MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF EMPLOYMENT-RELATED PRISONER REENTRY IN A RECESSION

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11 January 2010
Successful prisoner reentry is absolutely vital to the life prospects of formerly incarcerated individuals, the safety and economic well-being of their families and communities, and the integrity of our criminal justice system.

Over the past decade, prisoner reentry has increasingly been recognized as a way to mitigate the United State’s exceptionally high rate of incarceration. As a result, policies and programs designed to help prisoners and jailed inmates negotiate their reentry have drawn an enthusiastic response from private foundations and federal agencies. In nearly every state, public and private support is now underwriting an impressive prisoner reentry infrastructure and the establishment of innovative new programs.

Yet prisoner reentry approaches crisis:

- The root of the crisis lies in the fact that, with few important exceptions, employment-related prisoner reentry programs and services have not taken the realities of the recession into account. Job preparedness techniques that were effective before the recession, when unemployment was low and there were only 1.7 applicants for each job, are unlikely to be as useful for returning prisoners now that there are 6.1 or more applicants for each job and unemployment at its lowest measure tops 10%.

- The effectiveness of some established employment-related reentry program models is likely to be less than has been claimed. A number of published evaluations and reports cited to show that the rate at which returning prisoners in reentry programs obtain lasting jobs or by which recidivism is reduced are based either on preliminary data or on results achieved prior to the onset of the recession, or both. Anecdotally many programs are now reporting less success in placing prisoners into jobs than before the recession. If these preliminary conclusions are confirmed by objective studies and evaluations currently underway, we will be left with a poor track record for programs we know are important and reentry programming will stand to lose political support as a result.

- The costs of the more effective employment-related reentry programs raise questions about the political viability of these programs down the road, especially if overall success rates do not improve. The most effective employment-related reentry programs are expensive. New programs require additional costs which are not immediately offset by corrections savings. Bringing employment-related prisoner reentry to scale nationally would require some $1.4 billion in new funds, of which the Second Chance Act and other federal funding provides less than 5%.

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• Many policy-makers have overly high expectations about the contribution that employment-related prisoner reentry can make to the budget-driven goal of reducing incarceration by reducing recidivism. It is not clear that employment-related prisoner reentry programs can meet these expectations. Reliance upon prisoner reentry to reduce incarceration has encouraged politicians to ignore effective and less costly strategies for reducing incarceration. Loss of program funds for drug treatment, educational programs and community-based services are likely to result in off-setting increases in recidivism.

My research shows that the concerns identified above can be addressed, and crisis averted. Even in the face of this recession, it is still possible to improve program outcomes and cost-effectiveness by changing program models, revamping corrections procedures and programs, engaging the creativity and energy of private enterprise, and merging our efforts with those being put forth to restore and revitalize a troubled, uncertain American economy.

Strategies to achieve these goals include:

• Setting appropriate goals for employment-related prisoner reentry programs. Policy-makers must utilize the full array of programs and reforms, including bail bond reform, increased use of diversion programs, community-based drug treatment and mental health services, problem-solving courts, sentencing reforms, back-end discretionary release programs and parole reforms to achieve significant reductions in incarceration at affordable costs. More expensive employment-related prisoner reentry programs should be reserved for prisoners who for public safety or sound policy reasons must be incarcerated and for whom participation will be reasonably likely to lead to employment after release.

• Integrating prisoner reentry and jobs creation strategies. The fundamental new strategy for employment-related prisoner reentry is to identify new and emerging jobs for which there is likely to be demand for workers, prepare prisoners for those jobs, and then to connect prisoners with those jobs at the time and place they become available. Likely sources of jobs will include green industries, new and emerging businesses, small businesses, and community based entrepreneurial enterprises. Identifying these jobs involves creativity, vision, and -- in a world in which the future of the American economy is yet to be determined -- a willingness to proceed in the spirit of venture capitalism.

• Engaging private businesses and employers as interested partners who stand to gain by training and hiring returning prisoners for new and emerging jobs. The goal is to draw on the creativity and energy of American business as it finds its place in a changed world economy.

• Developing programs that convert returning prisoners into entrepreneurs and participants in community-based businesses. We need programs that identify able, motivated prisoners, provide orientation and training, and connect them with inspired, market-savvy local entrepreneurs who are creating new businesses and employment opportunities within the same under-served communities to which many prisoners return.

• Changing corrections’ traditional methods and practices. Corrections departments will need to reconsider fundamentals such as inmate classification and housing assignments. Corrections administrators must be willing to respond to the needs of potential employers
by shaping vocational training and administering work release or early release to meet the needs of their business partners. Parole supervision must facilitate, not hinder, employment.

- **Advocacy for government incentives to business.** We will seek out and advocate ways in which the administration of federal grants, allocation of stimulus (ARRA) funds, and use of state and federal tax credits and deductions and small business loans can provide incentives for industries, small businesses and community based entrepreneurial enterprises to train and/or hire prisoners.

- **Providing as much training and preparation during the prisoner’s incarceration as possible.** Using the time that a prisoner must be incarcerated for reentry programming has many advantages and will minimize the expense of providing subsidized housing or transitional job programs for prisoners after they are released.

The crisis confronting employment-related prisoner reentry cannot be separated from the crisis that confronts the American economy. The loss of jobs overseas, the displacement of entire industries which were once the mainstay of the American middle class, and the shift among service and technical, manufacturing and health care jobs has created a vacuum in the domestic job market. Many of the kinds of jobs that felons and returning prisoners traditionally filled are gone. But so too are millions of jobs that middle class Americans with no criminal history used to fill. The fate of returning prisoners seeking work is inextricably linked, along with that of all Americans seeking work, to the future of the American economy.

Therefore, a crucial step in meeting the challenge of prisoner reentry in a post-recession economy entails forging an alliance with the economists and think tanks who have been calling for government action and policies favoring jobs creation. With 30 million unemployed and under-employed to consider, these advocates for economic reforms and government policies in support of jobs creation have little reason to take on the unpopular cause of figuring out how to gain employment for convicted criminals. Generally they have not done so. But the reentry effort needs their help, and it does have something to offer.

The heavy concentration of returning prisoners (and convicted felons) in some of the same urban and minority communities that suffer most from job loss means that success in moving returning prisoners and convicted felons into good jobs will produce an appreciable increase in expendable income, stability and relief from government support for those troubled communities. To a disproportionate degree, economic and social stability in these communities depends upon successful prisoner reentry. This should be reason enough for economists at progressive think tanks and other advocates for jobs creation to endorse the goal of improving employment for returning prisoners and convicted felons, join in shaping strategies to accomplish this goal, and to include initiatives such as federal tax credits and other incentives for businesses that train or hire returning prisoners in their policy recommendations.

Indeed, employment-related prisoner reentry, like the rest of America, must overcome the challenge of jobs creation in a post-recession economy if it is to succeed. And as is true for the rest of America, there is no guarantee of success – but there is certainty of failure if we do not make the effort.