

Increased on-site programming will benefit inmates' return to society

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While re-entry and skill-building programs offered by the New Jersey Department of Corrections (NJDOC) at its 11 prisons are heavily used and generally viewed favorably by inmates, many anticipate a difficult return to society due to their underlying health conditions and concerns about finances and support systems.

To improve their chances for success in the community, a Rutgers researcher recommends that NJDOC adopt a policy of universal re-entry preparedness during each inmate's mandatory minimum term and a reallocation of funding to increase skill-building capacity on-site rather than in ultimately more costly halfway house programs.

Rutgers Professor Nancy Wolff, director of the Center for Behavioral Health Services and Criminal Justice Research, reaches those conclusions in a new study, *Re-entry Readiness of Men and Women Leaving New Jersey Prisons*. "Approximately 10,000 men and women leave New Jersey prisons each year. Many of them return to jail and prison for parole violations or new convictions within days, months or years post-release," Wolff observed. She added that the criminal justice system's current emphasis to "stop the revolving prison door" is on re-entry preparedness, with special funding under the federal Second Chance Act set aside to improve re-entry services around the country.

"While re-entry-related funding is flowing into states, its target efficiency and ultimate effectiveness in terms of public safety depend on whether it goes to the right people in the right places and in the right

ways," Wolff explained. "For this, it is critical to know the population - its needs, strengths and resources."

Wolff conducted a Re-entry Readiness Survey from June through August 2009 of 4,000 men and women in the state's prisons due for release within 24 months. Among the findings:

- "A sizable minority" of soon-to-be-released respondents had chronic health and/or [mental health problems](#) or chronic pain that would require follow-up treatment.
- A majority would be released with drug-related convictions that will constrain their ability to receive cash assistance, food stamps and public housing.
- More than one-third had no one helping them find housing or a job.
- More than one-quarter reported their ability to manage money, work for a living, be a responsible adult and control drug or alcohol problems as fair or poor.

Despite these impediments to success upon release, many respondents viewed favorably and utilized NJDOC re-entry and skill-building programs:

- Nearly 70 percent reported receiving needed behavioral health services.
- Nearly 70 percent knew about the STARS (Successful Transition and Re-entry Series) program; 80 percent of STARS enrollees or

graduates rated the experience good or higher and would encourage a peer to enroll.

- More than 80 percent admitted to social functioning skill programs rated instruction and materials good or higher.
- More than 87 percent of participants in educational and vocational programs rated instruction and materials good or higher.

To meet the twin goals of effectively preparing soon-to-be-released prisoners to "make good" and to protect the public, the department must re-examine how it spends limited funds dedicated to re-entry-related services, Wolff said. The report recommends that the skill-preparedness of inmates be maximized during their mandatory minimum terms.

Currently, NJDOC provides less than half the functioning, educational and vocational skill-building services needed by the soon-to-be-released population. To reduce recidivism and chances of compromising public safety, Wolff recommends creating a Re-entry Preparedness Checklist at all prisons that would measure key skills and resources expected upon release and monitor the progress of individual inmates toward these goals. Results would be posted on the department's website.

She also advocates for increased funding and skill-building capacity within NJDOC to the scale of need of prisoners during their mandatory minimum sentence, and to establish re-entry preparedness standards to determine if an inmate is eligible for parole consideration upon completion of his or her mandatory minimum term.

The research also finds that by keeping more re-entry-related services on site, rather than outsourced to halfway houses that provide community-based residential treatment for a minority of released inmates, NJDOC

can accrue considerable savings. The FY 2009 budget allocated about \$61 million for residential services that support an average daily halfway house population of more than 2,600 people.

"While it is often argued that a community-based halfway house bed is cheaper than a [prison](#) bed, this is true only if the services provided by the halfway house could not be provided by the Corrections Department while the inmate was serving the mandatory minimum term," Wolff said. "Adding off-site re-entry preparedness costs to the back end of a mandatory minimum sentence term adds \$23,000 per year per inmate."

Wolff added that reduced reliance on residential service providers will free up additional funds for on-site re-entry preparedness programming and pay for a Re-entry Preparedness Performance Monitoring System. She also called for a Community Service Vouchering program that will enable parolees to buy residential, vocational and treatment services as needed in the communities to which they are returning.

"Contracting for residential rehabilitation services has resulted in a concentration of services in such urban areas as Camden, Newark and Trenton," Wolff said. "A vouchering system is consistent with community reinvestment strategies and goals to distribute service capacity more evenly across the state."

More information: A copy of the report can be found at cbhs-cjr.rutgers.edu/announcements.html .

Provided by Rutgers University

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