RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORK-RELATED PRISON REENTRY

Over the last decade, work-related prison reentry programs have received an unprecedented amount of attention and hundreds of millions in federal dollars. But evaluations show that programs have not markedly increased the numbers of returning prisoners who successfully move into the workforce and that, further limited by perceived costs, there are too few programs to meet the need.

Addressing these concerns, the Program for Prison Reentry Strategies now recommends seven discrete strategies to make employment-related prison reentry more effective and affordable. These recommendations are the results of: analysis of research and program outcomes; information garnered from meetings with corrections staff, business owners and managers; site visits to correctional facilities; observation of community forums; writing and review by students and the Program Director from 2010 to 2012; and, additional research and writing in 2014. Each of the recommendations is grounded in past experience or program models developed and/or being tested by experts, by correctional agencies, and by business, industry and educators. Together, they point the direction in which work-related reentry must move in order to significantly improve employment prospects for returning prisoners, contributing to the economic health of disadvantaged communities in the process.

In brief, the Program for Prison Reentry Strategies recommends:

- That state Departments of Corrections enter into partnerships with private as well as other public entities to develop curricula, provide training and employ inmates in select private industries for which a prison setting offers unique advantages;
- That departments of corrections and general government look to share the cost of education and vocational training in proportion to the benefits that accrue to each partner; and
- That educational and vocational skills training be sufficiently technologically relevant to enable returning prisoners to compete for new and expanding jobs and that this training be coordinated with educational and vocational skills training made available to members of the disadvantaged neighborhoods to which a disproportionate number of prisoners return.

The seven recommended strategies are:

1. Teach communications and cognitive skills first, vocational and skills training second. For prisoners with a sufficient length of time to serve, corrections-based employment
reentry programs should proceed along a dual track or take a two-stage approach. The prisoner should first have the benefit of counseling, educational classes and programs which teach social, communications and cognitive skills. Once completed, the prisoner should have an opportunity to engage in serious vocational education and skills training. As suggested by correctional educators, this two-stage approach will more efficiently allocate resources and increase the efficacy of skills training.

2. **Raise the level of employment-related reentry programming.** Education and vocational training should be directed toward developing specific technologically-advanced skills sought by industry, similar to that afforded in multi-semester college-level educational and vocational training programs, apprenticeships and in-on-the-job training. This training should be open to inmates according to an assessment of ability.

3. **Enter into partnership with private businesses and industries.** Department of Corrections should collaborate directly with business and industry to design and deliver vocational and skills training that meets industries’ needs now and in the future. In pursuing this strategy, state departments of corrections have several options including:
   a. Engage in partnerships with for-profit businesses and industries, community colleges and organized labor to design and deliver technologically competent training.
   b. Seek private businesses which will train and employ prisoners inside or on work release, pay fair wages, and bring prisoners into the real world of competitive business. Reinvigorate the current Prison Industries Enhancement (PIE) program.
   c. Facilitate entrepreneurship by providing motivated returning prisoners instruction, counseling and access to social entrepreneurs and market-based credit or micro-financing.

4. **Focus on new and future jobs.** The impacts of climate change, deteriorating public housing and a crumbling infrastructure will inevitably require large public and private expenditures, some in support of experimental or high-risk projects, leading to the creation of thousands of jobs requiring new skills. These are the jobs for which prisoners should be trained and qualified to work.

5. **Negotiate cost sharing.** Instead of shouldering the entire cost of educational and vocational training, corrections should negotiate shared costs on a fairly-apportioned cost-benefit basis with general government, businesses and unions who need trained workers and returning prisoners who will benefit from training, much as is done informally in the private sector.

6. **Integrate educational and vocational skills training in prison with educational and vocational skills training in the community.** Where applicable, continued educational and skill training should be part of a returning prisoners’ parole or release plan. Integrated and coordinated programming will result in efficiencies, more specialized training, and smoother transitions and continuity as returning prisoners and other members of disadvantaged communities improve their ability to compete in an increasingly technological work place.

7. **Build political support for employment-related programming in prisons and in communities.** Community and civil rights advocates, organized labor and Worker’s
Alliances that represent people in families and communities most affected by mass incarceration are called upon to take up the cause of increasing access to education and technologically-relevant vocational training for all members of disadvantaged communities including returning prisoners, not only to improve job opportunities for returning prisoners but to improve economic development for the entire community and to reduce income inequality.

The work upon which these recommendations are based is described, and additional resources including links to relevant bibliographies and organizations engaged in employment-related reentry may be found, on the Program for Prisoner Reentry Strategies web pages at:  
http://bit.ly/1MZxExu

These recommendations are similar to those set forth in more detail in a position paper prepared for the Open Society Foundations, The Returning Prisoner and the Future of Work, accessible through the Program for Prisoner Reentry Strategies web pages or by downloading directly from:  
http://bit.ly/1FpM6fF

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