Strengthening Relationships and Families Following Incarceration
Webinar Question and Answer (Q&A)
December 10, 2013, 2:00 pm ET

Question: What, if any, differences are there in family services offered during incarceration and those offered upon release? Are there differences in programs that engage only the incarcerated individual and those engaging families on the outside?

Answer: Chris Warland, Manager of Program Quality and Technical Assistance, National Transitional Jobs Network:

I have talked to a lot of providers about making the connection between pre- and post-release services. For example, I know a lot of available grant opportunities for serving people reentering communities from prison actually require—as part of the program design—engagement before someone is released, as well as after. Quite often, the emphasis of those programs is on establishing a mentoring relationship so that an individual has some continuity pre- and post-release with a mentor that's providing them with guidance on a one-on-one level. And I think that is based in research evidence showing that mentoring is a strongly evidence-based practice or program component for supporting successful reentry. I've also heard a lot about the importance of very strong discharge planning in general and providing as many planning services as possible for an individual prior to release. What I don't know as much about are specifically what kinds of family reconciliation services take place pre- and post-release, but I did see as part of our literature review that incarcerated individuals who receive relationship- or family-focused services pre-release do show better post-release outcomes as far as measures of recidivism and things like that. With a little bit more time, I'd be happy to revisit some of the source material that we used to reach those conclusions and to identify exactly what was involved in those kinds of pre-release family and relationship programs.

Question: What support systems do men have when they are released from prison?

Answer: Geneva Rodriguez, Surveillance Officer, Maricopa County Adult Probation:

Good question. I love that question. We actually heard from inmates who said that they would like to have a support group of just inmates to talk about the stresses and anxieties of day-to-day life after being released in the first three to six months. It is possible; there are agencies out there that provide that type of network. For instance, we have the Father Matters program, we have Native American Fatherhood program, Women's Resource Center, and Native American Connections. They help us out with group discussions with ex-offenders and that type of thing. But we also have to be a little bit cautious because these clients' probation requirements say they are not to hang around with other offenders. So, we try and balance that as best as is possible. We make sure that the support groups are done in the correct manner—that there's a
counselor involved, that there’s curriculum involved, that there’s an agenda involved—so when they do gather together to discuss what they need/want to discuss, then it's sanctioned with probation and the court. For other individuals who are working on similar issues, I would suggest going to the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. They have some curricula that can help you get started with those types of groups, if that's something you're hoping to start within your State, county, or agency. I'm lucky enough to have agencies in place that I can refer clients to and, as long as it's done in the manner the court requested, everything's good to go.

Question: What specific topics are important to cover when teaching a parenting class to women in jail who will be released soon?

Answer: Geneva Rodriguez, Surveillance Officer, Maricopa County Adult Probation:

One of the main topics that we do go over with women is “the guilt factor.” We spend a lot of time with them discussing that sometimes their kids will verbally say it. Some kids are too young to say anything, but the women have guilt from not being there for the first time they walked, for having them put into foster care, that type of thing. So we target the guilt issue: how to deal with it; how to move on; how to confront the child once the child has mentioned that he/she is upset with the parent (mentioning that they weren't there for their birthday or whatever the case is). We do this because not dealing with the guilt is very defeating for parents and they have a tendency to then self-medicate, and that's exactly where we don't want them to go. So, the guilt factor is number one. Number two is about finances. I think Chris can talk about that a little more, but how to deal with money and if, before entering the Department of Corrections (DOC), they had a job with money and income coming in and the only person they had to take care of was themselves. Now they have a family of two, three, or four infants that need diapers, etc. and they need to know how to budget for that type of thing. The third thing we talk about is discipline. When they get out, what role will be played by whom? Who is the provider? Who is the disciplinarian? Will these responsibilities be shared? We encourage them to make sure that those types of decisions are dealt with before they enter the family network so that everyone knows their roles.

Chris Warland, Manager of Program Quality and Technical Assistance, National Transitional Jobs Network:

The only thing that I really have to add is that in the course of doing the research for the Healthy Relationships, Employment, and Reentry brief (available at http://tinyurl.com/reentry-brief-p) we looked into the topic of incarcerated mothers specifically. We didn't find very much in the literature about effective practices in helping incarcerated mothers with things like family reconciliation. All we really found was a description of just how harmful it can be. One of the papers that we looked at described the separation of a mother from her children as absolutely the most damaging aspect of an individual's incarceration and that it has negative impacts such as increased divorce rates, reducing the likelihood that a woman will reside with the father of her children, strains on mother/child relationships, and also a great deal of stigma. So, these are all really profoundly negative things that happen when mothers are incarcerated and
separated from their children. And I'm very happy to hear that Geneva has some very concrete recommendations on ways to address and mitigate some of these issues as mothers get ready to get out and are preparing for their return home. So, thanks very much for that.

**Question:** Are any of you aware of literature geared towards incarcerated mothers, especially mothers in short-term incarceration (weeks or months, instead of years)?

**Answer:** Chris Warland, Manager of Program Quality and Technical Assistance, National Transitional Jobs Network:

You know, as I mentioned, when we were in the process of researching the brief and looking into this topic, we really didn't discover a whole lot of useful recommendations for how to address the needs of incarcerated mothers. Based on what we found from looking at the academic literature, there really does seem to be a lack of evidence about what works. What we didn't do as much of is look into what individual program providers are doing on the ground and what their promising practices are. So I think that it's quite likely that there are additional services being provided in lots of other locations, similar to what Geneva has been describing, and it would just be a matter of doing a little bit more legwork to identify what those are and seek those out. You know, in my work, I quite often come up against an absence of evidence-based practices to address a particular issue, but that doesn't mean that there are not lots of promising practices out there that providers are using to effectively serve the people that they work with. So as far as literature, curricula, things like that [about mothers in short-term incarceration], I can't speak to any of that right now, although I don't doubt that some of those exist.

Geneva Rodriguez, Surveillance Officer, Maricopa County Adult Probation:

Well, I can tell you that I currently work in the female prison here in Arizona. And a lot of the stuff that we go over with inmates is stuff that we came up with ourselves based on what the inmates outside suggested that we discuss. So, we didn't actually have a curriculum, but we made materials based off of feedback we got from the inmates and from the moms about what they were dealing with. At first, it was quite a scramble trying to figure out, “Well how do we help her with this situation? How do we help her get through certain things?” because things we didn't really think we needed to consider came up. For example, the guilt thing: we knew that there was going to be some guilt issues, but we thought, “Okay, well, guilt issues, she'll get over it.” Well, the guilt really affected female clients and caused them to regress from their children to a point where they didn't want to be around their children because every time they were with them they felt guilty or were reminded the guilt. So those were little topics that we then started integrating into the program as we created it on our own. Like Chris said, I'm sure there are things out there. I just haven't come across them. We just kind of made them up on our own, on a case-by-case basis, and then integrated them into our program.

**Question:** What are good topics to get fathers more involved with their children when the relationship with the mother is not a good one?
Geneva Rodriguez, Surveillance Officer, Maricopa County Adult Probation:

I've actually run into that situation, where I've had fathers who are more active in the relationship with their children than the mothers are and, in some cases, the mother is still in prison and he's getting out a year or several months before she is. In the meantime, the mother has actually given up her rights and he now has full custody. So, when it comes to the father being a single father, we actually have some wonderful programs where we have a group of men getting together and discussing these types of issues. We have groups for ex-offenders who are just trying to get by day-to-day, but we also have groups designed to help single fathers out. Father Matters is actually an agency we use was specifically for this purpose: they have a support group, they also help out with child's clothing, activities to do with your kids—it's a monthly calendar that says, “Sunday take them to the park, Monday read them a book,” that type of thing—and with mentorship. They also help out with getting an apartment, employment, basic furniture, and that type of thing. So we've kind of lucked out in that situation when it comes to single fathers. But in the last couple of years since 2013, I've actually run into quite a few fathers who are the sole parent now and they're kind of clueless—they're committed, but they're clueless—and having collaboration with those types of agencies is very important because I, as an officer, have very little knowledge on how to support them, so having those agencies to rely on really comes in handy.

Chris, do you all have a timeline for successful re-entry transition (i.e. employment outcomes)? Does this fit the 30, 60, 90 day follow-up?

Chris Warland, Manager of Program Quality and Technical Assistance, National Transitional Jobs Network:

Realistic timeframes for successful transition into unsubsidized employment vary widely for individuals exiting incarceration, based on factors including the barriers to employment faced by the individual and the skills and strengths the individual brings to the job search. Additionally, the current state of the labor market and pervasive discrimination against people with criminal records make securing employment a challenging prospect for anyone who has been incarcerated. One thing we are pretty certain of is that rapid placement in employment after release, whether in competitive employment or a subsidized job, appears to have strong impacts on an individual's successful reentry. We think this is a good reason to continue and expand transitional job opportunities for returning citizens—in addition to providing work experience and skill development, the stability provided by earned income and the structure provided by employment helps individuals avoid recidivating. Most transitional jobs programs serving people exiting incarceration provide subsidized employment for three to nine months, with job search assistance taking place throughout that period to help ensure a successful transition to unsubsidized employment.

What can you tell me about possible funding for fatherhood or child support, or even re-entry grants?
Answer: Robyn Cenizal, CFLE, Project Director, National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families:

The best source of accurate information regarding these federal grants and others is Grants.gov. The website provides information related to 26 grant-making federal agencies in one location. Access is free and the website even offers a tutorial video to help newcomers better navigate the site.

Question: What kinds of changes or adjustments (if any) did Geneva’s department incorporate after their experience in the Resource Center’s Integration Institute training?

Answer: Geneva Rodriguez, Surveillance Officer, Maricopa County Adult Probation:

We learned early on that family involvement and support is needed, but we didn’t know how to go about starting a program. The Institute helped us create a road map on which steps to take in reaching out to other family treatment providers. The guide helped identify what type of assistance we needed and to how to deal with different family issues. The Resource Center has continued to help us with outside resources from other states and institutes dealing with the same re-entry issues.

Question: What do you do when it is the parole officer who is pushing the offender to get a job quickly instead of the family? How does one support the offender or talk with the parole officer about this concern?

Answer: Geneva Rodriguez, Surveillance Officer, Maricopa County Adult Probation:

Remember that the mission of Probation/Parole is to make the person a productive member of society. In addition, each officer has a supervisor and judge they must report their client’s individual progress to on a regular basis.

One of the interesting issues with our department is exactly what you are talking about, the parole/probation officer (PO) not giving the individual enough time to adjust to his surroundings. In some cases, that can do more harm than good. This has more to do with the officer’s training and the culture of the agency. In those cases you might have to get the officer’s supervisor involved and discuss the issues. Sometimes, bringing up the individual’s anxiety and feeling of being overwhelmed can explain what the PO thought was ambivalence towards job search/employment. Requesting one or two weeks for adjustment is not uncommon, we often have our client’s work at local community service projects or attend job skills classes to help them adjust and get back in to the groove of working with others.

If you do want to try to have your family member ask for adjustment time be sure to have a plan on what he will be doing with his time. Staying a home is ok the first two days, but at some point they will have to interact with the community again. Perhaps, the family could bring him a job application to complete at home or help him apply on-line during those first few days.
Question: Where can I find the slides from this webinar?
Answer: Visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org/events-archive to download a copy of the slides, recording, transcript, and a Q&A document from this webinar.

Question: Who should I contact if I have more questions about this webinar?
Answer: Visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website at www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org or email us at info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org.