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COUNTY ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN REENTRY PLANNING

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County jails release 135,000 individuals back into their communities every day,¹ and hundreds of thousands of people released from state and federal prisons also return home every year.² A jail stay of only a few days can lead to many challenges for an individual, such as losing his or her job, which can in turn lead to the loss of health care coverage and housing and disrupt family ties, all of which have been shown to increase the likelihood of re-offending.³ Individuals returning to the community also often face difficulties in accessing transportation and community-based services, and many would benefit from training or workforce development services. Counties are uniquely positioned to lead efforts to provide resources and services to individuals returning home, which can ultimately break the cycle of incarceration and result in safer and healthier communities.

Because individuals are often held in jail for relatively short periods of time, local reentry planning can be particularly challenging. For all the areas listed below, county jails and local service providers should work together on “in-reach” or “warm hand-off” strategies. County jails can invite service providers and non-profit organizations into facilities to meet with detainees and inmates, discuss the resources available to individuals within the community and to initiate services and assistance. This gives inmates the chance to learn about available resources and create relationships with service providers that can exist beyond the jail and be better equipped for release and reentry.

The solutions described in this document are only a few of the many strategies counties can employ to assist individuals returning to their communities. And, in addition to the areas identified below, county jails and other agencies can assist individuals returning home in other simple ways, like issuing identification cards upon release or offering assistance applying for identification cards, providing resource guides or handbooks and supplying basic necessities such as clothes and personal care items.

HOUSING

Access to safe and stable housing is a crucial component of successful reentry and is typically the most immediate, important need for an individual leaving jail. Studies have shown that the first weeks and months after release is a particularly vulnerable period during which individuals are at a high risk of becoming homeless, returning to the criminal justice system or dying.⁴ In most jurisdictions, however, obtaining housing upon release is complicated by any number of factors: a scarcity of affordable and/or available housing, legal barriers or regulations restricting housing options for individuals convicted of certain crimes or landlords who are unwilling to rent to a justice-involved individual.⁵

Housing First. Housing First is an approach through which people experiencing homelessness are provided with permanent housing with few or zero requirements to obtain that housing. In other words, individuals are not mandated to take part in treatment or services in order to have access to housing.⁶ Many studies have shown that Housing First results in higher housing retention rates, reduces the use of crisis services and improves individuals' health and social outcomes.⁷ A Housing First approach can apply in both short- and long-term interventions, several of which are described below.

Rapid re-housing. One of the most important solutions counties can employ to assist individuals returning to the community is rapid re-housing. Rapid re-housing programs provide temporary financial assistance and services to people experiencing homelessness and supportive services to help them obtain permanent housing.⁸ These programs offer a solution to the immediate problem of homelessness while allowing for assessments of an individual's needs (such as help obtaining employment) and provision of appropriate services.

Montgomery County, Ohio, rapidly re-housed 474 households at an average cost of \$1,233 in rental assistance. More than 90 percent of these households moved directly out of homelessness into permanent housing and 80 percent did not have a subsequent homeless episode.³³

Understand the law. County agencies can work with local landlords to ensure they understand the laws that apply to tenant screening policies and/or help them feel more comfortable renting to someone with a criminal history. In particular, landlords should be aware of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's guidance that makes clear that housing providers may be liable for discriminatory effects if they make rental decisions based on criminal history. This guidance states that housing providers cannot impose a blanket ban (one that doesn't consider factors such as the date of conviction, the underlying conduct, etc.) on any person with a conviction record.⁹

Master leases. County or non-profit service providers can hold "master leases," through which they lease units and then sub-lease those units to individuals.¹⁰ The county or non-profit organization, as lease holder, guarantees the rent will be paid and any issues will be quickly handled. Many counties across the country have successfully implemented this strategy, including **Huntingdon, Mifflin and Juniata counties** in Pennsylvania¹¹ and **Salt Lake County, Utah**.¹² Master leases can also be supplemented with services aimed at improving housing stability, such as training on rent payment and budgeting, housekeeping and apartment safety.



Supportive housing. Many justice-involved individuals with behavioral health issues can benefit from the provision of supportive housing. Supportive housing provides reliable and affordable housing with support services for people who would otherwise face difficulties staying housed;¹³ these services may include case management, coordination with health and behavioral health care providers, as well as assistance with employment, education, transportation and more.¹⁴ Supportive housing can be transitional or it can be permanent, based on an individual's needs. In **Hennepin County, Minn.**, six individuals spent 185 days in jail before being offered supportive housing, compared to only 24 days after receiving supportive housing.¹⁵ Those six participants used \$95,000 in services in the year prior to housing; in the year post-housing they used \$16,000 in services, for a savings of \$13,000 per person.

PHYSICAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Many individuals in jail have physical and behavioral health issues: People in jail are 1.19 times more likely to have hypertension and 2.57 times more likely to have hepatitis than the general population,¹⁶ and 64 percent of those in jail experience mental illness and 53 percent suffer from substance dependence or abuse.¹⁷ Forty percent of jail inmates with a chronic health condition take prescription medication while in jail.¹⁸ Ensuring that physical or behavioral health treatment continues in the community has been shown to reduce recidivism and been associated with lower health care costs, fewer hospitalizations, reduced emergency department use and decreased mortality.¹⁹

Continuity of care. One of the most important aspects of assisting individuals with health needs as they return home is ensuring continuity of care. County staff can assist with health connections, including scheduling medical appointments, making referrals to health and behavioral health service providers and making introductions to other support services. The professionals working to make these connections can be dedicated correctional staff, employees from county-run health or social services agencies or staff from community providers.²⁰

Medication-assisted treatment. For individuals with opioid use disorders, medication-assisted treatment (MAT) can be initiated in the jail and continued in the community upon release. Medication approved to treat opioid addiction, including methadone, naloxone and naltrexone, stabilizes the brain chemistry that triggers cravings, drug-seeking behaviors and use and blocks the effects of opioid use.²¹ SAMSHA advises the Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) approach to medication-assisted treatment.²² Using this approach, jails work with medical professionals to identify individuals who are diagnosed with an opioid use disorder. If an individual agrees to treatment, he or she begins receiving medication from licensed physicians and/or nurses while in jail. Because of the nature of the medication and the dosage frequency, individuals are connected with treatment and service providers before release to help ensure that the treatment continues and that a support network is in place.²³

Health care coverage. Counties should also work to connect justice-involved individuals to health care coverage. In states that have expanded Medicaid, many individuals in jail will be newly eligible for Medicaid and can be enrolled upon release, or even before release. For example, in **Bernalillo County, N.M.**, eligible inmates at the Metropolitan Detention Center are enrolled in Medicaid – their medical care cannot be covered while they are in jail, but they remain eligible for coverage and their benefits are “turned on” when they are released. Health care coverage can greatly increase an individual's treatment options post-release and enhance continuity of care.

In Monterey County, Calif., a study found that inmates from the county jail who received treatment for behavioral health disorders after release spent an average of 51.74 fewer days in jail per year than those who did not receive treatment.³⁴



Peer support services. For individuals returning to the community with behavioral health issues, another effective way to assist with reentry is through peer support. Peer support services are delivered by individuals who share common life experiences with the people they are serving. People with mental illnesses and substance use disorders have a unique capacity to help each other based on a shared affiliation and a deep understanding of this experience. Peer support specialists can be employed in a number of settings, including mobile crisis units, call-lines, crisis stabilization centers and crisis programs, and some states offer certification for peer support specialists.²⁵

TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Individuals returning to the community from jail – whether they have been convicted of a crime or not – often face many challenges finding employment or returning to their previous employment. Many employers will not hire a person who has an arrest record, even though an arrest alone should not be enough to deny employment.²⁶

Ban the box. One step counties can take to overcome this hurdle is to “ban the box,” or enact policies that prohibit asking about a criminal record in early stages of the job application process so that employers consider an applicant’s qualifications first. More than 40 counties across the country have passed such policies to give qualified individuals with a criminal record a fairer chance at employment in county positions.²⁷

On March 1, 2016, the **Cherokee County, Ga.**, Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution removing questions about conviction records from County employment applications, and delaying disclosure of records and background checks until after an interview has been conducted. The resolution states that any candidate with a conviction will be given the opportunity to demonstrate that the conviction should not be disqualifying for the position, and that an employer must consider the nature and gravity of the offense, the time passed since the offense and the nature of the job before making a hiring decision based on the applicant’s criminal history.³⁵

Workforce development boards. County criminal justice and other social service agencies serving individuals returning home should partner with local workforce development boards (WDBs) to assist these individuals. A 2015 NACo survey found that almost half (47 percent) of local WDBs operated reentry programs for adults or youth.²⁸ Local WDBs can join forces with many county departments, including social and human services, the sheriff and/or the probation department, to create and deliver reentry programs that provide workforce training and services to individuals who are currently or were formerly incarcerated.



Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Most local WDBs with reentry programs receive the largest share of their funding from federal agencies, particularly from the Department of Labor's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), as well as state and local grants.²⁹ WIOA can provide funding for a number of career services for people returning to the community from jail, including on-the-job training, which allows for local WDBs to pay up to 75 percent of wages for individuals in the program.³⁰ This program helps individuals earn income while developing important skills and helps private employers by providing employees at a lower cost.

In West Virginia, the Region VI Workforce Development Board is one of seven regional workforce boards and serves 13 counties in the northern part of the state. It is funded through a combination of sources, including WIOA and state grants. The board has grants that serve long-term unemployed individuals, which it uses to assist formerly incarcerated individuals. "Any time I go to a meeting, I remind everyone that we can count incarcerated adults as long-term unemployed, so long as they've been attached to the workforce at some point," says Barbara DeMary, executive director of the Region VI WDB.³⁶

For citations, visit the electronic version of this document at www.naco.org

TRANSPORTATION

Upon release from jail, a person's most immediate logistical concern is how to get where he or she needs to go. Many jails are located in rural or suburban areas in which public transportation is limited or not available at all, and even in urban areas many individuals are released after hours and thus have to wait until bus or train service resumes. Jail staff or community service providers should try to arrange for a family member, friend, case manager, probation officer or other appropriate individual meet the person at jail and take them where they need to go, whether it is home, a temporary housing location or directly to a health provider. Even after the immediate moment of release, lack of transportation options can be a major hindrance to individuals' efforts to successfully reenter the community. Again, the absence of public transportation options can restrict a person's ability to access community resources, get to a job or make pretrial services or probation appointments.

Transportation support or subsidies. Counties across the country are offering transportation assistance to individuals in many different ways. In **Johnson County, Kan.**, Community Corrections provides vans to transport individuals housed in its residential probation center to their work sites or into the community to search for employment opportunities. Johnson County also has an agreement with the county transportation system that provides residents with bus passes to get to their jobs.³¹ As part of the Adult Drug Court program in **Sacramento County, Calif.**, participants can receive bicycles to assist with transportation issues. Bicycles are donated by the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department, the California Highway Patrol and the non-profit organization Cycles for Hope, so the cost of the program is minimal, and the availability of bicycles has allowed participants to much more easily attend treatment, access education, get to jobs, visit family and more.³²





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