially those open to former prisoners, were difficult to find, sector managers often identified employers who were not located within or near the target community. Participants often did not have private transportation, and public transportation routes did not necessarily run to the more distant locations or operate on a schedule that would support a reasonable commute.

Sometime in 2010, Safer Foundation staff secured employment opportunities at Suncast in Batavia, Illinois—35 miles west. Safer Foundation provided funding for Paramount Forklift Training School to train the first round of participants working under this agreement. After participants completed the training, Suncast immediately hired them at a rate of approximately $10 an hour. Since Suncast operated three shifts, this became an around-the-clock operation.

Safer Foundation eventually reached an agreement with PACE to begin participating in a program to transport people to these distant job locations. PACE is a quasi-governmental transportation program responsible for suburban bus routes and services. The program enables relatively inexpensive bus service, charging $600 a month for a 13-passenger van, including insurance and gas. Safer Foundation hired the van drivers. The sector managers’ supervisor perceived that this approach would be part of the future direction for organizations like the Safer Foundation; he pointed out the organization had just received an order for 40 to 50 new employees, if it was in a position to transport employees to the job site.

Mentoring

The Safer Return mentoring approach was intended to be transformative and was designed to deliberately address or change negative self-perceptions and low self-esteem. Additionally, the mentoring program sought to address the attitudes and behaviors that place individuals at risk for engaging in new criminal activities and to inform participants of the consequences of technical violations and reincarceration. Although many mentor programs focus one-on-one mentoring, from the outset, the Safer Return approach was to establish small groups consisting of postrelease participants and one or two mentors.
Safer Foundation sought up to three faith- and community-based organizations (FBOs and CBOs) in the East Garfield Park community that would be willing and able to implement postrelease mentoring services for male and female Safer Return participants. Additionally, the FBOs and CBOs had to agree to operate mentoring programs that adhered to the following Safer Return standards:

- Recruitment and retention of roughly 15 mentors who were at least 21 years old from the designated community. The FBOs and CBOs were encouraged to recruit formerly incarcerated individuals as mentors, providing these people had been out of prison for at least two years and could demonstrate that they had successfully reintegrated in the community.

- Background checks on mentor candidates before their acceptance into the program to ensure that no mentors had current criminal charges.

- Mentor participation in an eight-hour training workshop presented by the Mentoring Center, which offered an Afrocentric approach focused on transformative mentoring and wraparound services.

- Mentors who committed to one year with the program.

- Mentoring sessions structured in small groups (e.g., four to six participants with one or two mentors). The FBOs and CBOs would retain the same mentoring groups for a one-year period so mentors could establish caring, consistent relationships with people in the groups, provide support and encourage peer support, enhance communication, and help participants build a positive network.

- Mentoring groups would meet at least twice a month in two-hour sessions at the FBO and CBO locations. Ideally, one of the monthly sessions would be a group session, while the other would be configured to enable more one-on-one contact between mentors and mentees.

- The FBOs and CBOs would monitor all mentoring relationships to ensure that they were formative.

- The partner organization would ensure that all mentors refrained from proselytizing or coercing participants (or their families) to engage in any form of religious activity.

- The FBOs and CBOs would assign a mentor coordinator and ensure that the coordinator matched all mentors and mentees and submitted monthly administrative reports.
Safer Foundation planned to compensate such organizations approximately $35 for each hour of mentoring, which the organizations could use in various ways (e.g., to pay small stipends to mentors or to purchase food or other incentives for participants).

Two organizations applied and were selected to offer mentoring to Safer Return participants: Mt. Vernon Baptist Church and the National Alliance for the Empowerment of Ex-Offenders, subsequently renamed the National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated (NAEFI). The partnership with Mt. Vernon Baptist Church never attained viability because of leadership and personnel issues at the time of program start-up. Thus, NAEFI became the mentoring partner for Safer Return and remained active throughout the demonstration period. As a result, community residents without criminal records were largely not engaged in the mentoring program.

The National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated is a local nonprofit led by a well-known former gang member (Benneth “Benny” Lee). Lee had successfully reentered society and was employed by TASC. He had been running an informal network of other successfully reintegrated former offenders who were dedicated to helping more recent returnees achieve positive life transformations. The operation evolved as a grassroots support network over a number of years before its current incarnation as NAEFI. For example, at one point Lee ran the African American Survivors Organization, which used seven principles based on Kwanzaa to encourage participants to think of themselves as part of the community and not as outlaws. One of Lee’s guiding principles was to encourage men who had made substantial prosocial changes in their lives to give back by working with those who were still struggling to positively reintegrate into the community.

Lee served as the mentor coordinator for the Safer Return mentoring component. The Safer Return mentoring group became part of a larger set of mentoring meetings or reentry circles that Lee had been organizing since 2001, when a group of individuals met at each other’s houses to seek support (the early meetings were later relocated to a transitional home on the property of one of the group leaders). When Safer Return mentoring was initially implemented in November 2008, most of the participants went to the reentry circles that were ongoing in the community. By late 2009, there were three sets of mentoring meetings: (1) Safer Return mentoring met on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month at Safer Foundation’s 808 South Kedzie Avenue site, (2) NAEFI-led mentoring meetings were held every Thursday night at the Gateway Facilities, and (3) NAEFI ran a meeting every Tuesday night at a site near the Howard train station on the north side of town (far north station of the red line). The Safer Return mentoring was specifically geared toward Safer Return participants, while the other two mentoring sessions were open to anyone. Several Safer Return participants elected to attend the other two mentoring sessions on a regular basis.
Recruitment and Training of Mentors

In the fall and winter of 2007, before implementing the mentoring component, Safer Return staff developed a mentoring manual that included the following:

- An introduction containing a mentoring deliverables checklist, a statement about the potential benefits of mentoring, and an explanation of the goals and objectives of Safer Return in general and of mentoring specifically.

- Guidance regarding topics the mentor partners should be prepared to address, such as roles and responsibilities of a mentor coordinator; key program design elements; and recruitment, training, support, and retention of mentors.

- Mentoring partner deliverables, including the nature of expected communications, program support, and training between Safer Return and subcontracted partners.

- Sample forms, such as a job description for the mentor coordinator, a recruitment flyer, a mentor application, a mentor assessment summary, sample letters of acceptance and declination, a mentor contact sheet, and a mentoring session report log.

- A section called Speaking the Language that included acronyms and definitions relevant for volunteers working with formerly incarcerated people.

- A section on mentoring principles that included brief discussion of research-based promising practices.

Safer Return mentoring was launched in November 2008. Nineteen mentors attended training on the Safer Return model and, at least initially, 32 mentors were trained following the curriculum of the Mentoring Center, which included information on the stages of reentry.

The majority of Safer Return mentors were recruited through the other NAEFI mentoring circles. Most of NAEFI mentor volunteers were men with criminal histories (see box 3 for some of the benefits of mentors with criminal histories). At the beginning of Safer Return mentoring, both male and female mentors were identified. However, initially, too few female participants (mentees) showed up to the meetings to justify asking female mentors to keep coming. Early on, only one female participant consistently attended the meetings, and for a number of months none attended. However, as the population of female Safer Return participants grew, efforts were made to recruit female mentors and to have the women form a small gender-specific cohort within the larger group meeting.
Although NAEFI sought mentors with histories of incarceration, a history of incarceration was not required. NAEFI mentors had to (1) be off parole for at least five years, (2) be gainfully employed, (3) have a high school diploma, (4) understand reentry well enough to “normalize the frustration” and “recognize the stress,” and (5) be familiar with the Garfield Park community area and local resources. Although Safer Return only expected mentors to make a one-year commitment to the program, NAEFI hoped the relationship would last throughout the life of the program, and beyond Safer Return, as a supportive friendship throughout individuals’ lifetimes.

As the program matured, potential mentors were required to attend mentoring-circle meetings before they became mentors so that Lee and the other more seasoned mentors could determine whether they had the right mindset and were likely to be a good fit. The National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated looks for prolonged, consistent commitment to the program as demonstrated by being on time and bringing high-energy participation into the circle week after week.
BOX 3

Mentor Perspectives on the Value of Mentors with Criminal Histories

The mentors we spoke with felt that their criminal histories were of significant value in their relationships with mentees. The following themes emerged from our discussions:

- Mentees perceive mentors with criminal histories as credible: they have been in the trenches.
- Formerly incarcerated mentors can help recently released prisoners deal with custodial and work issues, and can provide advice about the best way to maneuver the streets.
- Mentors with criminal histories know what former inmates are dealing with: they have credibility when they reinforce messages that, despite difficulties, mentees need to “hang on.” For example, many mentors can relate to the stress of being a 45-year-old in a GED class filled with 20-year-olds. They understand that mentees may be overwhelmed and afraid to ask questions, and they can provide needed encouragement to reassure mentees that they can achieve their goals.
- Mentors can speak from experience to help mentees learn to see the consequences of their actions and understand what they can do differently to achieve and maintain sobriety, avoid arrest, and refrain from victimizing or becoming a victim.
- Good mentors use their own personal experiences to engage in conversations that probe into mentees’ circumstances, get them to share their concerns, and allow for feedback and encouragement.

Structure of Mentoring Program and Sessions

Throughout most of the Safer Return demonstration, mentoring group meetings were held two evenings a month, although the location changed over time. Since NAEFI is not a bricks-and-mortar organization, it could not host meetings in its own facility. Although the meetings began at a transitional home owned by one of the mentors, they shifted and stabilized on site at Safer Return’s 808 South Kedzie Avenue offices. As the demonstration was ending and the number of active participants dwindled, meetings were reduced to once a month.
To some extent, NAEFI’s approach differed from the early expectation for four to six mentees with one to two mentors. Reentry circles included all active mentors and mentees in a single forum; at times, this might include 20 to 30 mentees with 6 to 8 mentors. The meetings were typically held with all participants sitting in a large circle, with mentors and mentees interspersed wherever they liked. Reentry coaches also participated in the group meetings (at least one reentry coach attended each group meeting), which enabled them to learn additional information about participants, including how they were doing and where they needed help.

Meeting agendas were fairly fluid, but generally included introductions, a daily meditation, discussion of accomplishments, discussion of any crises that required attention, and time when the leader empowered the group to determine what it wanted to discuss. Meetings typically started with participants volunteering to read different sections of the Safer Return mentoring program brochure, which identifies the seven principles of Kwanzaa, fundamental principles (adoptability, appropriateness, cooperativeness, excellence, inclusiveness, interdependence, mutual aid, natural goodness, respect, and responsibility), and a narrative on the power of self-talk. First-time participants were encouraged to stand up and be introduced. Program partners, particularly from PCDAC/People's Church of the Harvest, sometimes made announcements about upcoming community events that mentees should consider attending. Also, at many meetings, guest speakers made brief presentations and led interactive discussions on timely, relevant topics (e.g., the Chicago Housing Authority gave a presentation on public housing requirements and how to apply for housing). A resource table at each meeting was stocked with flyers that provided information on where to go for GED tests, how to get assistance for gas and electric bills, where to obtain help with foreclosures, and where to attend home-buying seminars.

When the mentoring component was first introduced, participation in the monthly group meetings was voluntary. However, toward the end of 2009 the mentoring sessions became mandatory for all Civic Community Works participants. In fact, to promote compliance with the new policy, participants were given their Civic Community Works stipend checks at the mentoring meetings; those who did not comply experienced delays in receiving their stipends and were spoken to about participating. The National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated was opposed to this change in policy, expressing concern that it would damage the overall atmosphere of the mentoring meetings because participants would not be truly engaged in the lessons that were being taught. However, Safer Return management felt strongly that since mentoring was perceived as beneficial to participants, they ought to be required to participate.

Despite initial concerns and some resistance from participants, the group meetings retained a positive energy. One mentor suggested that the good atmosphere was facilitated by the fact that
participants typically knew one another before incarceration. In fact, some of the participants required to attend mentoring liked it so much that they began voluntarily participating in the other NAEFI circles. Eventually, Safer Return also required participants in the DOE Landscape Project component of Civic Community Works to attend the mentoring circles.

To recruit beyond the Civic Community Works program, mentors attended postrelease community-based Welcome Home panels and distributed materials to potential Safer Return participants. These materials, together with contact forms, were also provided to inmates who attended prerelease Welcome Home panels Then, NAEFI sent letters to these inmates as they were preparing to return to the community. Also, mentors corresponded with potential mentees while they were incarcerated in an effort to build a connection that could be sustained once they returned home.

Mentor-Mentee Matches

In addition to the larger reentry circles that occurred twice monthly at the 808 South Kedzie Avenue community location, mentees found individual mentors to work with them one-on-one outside of the group meetings. The process for choosing a mentor was dependent on the individual mentee. Typically, mentees attended multiple reentry circles to become familiar with the structure and expectations of the program and with the other participants (mentors and mentees).

Once the mentees became comfortable, they were encouraged to talk to individual mentors and to get their phone numbers. The program did not specifically match mentees with mentors, but during each session group meeting leaders asked mentees whether they had called any of the mentors during the prior two weeks. This was believed to be an effective method because it allowed the group leader to pressure individuals to engage in one-on-one mentoring, while permitting individuals to choose their own mentors.

Mentors and mentees typically paired off by age: older mentees seemed to gravitate toward older mentors; similarly, younger mentees preferred mentors closer to their own ages. Hence, when the group leader encouraged new mentees to initiate conversations with mentors, he often made age-graded suggestions. He perceived that it was important to have similar ages when forming one-on-one mentor-mentee pairs because older generations may have difficulty connecting with younger ones (and vice versa) or older mentors may behave in condescending ways toward younger mentees. He believed that slang and street culture had changed considerably over time, making it hard for older and younger individuals to easily relate to one another. For instance, one older mentor suggested that current gang
culture is all about managing drug traffic, whereas in his experience, gang culture was based on “nations” and accountability.

The actual interaction and information exchanged through individualized mentoring matches varied. While all mentors strove to meet with mentees regularly, some had daily interaction with mentees while others had considerably more limited contact in practice. Some mentors met mentees at the mentees’ homes and interacted freely with their family members, while others touched base primarily in the context of the mentoring group meetings. Generally speaking, the interactions were focused on the future. Mentors tried to ask the types of questions that would motivate mentees to think about the changes they were going to make in their lives to stay out of prison. The mentors provided encouragement and talked about the reasons various types of changes were necessary to achieve successful outcomes.

**Mentoring Services Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them**

As described on page 58, Safer Return program managers’ decision to alter the voluntary nature of the mentoring component—by requiring those in Civic Community Works to attend—initially created morale challenges, but later waned as a concern. After consultation with and approval from the other partner stakeholders, Safer Return program managers made this decision because there were a number of interpersonal and behavioral issues on the work crews that they felt could be addressed through the mentoring component’s prosocial engagement. Program managers thought the mentoring component would be a positive, uplifting experience that wouldn’t feel burdensome to the participants after they attended one or two sessions. For some participants, this issue was a breach of trust: they had joined with the understanding that some program components were voluntary, only to learn that participation in mentoring was required. For others, resistance was driven by time management concerns.

Although it is true that many individuals have fluid schedules after returning to the community because they are not engaged in intensive outpatient treatment for substance abuse or mental health issues, enrolled in educational programming, or working full-time, it is also true that Safer Return participants were a heterogeneous population and that attending evening meetings twice a month may not have been feasible for all of them. Some had so many obligations—in terms of either compliance with justice system requirements or family commitments—that they were overwhelmed by the need to fulfill yet another external demand. For example, on a few occasions when researchers observed the mentoring circles, men arrived with young children in tow because it was their responsibility to provide
child care during the time meetings were held, and they could neither find someone to provide babysitting nor afford to hire someone to care for the children.

Another challenge was posed by mentees who attended meetings when they were not in the appropriate frame of mind to do so. Many mentees needed substance abuse treatment; several were confronted at group meetings because they arrived inebriated. When this occurred, the group was reminded that no one was permitted to participate under the influence of drugs or alcohol and that violators’ names would be forwarded to their reentry coaches and parole agents.

The mentor coordinator expressed concern that he had insufficient resources to provide even small stipends to mentors, some of whom were doing considerable work on behalf of the group or particular mentees. Additionally, some mentors felt that the mentoring program’s lack of a dedicated space for one-on-one meetings hampered the formation and growth of individual mentor-mentee relationships; nonetheless, they seemed to find various ways to arrange for one-on-one time with mentees.

A related ongoing issue was that participants were often unmotivated to connect with mentors in the weeks between reentry circle sessions. In an effort to address this challenge and forge stronger bonds between mentors and mentees, reentry circles were structured to end about 15 minutes sooner than scheduled. During the last 15 minutes of the meeting, mentors left the circle and moved to other spots in the room so they could meet with their assigned mentees. Participants who had not yet identified a mentor were encouraged to use this time to strike up a conversation with one or more mentors with whom they might be willing to form a relationship. The mentor coordinator imbued both mentors and mentees with personal accountability for the development of viable matches.

Housing

Housing is one of the most frequently cited needs for the reentry population. Safer Return planned to address the housing issue by leveraging existing housing resources and augmenting those resources with the establishment of an Oxford House in Garfield Park. The intent was to leverage available housing stock and to charter an Oxford House that would accommodate a minimum of six individuals with substance abuse histories at any given time.
The Oxford House Model

Oxford Houses provide shelter and set standards for new norms and patterns of behavior. They are considered good options for individuals with substance abuse histories who need stable drug- and crime-free housing without significant treatment intervention. Ideally, but not necessarily, residents will have completed inpatient, outpatient, or recovery-home drug treatment. The underlying premise is that residents will engage in self-monitoring and mentorship with no onsite program staff while living in a mutually peer-supportive, democratically run setting. Residents are expected to be self-sufficient and to conduct their lives in responsible ways. There are no limits to the duration of residency and there is no explicit push for residents to move on to more permanent housing placements.

Safer Return envisioned that

- the Safer Return Oxford House would be established in accordance with the regulations and standards set forth by the Oxford House World Services Conditional Oxford House Charter, and might take as long as two years to set up;
- the Oxford House administrative partner would coordinate with Safer Return reentry coaches and dedicated parole agents to evaluate the eligibility of participants applying for membership in the house and to establish policies and procedures (e.g., for participant staffings, weekly house meetings, and parole visits);
- individuals who wished to move into the Oxford House would be approved by their respective reentry coaches and voted into the house by the other residents, and criteria for recommendation would include the lack of alternative drug- and crime-free housing; and
- the first Safer Return Oxford House would eventually generate sufficient funds to seed a second, and so forth.

Only one organization, Kalimba House, responded to Safer Foundation’s solicitation for proposals, and Safer Return initially planned to work with this organization to establish the Safer Return Oxford House. Kalimba House had a history of providing housing for people with substance abuse issues; approximately 95 percent of those Kalimba House had served also had criminal histories.

For the Safer Return Oxford House, Kalimba House initially began to look for available housing stock close to a bus line, with the intention of leasing property in the corporation’s name. Individual rent would be pegged at the total rental cost of the house, divided by the number of residents. The house would not permit residents who relapsed to remain. Kalimba House would establish a rule system that
all house members must agree to before moving in; subsequently, residents could decide on other rules as they established the household. Residents would be permitted to have overnight guests and could elect to be out overnight, with advance approval. To encourage responsibility, each house member (typically six) would have an official job—president (oversees the house), treasurer (pays the bills), comptroller (collects rent), and so forth. These positions would be rotated every six months. Kalimba’s long-range view was that as the Safer Return Oxford House was in a position to seed new Oxford Houses, new houses might be colocated, as Oxford Houses often are, to support one another.

Housing Services Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Oxford House. Unfortunately, as the search for a location to seed an Oxford House in the East Garfield Park community moved forward, Kalimba House’s proposal to Safer Foundation was amended to include much greater costs than when it was originally submitted. No agreement could be reached between Kalimba House and Safer Foundation and the partnership was ultimately terminated. By spring 2009, Safer Foundation began a new search for a prospective partner to implement the Oxford House model.

Following the recommendations of the project’s National Advisory Board in March 2010, Safer Foundation decided that pursuing the Oxford House model was no longer a viable option. Safer Return managers decided to focus their attention on creating a housing assistance process that would enable the Safer Foundation to link participants with providers that offered emergency housing, transitional housing, and longer-term housing options in the community. Using the funds that were allocated for the Oxford House model, the housing assistance process would cover housing entry fees for participants recommended by reentry coaches. By November 2010, program staff had identified housing programs in East Garfield Park and the surrounding community. By July 2011, three housing programs were selected, but it was not until October 2011 that the program formalized linkages to enable Safer Return participants to be connected to these housing partners using housing subsidies.

Transitional housing. Safer Return estimated that between 15 and 20 percent of participants were not connected to their biological families, at least in terms of receiving a place to stay. Many participants lived in community shelters and transitional recovery homes, such as the Walls Warming Center and Jack Clark Family House. Despite the need, there were relatively few housing resources within Garfield Park, and some of the resources required payments that exceeded the financial abilities of Safer participants. For example, Jack Clark Family House charged $125 a week, which was the exact amount that Safer Return work crew participants earned.
During the early implementation period, many of the Safer Return participants who needed housing assistance could not locate suitable accommodations within the defined program boundaries. A few participants reported living in their cars, while others were sometimes able to reside in transitional homes just outside the boundaries of the service area (e.g., the Chicago Christian Industrial League and St. Leonard’s House). Participants who found housing resources outside the service area became another source of friction between Safer Return management and the reentry coaches because movement out of the program’s geographic boundaries could have been cause for discharge. In fact, miscommunication between Safer Return program managers and reentry coaches caused several participants to be discharged each week because they had moved outside the program boundaries. Clear directives were eventually established to ensure that reentry coaches knew they were permitted to serve individuals who had moved to the service area but then relocated elsewhere (as long as they were within a distance that made it practicable and desirable to continue case management and other service delivery).

Generally speaking, Safer Return program managers never made adequate systematic arrangements to offer housing supports to those in need. Reentry coaches struggled to find satisfactory housing options for Safer Return participants who needed assistance on a case-by-case basis, and as the program matured several coaches attempted to establish their own informal agreements with housing-provider staff. Safer Return program managers did what they could to address the gap that was created when the Oxford House model failed to come to fruition.

Another housing-related challenge was occasioned by IDOC and the parole department’s use of Jack Clark Family House as a halfway house for individuals with substance abuse histories who were returning from prison with electronic monitoring. Jack Clark Family House was the southernmost provider in Illinois that accepted parolees with electronic monitoring. Many of these individuals had never lived in Chicago—quite a few were from the Peoria area—and virtually all intended to return home once they were taken off electronic monitoring. However, because they were residing within Safer Return’s boundaries after release, they were eligible for Safer Return enrollment. In fact, parole agents stated that they recommended the Jack Clark facility to released prisoners they thought would benefit from the services of Safer Return.

As a result, reentry coaches found themselves working with an increasing number of participants living in Jack Clark Family House who had never lived in Garfield Park and were largely disconnected from their families and former support networks who lived elsewhere. Not only did this population living in Jack Clark have different profiles and needs than other prisoners returning to the community, but this challenge also made family-inclusive case management more difficult to employ. For those
living in Jack Clark and others, reentry coaches tried to connect with families who lived far from Garfield Park. They also made concerted efforts to encourage participants living in Jack Clark to participate in mentoring reentry circles and community activities.

### Engaging Participants with the Community

Aside from the supportive services that reentry coaches tried to arrange for participants (e.g., transportation and clothing), Safer Return included a community engagement component under which PCDAC was subcontracted to help establish a socially supportive link for participants and their families to participate in positive community-oriented events that facilitate reentry and reintegration. This component did not start to gain traction until later in the program's life, but eventually PCDAC/People’s Church of the Harvest organized some activities for Safer Return participants specifically, as well as for the community at large (the organization reached out to Safer Return participants and their families to encourage their participation in community-wide events). The organization also made contact with other clergy in the neighborhood and local stakeholders to invite them to events. The pastor of People’s Church organized a meeting in November 2011 to expand the community engagement component of Safer Return and to discuss what was needed. The organization also developed community-resource packets for Safer Return participants that included information about:

- free computer centers with Wi-Fi capacity;
- area churches;
- area restaurants;
- public office contact information (e.g., aldermen, congressmen, state senators);
- a legal aid clinic;
- job training and placement resources;
- notices of pertinent community meetings;
- organizations that offer utility payment assistance;
- business services;
- child care services;
- a community newspaper;
- coupons for restaurants and grocery stores; and
- continuing education resources.

The resource packets were handed out at Welcome Home panels in the community, which were held at the People's Church of the Harvest. The packets were intended to be useful for a general audience. Since some of Safer Return participants were coming to Garfield Park for the first time, the packets were also designed for use by individuals who might have no familiarity with the neighborhood.

The church's coordinator attended community-based Welcome Home panels and asked potential participants to sign releases permitting the church to contact them directly (without going through the reentry coaches or Safer Return) to invite them to events.

Additionally, the People's Church of the Harvest tried to link Safer Return participants to activities that were already happening at the church (e.g., comedy nights, fairs, block parties, clothing giveaways, and barbecues) and to resources the church knew about. The church coordinated several events and tried to leverage them as resources for Safer Return participants. These included, among others,

- A community baby shower where residents, including Safer Return participants and their families, could get baby clothes, equipment (e.g., cribs), and other items such as formula and diapers. The event attracted more than 120 women, including several Safer Return participants, and was funded exclusively by donations.

- A community picnic involving free food, school-supplies giveaways and other giveaways, health screenings, free haircuts for boys 12 years old and younger, free nail painting for girls 12 years old and younger, free clothing donated by area cleaners, and live entertainment for all age groups. More than 434 people attended this event; a handful of the attendees were Safer participants who brought friends or relatives with them.

- Hallelujah night, a family-oriented party on Halloween, attended by more than a dozen Safer Return participants.

- A resource fair held at the church to provide information about jobs, housing, and other resources throughout the city. Eleven organizations attended and more than two dozen Safer Return participants participated.
Engaging Participants in the Community Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Generally speaking, the attendance of Safer Return participants at these events was less than organizers had hoped for. This is perhaps unsurprising given the other commitments participants had to keep as part of the program, in addition to their own personal commitments. However, the pastor was interested in holding special classes for Safer Return participants nonetheless. Over time, once he became more involved with Safer Return, he realized the extent to which the program benefited the church and helped it fulfill its mission. He pointed out that part of the church’s vision statement entailed making disciples, uplifting humanity, and transforming community, and that involvement with Safer Return helped the church address the last two areas. In his view, the association with Safer Return helped him see more clearly how to accomplish those goals.

In addition, the church offered to train Safer Return participants through its Philemon Restoration Project, which helps residents with life skills, job training, and information on how to check and improve their credit. Several Safer Return participants participated in the Philemon project and completed a five-week custodial training course.
Implementation of System Reforms and Enhanced Community Conditions

Key system reforms that Safer Return was designed to implement were (1) the integration of comprehensive and sustainable services for returning individuals and their families through enhanced cross-institutional collaboration facilitated by a justice intermediary; (2) neighborhood-based parole supervision that actively partnered with case management; and (3) police and parole partnerships with case managers and service providers that enabled Safer Return participants to be diverted from reincarceration for new nonviolent offenses, particularly technical violations. Additionally, it was hoped that the partnership between IDOC and the Safer Foundation as a steward for Safer Return would spur system reforms that were already under consideration for the correctional system, including more prerelease preparation and transitional planning for inmates and possible transfer of inmates closer to Chicago in the months before their release to facilitate community-based case management and public and private sector providers’ ability to reach into facilities.

Justice Intermediary

Intermediaries have been used successfully to perform community development, mitigate the effects of urban poverty, facilitate welfare-to-work initiatives, and resolve problems associated with the homeless and other hard-to-serve populations whose needs transcend multiple institutional and service domains (Walker2002; Walker, Gustafson, and Snow 2002). In such settings, successful intermediaries have demonstrated a number of important characteristics:

- Projecting a dual customer perspective by simultaneously addressing the supply and demand sides of a problem and focusing not only on meeting individual service needs, but also on influencing policy, the market, and the community.

- Filling an essential governance need by organizing key stakeholders (e.g., CBOs and FBOs, local businesses, parole and police departments, human services departments, people with criminal records, and workforce development agencies), ensuring that core sectors are adequately represented, and building partnerships that can affect individual and system outcomes.
- Serving as a fiscal administrator by raising funds from multiple sources, distributing resources to appropriate community entities, and overseeing fiscal accountability.

- Serving as a consolidator by identifying opportunities for collective action and engaging multiple stakeholders with similar needs to aggregate demands for services or training.

- Empowering residents to guide the initiative by using a community organizing approach to include them in planning, decisionmaking, and implementation.

- Assuming various advocacy roles at local, state, and national levels.

Safer Foundation was more proactive as an intermediary in some regards than others. For example, the Safer Foundation served as the fiscal administrator for the funds awarded by the MacArthur Foundation, and made a reasoned and careful effort to share those resources with CBOs and FBOs within the Garfield Park community targeted by Safer Return; however, it was less successful in raising new funds to extend or sustain the project during or after the demonstration period.

As a consolidator, Safer Foundation not only provided training for Safer Return staff on key aspects of service delivery, such as mentoring and family case management, but it also attempted to extend the reach of the project as a learning community by inviting other local organizations, most of which were either Safer Return subcontractors or stakeholder partners, to participate in various training opportunities. Additionally, Safer Foundation convened a National Advisory Board made up of local and national experts who met approximately once a year during the course of the demonstration to provide guidance on the Safer Return framework and implementation, facilitate the involvement of decisionmakers at the highest levels of state and local governance, and identify opportunities for joint actions to improve prerelease and postrelease circumstances not only for Safer Return participants and families but system wide.

In addition to these activities, Safer convened a Safer Return Service Cabinet and a Community Advisory Council, and continued its Employer Advisory Group. Each is described briefly below.

Service Cabinet

The Safer Return Service Cabinet was developed to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among a comprehensive group of health and human service providers—including such services as physical and mental health and substance abuse treatment, transitional employment, and housing—to benefit Safer Return participants through the provision of expertise and resources from Safer Return subcontractors.
and publicly funded providers. The Service Cabinet was conceptualized as a consortium of service providers, linked through formal interagency agreements, that would meet quarterly and collaborate with Safer Return to enable reentry coaches to coordinate participant-focused services in a timely manner. As such, the Service Cabinet was intended to accomplish the following:

- Leverage services to assist those returning from prisons to Garfield Park. For example, the Illinois Department of Public Health was expected to provide physicals for all returning participants within two weeks of release, provide ongoing care for those with high-risk communicable diseases or chronic illnesses, identify health care providers who would provide quality care for participants’ families, include Safer Return participants in the health care educator program, and identify health care providers who were funded by the state and ask them to allocate slots for participants’ medical care.
- Coordinate service delivery via an integrated system.
- Possibly enhance or revise services to be user-friendly for formerly incarcerated individuals and their families.

Participating organizations were expected to engage in regular case staffings with Safer Return reentry coaches to ensure comprehensive, integrated service delivery.

**Community Advisory Council**

The Community Advisory Council (CAC) was a voluntary council organized to provide feedback and recommendations to the Safer Foundation. The plan was to attract 12 members (originally 8 from East Garfield Park and 4 from surrounding areas such as West Garfield Park, Austin, North Lawndale, and Humboldt Park) who would represent community residents, including people with criminal records and their family members, property and business owners, clergy, long-time residents, or local service providers. Initially, CAC membership included CeaseFire Chicago workers, AmeriCorps VISTA workers, and congregants from various local churches. The group met monthly for the first four months to help the program get started, and quarterly meetings were planned to take place thereafter.

In the early days of program planning and implementation, the CAC was not entirely sold on the project. In particular, several members were opposed to limiting the program boundaries to East Garfield Park. On the positive side, the group offered several insightful recommendations, including adding participant success stories to Welcome Home panels to make the Safer Return program more
attractive to potential participants and, in light of pending economic stimulus funding, strengthening relationships with city and state decisionmakers to press for more resources. The CAC was not the only set of voices recommending that Safer Return position itself for stimulus funding, and program managers did, in fact, adapt such advice in pursuing the aforementioned stimulus-funded DOE Landscape Project.

**Business Consortium**

Safer Return was intended to convene a Business Consortium that would include such stakeholders as the neighborhood’s alderman, the Chicago Jobs Council, the Chicago Urban league, the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, the People’s Economic Development Association, and the City of Chicago. However, rather than pulling together such a group expressly to address the needs of Safer Return participants and to promote more business growth and job opportunities in Garfield Park, Safer Foundation elected to address the objectives of Safer Return within the context of its extant Employer Advisory Group that met three to four times a year. It is not clear whether or to what extent this group helped the program meet its economic and employment growth objectives.

**Justice Intermediary Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them**

After a reasonably good start, Safer Return encountered difficulty keeping the Service Cabinet active. City and state government funding cuts caused a significant number of service providers to experience challenges maintaining their current service delivery obligations, let alone extending services beyond their traditional clienteles. As government resources were subjected to cuts, agencies endured staff reductions and were forced to severely curtail such activities as collaboration in cross-institutional forums, as well as the scale and scope of their service offerings. The economic downturn also reduced the amount of available community-based services. This was an ongoing issue throughout the rest of the program, but Safer Foundation and TASC continued to work together to leverage their relationships with other service providers in the interest of meeting the critical needs of Safer Return participants.

Safer Return program managers also found it increasingly difficult to convene the CAC for the duration of the demonstration. The interest of members waned as they perceived that their role was largely advisory and that much of their advice was not acted upon. Ultimately, based on guidance from the program’s National Advisory Board, Safer Return program managers resorted to attending meetings of established community groups, including such entities as Congressman Davis’s Ex-Offender

While this engagement gave the Safer Return program additional visibility within the community, it did not address the original intentions that led to the CAC’s creation. The CAC was intended to function as a community group that would actively establish opportunities and organize residents to interact positively with Safer Return participants and their families while modeling prosocial recreation and civic involvement.

Likewise, the Civic Community Works component experienced challenges in achieving the full scope of planned community engagement. Civic Community Works was intended to take on at least one community-determined project—for which no local government funding was forthcoming—that was developed in response to the articulated needs of community residents. The project was meant to give Safer Return participants the kind of visibility that would constitute “earned redemption” while also giving them the opportunity to work alongside community residents in a common enterprise. The community was to have been empowered to lead the planning, design, and operation of the service-centered Civic Community Works component. Along those lines, it was envisioned that community members would host workshops to renew interest and plan new projects, raise funds to support the costs of materials for improvement projects, and work as part of the team, sharing their skills with participants and families. Unfortunately, these plans did not materialize.

In addition to these challenges, the Safer Foundation, as intermediary, encountered difficulty identifying a suitable location for the Safer Return program office within the target community. Safer Foundation had planned to locate two offices within the target community to make it easy for participants to access services and to heighten the visibility of the demonstration within the community. While Safer Return was not expressly intended to be a one-stop shop, it was intended to offer an office where Safer Return staff and other service providers could serve participants within the target community at a convenient location. Many reentry programs try to provide space for prosocial informal activities to enable newly returning individuals to use computers or recreational resources to develop supportive peer relationships and alternatives to their former criminal lives.

Initially, the program was located at 808 South Kedzie Avenue, where Safer Foundation operated other efforts not related to Safer Return. While the 808 South Kedzie Avenue site enabled Safer Return program managers, reentry coaches, and Civic Community Works staff to be colocated, the site was not technically within the Safer Return community boundaries (although it was very near the boundary). For various reasons, the Safer Foundation had difficulty locating suitable office space in the
demonstration community that was move-in ready and could accommodate more than a handful of staff. Safer Return program managers searched for an ideal community space to accommodate case managers and employment staff. After a long search that required a substantial amount of Safer Return program managers’ time to locate and to make suitable for the program’s purposes, the Safer Return community office location was opened in November 2009. From November 2009 through May 2010, the Safer Return community office was located at 742 South California Avenue, at street level in a building that also housed four apartments above the program office. While the Safer Return program managers and Civic Community Works supervisors remained at the 808 South Kedzie Avenue location, the reentry coaches relocated to the new site.

Shortly after the move and the investment of funds to convert the 742 South California Avenue space into an office, the space sustained damages as a result of flooding from the apartments above. Aside from the flooding, and in spite of the resources invested by program managers, the conditions were generally unsatisfactory from reentry coaches’ perspective for several reasons: the office was small and there was not enough space for each reentry coach to have his or her own independent work space, there was no space for conducting private conversations with participants, the building was not secured, and there were not sufficient office supplies. The office space was not truly conducive to participants (or their families) dropping by to interact with one another during periods when they had nothing else to do and were trying to stay out of trouble. Though some modifications were made, such as securing the building and investing in additional office supplies, these concerns created tension between Safer Return program managers and TASC reentry coaches. Because of the damages sustained from the flooding, staff were temporarily relocated back to 808 South Kedzie Avenue.

A new Safer Return community site was subsequently opened at 312 North Pulaski Road, which was located within the expanded boundaries in the 60624 zip code (West Garfield Park). This community site was larger and provided reentry coaches with their own open work spaces. The space included a small conference room with its own door, which served as a private area for case managers and participants to talk. From that point on, meetings between participants and families and reentry coaches took place at that site; case staffings with parole agents were also usually (but not always) held there. Albeit small, the final site had enough space to be considered a comfortable drop-in location for participants and family to gather and use resources like computers, printers, and the like.
Neighborhood-Based Parole

Safer Return and the parole department worked together to complete protocols for collaboration by January 2008. Under their agreement, select Safer Return staff and reentry coaches would be trained on and granted access to the parole Automated Management System database, which would enable them to check participants’ statuses. Agents would be asked to volunteer as neighborhood-based parole agents; in this role they would participate in Welcome Home panels that were held within three hours of Garfield Park and engage in co-case management with reentry coaches during case meetings and home visits (i.e., reentry coaches would be encouraged to join parole agents as they made their first home visits to Safer Return participants). The neighborhood parole agents were expected to maintain caseloads not exceeding 60 parolees; reentry coaches were expected to maintain caseloads not exceeding 30 participants.

The supervisor and dedicated neighborhood-based parole agents were assigned by July 2008. The parole department provided Safer Return staff and stakeholders with a training session on the structure of the department and its processes, and the original two supervisors and four parole agents who volunteered to participate in Safer Return received six sessions of training that covered the program model, Welcome Home panel structure and processes, and the family-inclusive case management model.

As the program expanded within the first year to enroll participants through community-based Welcome Home panels, parole agents were expected to participate in those panels and to directly refer parolees who had been in the community 45 or fewer days to Safer Return. On the parole side, the procedure for recruiting parolees from the community and referring them to Welcome Home panels included the following steps:

- Parole agents received a list of eligible individuals from Safer Return.

- When parole agents met with those individuals, they were directed to do one of two things: (1) give the participants the Safer Return handout (included in the training materials) and ask the parolees to enroll on their own, or (2) call a Safer Return dedicated cell phone (which would be answered by a reentry coach) and sign the participants up for the Welcome Home panel at that time.

- Participants were told that they could choose to attend a Welcome Home panel at Jack Clark Family House (held on Wednesdays at 11:00 a.m.), to schedule one in their home, or to schedule
one in the Safer Return office. By the second year of the program, the People’s Church of the Harvest was being used as the location for community-based Welcome Home panels.

As the program matured, both parole agents and reentry coaches felt they had mutually supportive relationships that benefited Safer Return participants. They routinely communicated with one another through the Automated Management System, by email and telephone, and in face-to-face conversations. Sometimes the reentry coaches had more current information on participants than the parole agents, and sometimes it was the other way around. Reentry coaches indicated that these relationships with parole agents were helpful in the following kinds of circumstances:

- When case managers had individuals on their caseload who were missing, parole agents often helped locate them. Reentry coaches could often do the same when the situation was reversed.
- When individuals violated their conditions of parole, parole agents could identify their charges and determine whether they should be discharged from the program.
- Parole agents could approve the movement of participants who were on electronic monitoring supervision, thereby permitting such individuals to participate in work crews, go with reentry coaches or by themselves to appointments, and attend mentoring or other program activities.
- Parole agents reinforced the message that individuals needed to be engaged in the program.
- Parole agents were committed to helping the reentry coaches find and gain admittance to the best services for individuals who were part of their joint caseloads.
- Parole agents and reentry coaches shared information about participants since some may have talked to parole agents more or less than they talked to reentry coaches.

Parole agents held similarly positive views. As one parole agent stated, “typically, parole agents see parolees once a month, but with the Safer Return participants, agents have more contact with them since they are working with all of the partners.” For example, co-case management was seen as undercutting many of the excuses the parolees might offer for violating their conditions of parole or failing to meet their parole mandates, because the officers knew what individuals were doing and what services they had access to through Safer Return. As a result of Safer Return, parole agents found that they could have conversations with all the other partners, so parolees were unable to make as many false claims about the extent to which they were or were not complying with supervision or other program requirements. Parole agents also used the reentry coaches’ assistance and access to other
service providers to motivate participants to complete their parole requirements, such as treatment for substance use or mental health or anger management classes.

By 2011, reentry coaches and parole agents had established a routine that included weekly check-ins between reentry coaches and assigned parole agents; monthly case staffings between parole agents and reentry coaches (with participants as needed); and monthly meetings that included the parole supervisor, parole agents, reentry coaches and their supervisor, and the Safer Return administrative assistant. Parole agents reported that they believed the case staffings worked well and that, in their view, the team (parole agent, reentry coach, and sometimes sector manager) presented a “united front” to the parolee. This united front helped parole agents when they were talking to parolees about what they were doing well and what wasn’t working as it ought to be. The parole agents felt the participants liked it, too: they seemed to be more open with the reentry coaches, which gave participants an opportunity to discuss things they would not normally tell a parole agent. These discussions were important in helping both the reentry coaches and the parole agents understand how to properly guide and support the individual.

Lastly, a reentry coach supervisor encouraged the development of a diversion-strategy protocol that would keep reentry coaches informed regarding participants who were in danger of getting warrants. This protocol would also provide reentry coaches with early notification regarding violations and returns to IDOC custody. The parole supervisor agreed with this request and indicated that notification would be made for all pending cases, and also reinforced the notion that parolees would be considered for every diversion opportunity before violation.

### Neighborhood-Based Parole Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Over the course of the demonstration, the neighborhood-based parole model was hampered by IDOC rules governing parole agents’ assignments. Based on their rank and tenure, Illinois parole agents are permitted to switch work assignments annually. This annual change includes changes to their working hours (day or night shift), work days, and neighborhood. Consequently, parole agents who were dedicated to Safer Return were able to choose to take another assignment annually. As a result, the parole agents who were assigned or had chosen to work on Safer Return switched annually throughout the demonstration. None of the agents who choose to switch their work assignments reported doing so because of dissatisfaction with Safer Return; however, there was turnover virtually every year as parole agents chose to move on for various personal or professional reasons. With each switch, new parole
agents had to be trained on the Safer Return model and familiarized with the operational practices of the co-case management model and partner relationships.

Even when relationships among different entities are working well, there are often opportunities for improvement. At various times, despite general satisfaction, either reentry coaches or parole agents noted that communication could be enhanced. One particular issue was cited several times: the cell phone system for community Welcome Home referrals was not as reliable as parole agents would have liked. They thought the idea of being able to call and set up an appointment for a Welcome Home panel while the parolee was present was wonderful, but they experienced a number of occasions when no one answered their phone call, so no appointment could be established. Additionally, several agents indicated that they would have liked to receive feedback immediately after the Welcome Home panels, so they would know who actually attended them.

**Policing**

The demonstration model anticipated that a partnership between Safer Return and the Chicago Police Department (CPD) would enable the program to assist families of participants with orders of protection, when appropriate, and would also enable CPD staff to advise Safer Return staff on issues related to orders of protection and gang involvement. Similarly, it was hoped that CPD would provide Safer Return with training on domestic violence and provide guidance to reentry coaches regarding case management and family engagement for participants with domestic violence histories.

In addition, it was hoped that CPD would coordinate with the parole department to

- notify IDOC and the parole department when Safer Return participants were arrested, before bringing new charges against them for nonviolent crimes and transporting them to the IDOC Reception and Classification Center, and
- perform compliance checks on Safer Return participants.

Protocols that were intended to be implemented would have permitted police to hold arrests in abeyance, as the parole department was able to hold technical violations, in order to work with Safer Return to determine the best approach for both the participant and public safety.
Police Partnership Challenges and Strategies to Overcome Them

Safer Return staff held numerous meetings with CPD representatives to try to implement this component. However, within the first year or so of implementation, there were numerous staffing changes within CPD, including changes in commissioners and other staff members across the criminal justice system, as well as changes to district boundaries. In addition to those difficulties, Safer Foundation staff had piqued CPD’s interest in partnering on Safer Return by describing a model in place in Portland. After six months of trying to obtain written protocols for that approach, Safer Foundation staff ascertained that written protocols did not exist. The new administration in CPD decided not to formalize a memorandum of agreement with Safer Return since (1) there was already a process in place for CPD to alert the parole department when parolees were arrested, and (2) diversionary programs already existed. The administration did not want to initiate a special process for Safer Return participants since these two conditions were already in place and were not in conflict with the goals of the demonstration. The district commander, however, sat on an advisory council for Safer Foundation’s Adult Transition Centers and remained accessible to Safer Return program managers.
Overall Implementation Challenges

This section discusses the overall challenges that hampered the demonstration’s implementation; the following section focuses on lessons learned. The challenges can be summarized as (1) management issues, (2) service delivery and coordination problems, and (3) difficulties with the “design-build” model. These three challenges should be understood within the dynamic context of the multitudinous implementation activities just described. Overarching lessons from these challenges include the importance of (1) being flexible and responsive to changing policy and political landscapes, as evidenced by understanding and working within the local context and adjusting to the concerns of all players; (2) being sensitive to differences in organizational structures and hierarchies, since agencies with different missions and cultures may have processes that do not neatly align; and (3) understanding potential trade-offs in comprehensiveness versus cohesiveness.

Management Challenges

A subtext throughout much of the demonstration was the stilted nature of collaboration and communication between reentry coaches, employed by TASC, and Safer Return program managers and employment staff, employed by the Safer Foundation. Tension existed throughout much of the demonstration, particularly earlier in the implementation period. Safer Return program managers and reentry coaches were equally frustrated and dissatisfied with the way their relationships were playing out. Reentry coaches felt that Safer Return program managers were micromanaging their time through efforts to establish protocols for case management. Coaches also felt that program managers were not fully supportive of their ability to perform effective case management independently, based on their years of experience. Reentry coaches also felt that Safer Return program managers were not always responsive to their requests for additional resources for participants (e.g., emergency funds for bus passes). Reentry coaches requested clear guidelines for communication, better articulation of each agency’s responsibilities, and unambiguous guidance regarding how various program components (e.g., hiring halls, mentoring activities, and work crews) were being implemented and coordinated.

Safer Return program managers felt the reentry coaches were resistant to implementing some components of the Safer Return model—specifically the strengths-based, family-inclusive case management—and less than supportive of the accountability and documentation practices Safer Return managers had put into place (e.g., consistent documentation of case management activities in the Axiom...
database and consistent implementation of case management tools). Safer Return program managers understood the importance of a functional case management component to the demonstration’s overall goals. Further, in the Safer Foundation’s role as justice intermediary, Safer Return program managers had the added task of managing a dynamic demonstration with various moving pieces. Safer Return program managers were responsive to reentry coaches’ request for clear and consistent guidelines; they held frequent staff trainings to articulate the program’s processes and established a formal standard operating procedures manual that was modified over time as new assessment tools and procedures were put in place. The situation improved with time as each agency made a concerted effort to work together better. Consistent guidelines were frequently challenged, however, by the dynamic way in which Safer Return was implemented over time (as illustrated through the previous sections).

Unfortunately, the reality is that this management and coordination tension was somewhat built into the program given that both TASC and Safer Foundation, organizations with long histories and proven track records of engaging the target population, had the requisite expertise central to the successful execution of the demonstration. This tension was not inevitable, however, and could likely have been avoided with more effective management practices. Reentry coaches, the Safer Return program managers, and employment staff hailed from two different organizations with different cultures and missions, which understandably influenced their expectations regarding how the program should operate. For example, reentry coaches expressed frustration with having to use Safer Foundation’s Axiom database since many of them were more familiar with TASC’s case management database. They perceived TASC’s database as more participant centered, goal oriented, and appropriate than the Axiom database, which they felt was more appropriate for recording employment activities and outcomes. Axiom was the database all parties agreed to use for the demonstration. While it never reached its full potential as a case management database, it did allow Safer Return program managers to look at participant activities across components and assess program performance and outputs.

Further, the management structure was complex by design. Reentry coaches had two TASC supervisors—including an onsite team leader assigned to Safer Return specifically and a TASC administrator assigned to Safer Return part-time—for issues related to the clinical aspects of their case management, but were also directed by Safer Return program managers who oversaw the entire initiative and connected them to other program components (e.g., mentoring). Generally speaking, the management structure was suboptimal since it required case management staff to report to and be responsive to supervisors in two different agencies. Such a structure can easily give rise to friction, as it did in this case. The eventual physical separation of Safer Return program managers and employment staff from reentry coaches only contributed to the stilted collaboration and communication.
Operational guidance was indeed developed in writing over time, but basic directives at the start might have helped everyone better understand their roles and responsibilities. Aside from the reentry coaches and Safer Return program managers and employment staff, various other staff members were associated with the mentoring component and the community engagement component, in addition to the neighborhood-based parole agents. Staff turnover, which was an issue with this initiative (as is common in multiyear demonstrations), only further contributed to the management challenge.

It took considerable time and negotiation between all the parties before the different agencies and entities could work together smoothly. But even then, many staff members felt that there were untapped opportunities to develop more connectedness, cohesion, and mutual support so that all the parties could function as a team to manage the cases of individual participants and their families. Examples of ways to develop more connectedness and cohesion abound, from the perspective of all the partners. These challenges persisted throughout the Safer Return demonstration because of the depth of the partnership, the relative expertise of all involved parties, and the parties’ differing perspectives.

Service Delivery and Coordination Challenges

Establishing special service agreements that would have enabled Safer Return participants to be placed in slots allocated for the program’s use proved challenging. In part, this was because of economic circumstances in the state of Illinois (and the country) during the demonstration period, which forced cuts in government services. However, it was also the case that Safer Return’s connections with the community-based service providers participants were referred to were not very strong and were often ad hoc. Program staff, particularly reentry coaches, anticipated that the program would have streamlined referral processes, would be able offer participants reserved spaces at facilities, and would have concrete agreements with substance abuse and mental health treatment agencies that could complete assessments for free, but this was not the case. Safer Return program managers did not pursue such agreements until late in the demonstration, and their understanding was that TASC would secure those agreements. For example, in 2012, Safer Return program managers and Association House of Chicago developed a way for participants to receive substance abuse and mental health assessments that Safer Return would fund if Association House could not cover the costs. This enabled participants who had not been assessed or treated because of monetary barriers to be seen more quickly and begin receiving services.
Because of the lack of special service agreements throughout much of the demonstration, reentry coaches had difficulties referring participants to necessary services, which are typically in high demand among criminal justice-involved populations. In light of the Safer Foundation’s role as justice intermediary, the expectation was for Safer Return program managers to be aggressive in seeking innovative solutions to this challenge. The Service Cabinet, in particular, was originally intended to serve as a cohesive network to identify service gaps and solve problems. Yet the Service Cabinet was disbanded at the time it was needed most: when resources and services were shrinking because of the changing economy, with no corresponding reduction in demand.

It is unfortunate that the agencies that did not receive subcontracted funds from Safer Foundation were unwilling or unable to continue to meet and collaborate to find creative ways to help returning individuals and families whose needs were not diminished despite greatly reduced public and private resources. While some partnerships between the Safer Return program and other providers were strengthened by the end of the demonstration, delivery of services beyond those offered by Safer Return directly was not routinized. Reentry coaches struck their own agreements with other community-based providers and shared those connections with other staff as they could, but these agreements were informal and ad hoc and changed considerably over time in response to the dynamic economic landscape.

Finally, while the Safer Return program was funded generously, there was still the sense that some participant needs were unmet. These include the treatment assessments and services just described, as well as more elemental needs. While some of the participants’ elemental needs were met through Safer Return’s emergency funds, there was difficulty in fully meeting all of the needs that would support successful reentry outcomes, including (1) appropriate attire for jobs and job interviews; (2) sufficient bus passes for transportation to and from work and training, educational, and treatment programs; (3) registration fees or payments for training, educational, and treatment programs; and (4) support for obtaining items such as identification cards, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, LINK cards, and the like. Reentry coaches reportedly pooled their own personal resources to assist participants who, for example, needed work boots or bus passes when insufficient emergency funds were provided by the Safer Return program managers. While funds for elemental and emergency needs were available to all the program participants, these funds were not, of course, unlimited. This funding challenge was partially caused by the fact some of the other budget items (e.g., Welcome Home panels, finding a suitable community location) exceeded planned program costs.
Challenges with the Design-Build Model

Implementation of Safer Return proved more difficult than anyone anticipated. Safer Foundation believed that a strong foundation had been established during the project’s planning period and in the months immediately after receipt of the MacArthur Foundation demonstration award, and that this foundation would enable Safer Return program managers to use a design-build approach. As envisioned, the design-build approach enabled program managers to begin building some program components while designing others, and thus roll out components of the model over a period of months. In reality, implementation took more than a year to complete, and some components were never fully realized. This departure from expectations led to frustration among all the partners and likely contributed to tension between the program partners, confusion over roles and responsibilities, and challenges with service delivery and coordination since different services were available to the participants over time.

Although the program had the infrastructure and resources to provide certain core services—such as case management and employment services—to participants immediately, other resources were absent or insufficient during the course of the demonstration. Reentry coaches felt their ability to help participants was limited since the Safer Return demonstration components were not all fully functional or fully implemented immediately. Examples of such components include the Oxford House Model that was never fully implemented (and the subsequent inability to identify other suitable housing solutions in the community) and the limited number of spots available for the Civic Community Works transitional job component and the job readiness training. Reentry coaches reported that participants were drawn to the program primarily to get jobs or find places to live, and they felt the program offered no easy solutions for either of those needs. The length of time it took to find a community-based facility conducive to the case management activities and to retool and enter data into the Axiom database were also sources of frustration for all the partners. While Safer Return’s design-build model allowed the program to design the demonstration, build and implement the components according to the design in collaboration with its subcontractors and partners, and then fine-tune the components based on early lessons learned and in response to the changing economic and community landscape, the model also created frustration at times among all the partners.
Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Building Stronger Reentry Efforts

Based on the overall implementation of Safer Return and, specifically, the challenges the program faced, there are three lessons learned from its implementation that are critical for building stronger reentry efforts fashioned after Safer Return (that is, efforts that are expected to be comprehensive and multifaceted). These lessons concern the importance of (1) being flexible and responsive to changing policy and political landscapes, (2) being sensitive to differences in organizational structures and hierarchies, and (3) understanding potential trade-offs in comprehensiveness versus cohesiveness.

Responsiveness to Changing Policy and Political Landscapes

Over the course of the five-year demonstration, tremendous changes at the local and state level affected Safer Return’s implementation. These changes included the Great Recession, which affected the country, the state of Illinois, the city of Chicago, and, of course, disadvantaged neighborhoods like Garfield Park. As a result, fewer publicly funded services were offered, nonprofit and community-based agencies received fewer funds, fewer nonprofits or community-based agencies were willing to partner in the absence of funding, and there were fewer job opportunities for program participants. In addition, there were staffing changes among leadership and key staff at IDOC and the parole department over the course of the demonstration. While these types of circumstances are not ideal, they are to be expected for a multiyear initiative that has a mission focused on leveraging various resources, organizations, and individuals to address a large-scale challenge like prisoner reentry. Therefore, any program must have flexible resources and personnel to enable it to adapt to such changes by being innovative, creative, and forward thinking. An understanding of the local context and a willingness to work with various partners—even those who were not engaged at the outset—is key to success and to warding off implementation failures.
Sensitivity to Differences in Organizational Structures and Hierarchies

A comprehensive and multifaceted program must be flexible and sensitive to differences in organizational hierarchies. If a program is designed to leverage and build on the strengths of partners, it must be able to adapt to differences across partners. One of Safer Return’s biggest challenges was the lack of coordinated responses to participant needs. While this challenge could have perhaps been better managed through different staffing arrangements or positions, it was a consequence of the varied organizations, partners, and entities that were intended to be engaged in effecting change among individuals and their families, the community, and the system. Management challenges are not inevitable: they can be avoided or minimized by core staff members who remain flexible and able to adapt to differences in organizational structures and hierarchies. Frequent meetings to cross-train, communicate differences, and troubleshoot problems as they arise are critical to maintaining the functioning of a program with a lot of moving pieces and parts.

Understanding Potential Trade-Offs in Comprehensiveness versus Cohesiveness

At its core, Safer Return was intended to be comprehensive. As described in the opening sections of this report, Safer Return was expected to engage individuals and their families, the community, and relevant systems. The Safer Return design was well outlined and articulated, such that all the partners knew what was intended to be implemented. The six-month planning grant from the MacArthur Foundation provided a blueprint for implementation and a reasonable expectation that all the program components and activities could be implemented as designed. However, there was no guideline or blueprint for the processes. Such a guideline or blueprint should have been in place to make the process cohesive, particularly in a dynamic, real world context.

Despite these challenges, each partner implemented its own component to the best of its ability. With the exception of the housing component, all the demonstration’s components were implemented to some extent. However, Safer Return lacked connective tissue between the components, in spite of program managers’ eventual efforts to encourage more cohesion, collaboration, and communication through monthly partner meetings and other operational meetings. Indeed, some of the most frequent complaints among most of the partners (and the participants) related to their lack of knowledge about
all the moving pieces and changing or inconsistent guidelines and procedures. As a result of their efforts to implement all the components of the demonstration design—which entailed expending additional resources and time for those that proved to be harder to implement than anticipated (e.g., finding the community site, locating a housing provider, delivering prerelease planning)—program managers’ attention was diverted from making sure the demonstration was cohesive. The cohesiveness of the demonstration was also challenged by the number of agencies, partners, and stakeholders involved.

The overall implementation of Safer Return could have perhaps been more successful by attending to the connective tissue, making the components more cohesive, and establishing more consistent communications and guidelines that were more quickly or easily put into place. The implementation challenges also raise a more radical suggestion: that perhaps the blueprint for the Safer Return demonstration was too ambitious and too comprehensive to be cohesive. Safer Return program managers and partners were focusing concurrently on trying to encourage meaningful change among individuals and families, systems, and the community; full implementation success was likely an elusive goal. Nevertheless, a longer planning grant from the MacArthur Foundation may have made a substantial difference in making the comprehensive demonstration more cohesive.
Conclusions

Implementation of the Safer Return demonstration faced several hurdles that were beyond Safer Return program managers’ direct control. In addition to the economic context that changed the service delivery landscape, these included difficulties in the accurate prerelease identification of eligible participants in IDOC, which hampered prerelease transitional reentry planning and increased the resources necessary to recruit participants; the reality that parole agents were eligible to change their work assignments annually, which precluded the program from having a consistent core of neighborhood-based parole agents working alongside reentry coaches; and the parole department’s use of a residential treatment center and halfway house in Garfield Park for individuals with limited or no ties to the neighborhood, which made family-inclusive case management for these individuals untenable or difficult. Some of the other implementation hurdles, such as engaging community volunteers and family members and finding a local housing provider and community-based program location, should have been more easily or quickly overcome by the program managers. In general, Safer Return made greater progress on implementation of key individual services than it did on the implementation of specific system reform components and efforts to improve the local conditions.

In the end, however, Safer Return engaged 727 individuals in a suite of community-based services by working with various criminal justice and community-based partners. It succeeded in creating new opportunities for participants; linking them to services, jobs, and prosocial activities; forging new connections between community-based partners assisting the reentry population, including a strong relationship with the parole department; and working within the challenging criminal justice context. The outcomes, impacts, and cost-effectiveness of these efforts, which are contextualized in Safer Return’s implementation successes and challenges, are discussed in the second report from the evaluation (Fontaine et al. 2015), which includes a concluding chapter that brings lessons learned from the demonstration’s implementation together with the outcomes and impacts it achieved.
Notes

1. The Safer Foundation has designed and managed several other reentry projects that have received national attention (e.g., the Sheridan Initiative, Chicago Ready4Work, and the Joyce Foundation’s Transitional Employment Program).

2. For more information, see Bazemore and Karp (2004).

3. The Bodega model was developed by the nonprofit Family Justice Institute, which closed in late 2009. The organization’s national training and technical assistance work continues as the Family Justice Program of the Vera Institute of Justice. For more information, see http://www.vera.org.

4. Oxford Houses exist internationally as democratically run, self-supporting, drug-free homes for individuals recovering from alcohol or substance abuse. For more information, see http://www.oxfordhouse.org.


6. The Safer Return National Advisory Board, co-chaired by Jeremy Travis (president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York) and Diane Williams (former president of the Safer Foundation) was composed of senior officials from local government agencies and service providers that engage with formerly incarcerated individuals.

7. Entities had to have 501(c)(3) status and at least two years of experience working with individuals who had criminal histories, as well as evidence of successful volunteer programs, records of accomplishment in terms of relationships with other organizations and community constituencies, and the ability to partner well with a broad range of groups.

8. Selection criteria were similar to those for other program components. Entities had to have 501(c)(3) status and at least five years of experience in case management of individuals with criminal histories, as well as five years of experience providing services in East Garfield Park. Applicants also had to demonstrate that they had an adequate accounting system and internal control procedures, successful programs, and a record of accomplishment in terms of relationships with other organizations and community or government constituencies.

9. The Texas Christian University tool predicts risk of recidivism; scoring is based on dynamic risk factors (education, employment, drug use) and static risk factors (criminal history). Scores place participants in three levels of risk—high, medium, and low—with the intent of informing the intensity of case management and services.


11. Special services agreements are community enhancement projects targeted at specific wards and funded by tax dollars.

12. Qualified organizations needed to (1) be a nonprofit with 501(c)(3) status; (2) have a minimum of two years of experience working with individuals with criminal histories; (3) evidence successful programs; (4) have a proven record of maintaining relationships with other organizations and constituencies in the community; (5) have at least five years of direct experience in training on soft-skills job readiness; and (6) use an evidence-based curriculum, which Safer Foundation planned to review for adequacy and amend as needed.

13. Qualified organizations had to (1) be nonprofit corporations with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, (2) demonstrate a minimum of two years of experience working with individuals who had criminal records, (3) evidence a history of successful volunteer programming, and (4) produce a track record documenting accomplishments in relationships fostered with other organizations and constituencies in the community.
References


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