



Supporting Reentry Programs

A Guide for Program Officers

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Foreword

by Jenny Achilles, Senior Program Officer

As a higher education program officer without a background in the criminal justice or justice reform spaces, I have faced a steep learning curve as the Trellis Foundation expands our work in prison education programs and re-entry education supports.

I imagine you may share my need for guidance. Even if your foundation doesn't focus on supporting formerly incarcerated individuals, your priority focus likely does. In this guide, we are writing as postsecondary completion funders supporting low-income students and students of color so that we will center these populations. However, any topical area focused on underrepresented populations can likely relate. Do you prioritize more equitable outcomes for historically marginalized populations? Then this guide is for you! Those of us seeking equity of educational outcomes for students of color must recognize their over-representation in the justice system. Supporting educational opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals is critical to our equity goals.

Fortunately for the Foundation, Alexa Garza joined our team as a graduate fellow. Her lived experience, coupled with her policy advocacy training, has made her an invaluable resource for the Foundation. Through this guide, we hope to share what we have learned with her and help other program officers learn alongside us. While there is much overlap in the methods and principles of grantmaking for organizations focused on supporting re-entry for formerly incarcerated individuals, the space has some key differences from other work focused on connecting adults to educational and career advancement opportunities. For example, students may experience logistical barriers to their studies based on parole requirements. In addition, the dehumanizing lens that much of society uses toward formerly incarcerated individuals creates unique logistical and psychological barriers.

We are deeply grateful to Alexa for her patience in explaining these barriers and helping us readjust our thinking and our language. Special thanks also to our advance readers: Molly Lasagna (Ascendium Education Group) and Mary Gould (Sunshine Lady Foundation).

We invite you to join us in our quest to improve our support for formerly incarcerated individuals in our communities.

About the Author

Alexa Garza served as a 2023 Graduate Fellow with Trellis Foundation and Education Trust. She is a student at Texas Woman's University, pursuing a master's degree in business with an emphasis on Women in Leadership. Her passion for advocacy is rooted in her personal experience of incarceration and the stigma she faced in her community upon release. Alexa earned a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from Tarleton State University and completed certification through the Library of Congress as a braille transcriber.

Introduction

Transitioning from incarceration into society is a critical phase for individuals, as it presents many challenges and opportunities. Federal and state funding alone is often insufficient to meet the needs of those transitioning from incarceration back into the community. This is where philanthropy steps in to bridge the gap. Philanthropy brings more than just financial resources to the table. It also brings expertise, networks, and innovative ideas that can enhance the effectiveness of reentry programs.

Investing in reentry programs aligns with the principles of social justice and equity. Most incarcerated individuals have limited access to quality education during confinement, including postsecondary opportunities. By supporting reentry programs, funders provide these individuals with access to resources, training, and counseling, opening avenues for personal growth and skill development eventually leading to higher education opportunities and economic mobility.

The reality of the collateral consequences of an individual's actions extends far beyond the prison walls. A person's ability to attain financial stability and upward mobility contributes to their well-being, strengthens community connections, and reduces recidivism rates. Economic mobility is beyond just earning money; it is an investment in personal development, taking every opportunity to acquire new skills and expand their knowledge base.

Given this complexity and the importance of successful reentry programs in promoting social integration, ***Supporting Reentry Programs: A Guide for Program Officers*** is intended as a reference for program officers to understand common trends, challenges, and best practices and includes information on:

- Challenges and inequities that surface during reentry
- Types of organizations in the reentry space
- Different approaches to delivering reentry services
- Recommendations for measuring success

Person-Centered Language

Using language that reduces individuals to their current or previous incarceration status can perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatization. It leads to generalizations that all individuals who have committed crimes are inherently bad or dangerous, disregarding the complex factors contributing to involvement with the justice system, such as socio-economic conditions, mental health issues, or systemic injustices.

Focusing on a person's criminal history can also perpetuate a cycle of shame and discouragement, making it harder for them to thrive in the present and future.

Person-centered language acknowledges that individuals who have committed felonies are not defined solely by their actions or experiences; they are human beings with complex lives and experiences.

Instead of using terms like "felon" or "criminal," opt for phrases such as "individuals with a criminal record;" "formerly incarcerated individuals;" or "people who have been involved with the justice system."

Adopting this approach creates a more inclusive dialogue that encourages empathy and promotes better treatment options for those who have paid their debt to society.

Reentry Challenges & Inequities

A successful reentry starts the moment incarceration begins, and ongoing, long-term services are crucial for formerly incarcerated individuals to achieve economic stability and independence. Understanding the significance of reentry services helps break down societal stigmas associated with incarceration. Many people hold negative stereotypes about those who have been in prison, assuming they are dangerous or irredeemable. However, recognizing the importance of reentry services acknowledges that individuals released from confinement deserve a fair chance at rebuilding their lives and reintegrating into their communities. Some core challenges individuals encounter as they transition from incarceration are employment, education, and housing.



EMPLOYMENT: The benefits of employment include economic stability and a sense of purpose. However, the type of employment and wage earned make a significant difference in successful reentry. In Texas, gainful employment is a requirement for parole. Enrollment in an educational system cannot be substituted for employment to satisfy the requirements of parole/probation. Individuals are most often released under **probation or parole supervision**. Probation is a court-imposed sentence that, subject to stated conditions and restrictions, releases an individual into the community instead of confining them to jail or prison. Parole supervision is conditional release requiring individuals to follow specific requirements, such as securing housing.

Standard electronic **monitoring requirements**, such as mandatory curfews or pre-approved scheduled outings, may make it difficult for those impacted by the justice system to find family-supporting jobs, limiting their capacity to pay off court-related debt and pursue time-consuming educational opportunities.

Lack of proper **identification** hinders reentry success, as most employment opportunities require identification. While some states have a process to provide state identification and social security cards upon release, these items are often unavailable due to the inability to verify vital statistics such as correct last name, especially if divorced, and birthplace. Policies could ensure that every released individual receives their state identification and social security card to enable an easier transition and remove the stress of obtaining these documents without the knowledge or resources.

Widespread use of **criminal background checks** has resulted in individuals with former convictions being effectively removed from the employment procedure and specific housing options. This puts even more pressure on people to take any job after being released from prison rather than concentrating on finding a position that offers long-term stability and progress.

Some professions have **state licensing requirements** that create barriers to employment, which are frequently unknown to incarcerated students. Prisons often fail to ensure transparency and prepare incarcerated individuals for the inevitable roadblocks they may face in pursuing licensed professions after release. Criminal record expungement is a complicated and costly process many people would benefit from but cannot achieve.



EDUCATION: Education is not just a privilege but a fundamental right that should be accessible to everyone. It is essential in determining whether newly released individuals can secure upward mobility employment. The training a person participates in during incarceration provides the skills they most depend on upon release. However, transferring these skills into marketable qualities can be challenging for individuals transitioning back into their communities.

Barriers to completing an education program persist in most correctional facilities, such as inadequate Internet access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, correctional educational programming was delayed for months as many units did not allow visitors, including in-person instructors.

In the past, online digital learning involved students, supervised by a security guard, listening to a recorded lecture in a computer lab while working on the assigned task. This setting was not conducive to learning as there was little interaction between the pupils and the instructor. Historically, digital learning options have not kept pace with best practices in instruction technique and have not mirrored the quality and intellectual engagement of in-person and virtual options offered to students outside of the prison system.

During reentry, access to the necessary technology to engage in online learning, such as Internet access, can create challenges. In addition, recently released individuals, especially those with long sentences, may need digital literacy training to use virtual platforms and access virtual learning opportunities successfully. Colleges do not usually account for this lack of digital knowledge. Digital learning centers should be available to aid all students struggling because of the digital divide, including formerly incarcerated individuals.

Lastly, personal and family obligations can hinder education and skill acquisition. Balancing responsibilities such as childcare and familial expectations can limit an individual's ability to dedicate time and resources to pursuing further education or skill development. These competing priorities can make it challenging for individuals to focus on acquiring the necessary qualifications.

Pell Grants

While the expansion of federal Pell Grants creates an opportunity for eligible incarcerated students to enroll in post-secondary education, other funding streams are needed to strengthen and expand existing college prison programs to hire adequate staff, facilitate the transition to outside campuses, and ensure students are being offered a quality education comparable to that of the outside campus.

Not all incarcerated individuals will be eligible to receive Pell Grants. Those who qualify can receive Pell Grants for no more than 12 terms or the equivalent (roughly six years). Given the more limited availability of classes in prison programs, this may be inadequate.



HOUSING: A stable, secure home while navigating life outside is essential. Safe housing, particularly when accompanied by supportive services, can help reduce recidivism and decrease further involvement in the criminal justice system.

While colleges and universities generally prioritize housing options for their students, it is relatively uncommon for these institutions to offer housing for people with a criminal conviction. Due to the perceived risk of housing individuals with criminal backgrounds on campus, many higher education institutions do not allow formerly incarcerated people to live there. A few colleges and universities are creating ways to provide specialized accommodations for this population.

For many people who are formerly incarcerated, alternative housing options are halfway and transitional housing. These tend to be located far from campus and usually in high-poverty neighborhoods. Some require residents to comply with mandatory meetings that interfere with class times and “blackout periods” on electronic devices, hindering educational studies.

Reentry is a process that manifests all the inequities in our society, along with unique challenges explicitly created by the justice system and our cultural biases. Recognizing the intersectional needs of all individuals and developing responsive approaches promotes inclusive and impactful reintegration efforts. By adopting a more comprehensive approach, philanthropy can facilitate more equitable access to the support and resources needed to break the cycle of incarceration and support successful reintegration into society.

Racial and Ethnic Inequity

One of the critical reasons race and ethnicity are essential when considering reentry organizations and programs is the disproportionate representation of people of color in the criminal justice system. The overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in prisons highlights the need for targeted programs and resources that address the unique barriers they face in reentering society.

Gender Inequity

Keeping gender inequities in mind is also essential, as many reentry programs predominantly focus on men, and women have different reentry needs. While women constitute a smaller percentage of the overall prison population than men, they often face unique challenges upon reentry into society. Rehabilitation programs, job training, educational opportunities, and mental health services specifically tailored for women post-incarceration are often scarce.

Many women who have been incarcerated face difficulties in reestablishing relationships with their families, particularly their children. Separation from their children during incarceration can strain relationships and lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation. Additionally, the challenges posed by maintaining custody arrangements and finding stable housing often prove overwhelming.

Women also have unique physical health needs, including reproductive healthcare and management of menopause, but often lack access to proper healthcare.

Type of Conviction

The scope of reentry services can vary significantly depending on the nature of the offense committed, particularly for those with aggravated offenses. Aggravated offenses generally include more harmful, dangerous, or violent acts than their non-aggravated counterparts. For individuals incarcerated for long periods, a more comprehensive suite of reentry services may be required for successful reintegration compared to those imprisoned for short durations. Aggravated offenses may also be ineligible for government assistance programs, and many states have laws restricting those individuals' rights to participate in certain activities, such as teaching or joining the military. Furthermore, aggravated offenses may be subject to a greater degree of monitoring compared to those with non-violent offenses.

Foundations may be tempted to “play it safe” and focus their support on organizations that support individuals with less severe convictions, and you may encounter organizations that only serve individuals with specific types of convictions.

This approach misses important social justice imperatives and the persistent disparities within the justice system. It is unjust to make assumptions or judge someone solely based on their convictions, and it undermines the goal of reentry services to limit eligibility for services to individuals with only select convictions.

Philanthropy can set a standard by embracing initiatives that support all individuals with convictions, equipping them with essential skills to improve their employability and secure stable livelihoods.

Reentry Organizations

Funders will encounter both organizations with broad missions that provide services utilized by formerly incarcerated individuals and other organizations that focus on one aspect of reentry, such as digital literacy skills. Reentry organizations stand apart from other groups or programs through their specialized focus on assisting individuals who have been incarcerated. By offering tailored services, including housing support, employment assistance, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, and educational programs, these organizations play a crucial role in supporting the successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into society.

ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

The following considerations are intended to assist funders in identifying potential capacity issues rather than assessing whether to fund a specific organization.

Given the grassroots, community-based nature of many organizations working in the reentry space, there will be opportunities to work with grantees on organizational capacity and growth. You will find that organizations are often seeking funding to scale up or expand proven approaches.

Sustainable Model

- Does the organization have a long-term plan in place?
- Does the organization demonstrate the potential for replicating its model or expanding its services to reach a larger population?
- Is the organization agile and adaptable, able to adjust its strategies based on emerging needs and the evolving landscape of reentry service?
- Does the organization have a solid understanding of the challenges faced by individuals reentering society after incarceration?
- Do they have a comprehensive plan to address these challenges?
- Small organizations may need additional funding or technical assistance for organizational capacity building.
- Program officers may need to dedicate time to helping the organization navigate the foundation's processes.

Impact

- Does the organization have a definition of positive outcomes and have data to support their definition of success?
- Does the organization measure and report its progress?

Focus

- Does the organization have a clear and well-defined mission and track record of successfully achieving its goals?
- Is it clear from their messaging which services they provide themselves (versus services for which they provide referrals) and how services are provided?

Collaboration

- Does the organization include individuals with lived experience in program design and decision-making?
- Does the organization compensate former or currently incarcerated participants for sharing their time and expertise?
- Does the organization use person-centered language when referring to the reentry population?
- Has the organization reviewed the risks and benefits of partnerships with correctional institutions and state agencies?
- What is its reputation among other criminal justice/ re-entry organizations and stakeholders?
- Is the organization participating in community events?

TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS

The three most common types of organizations in the reentry space are criminal justice advocacy, faith-based, and community-based groups. While these organizations share certain commonalities, there are critical differences in their typical approach. The specific attributes of each organization type are discussed in detail below.

Criminal justice advocacy organizations involve people impacted by the justice system and advocates dedicated to reforming the criminal justice system. While these organizations don't exclusively focus on reentry, these advocates provide relationships facilitating reentry.

Criminal justice advocacy organizations typically offer the following:

- Regular virtual meetings to discuss criminal justice issues and provide space to discuss common reentry barriers.
- Community forums in cities to educate the public on advocating for individuals inside prisons and empowering individuals with lived experience to address the systemic barriers they face by influencing policy change.
- Support networks of justice-impacted individuals navigating or have navigated reentry and opportunities to build new professional contacts and skills (best practices in the field would recommend that lived-experience advocates are compensated for their time and expertise).

Questions to Consider:

- To what extent does the organization authentically empower individuals to co-create a policy agenda? Providing adequate resources for authentic participation is necessary for individuals to effectively co-create a policy agenda. Policymakers and institutions must establish mechanisms that encourage continuous citizen involvement at every stage of the policy cycle, such as problem identification, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Many organizations have historically called on individuals with lived experience to share their stories as a public relations tool instead of involving them in power-sharing and creating policy.
- If the organization asks individuals to share their personal experiences, is this done sensitively to avoid pressuring or exploiting them? Reentry organizations may fail to adequately educate returning citizens about the potential risks and impacts of sharing their personal experiences publicly.
- How does the organization use stories? Is there a mutual benefit to the storyteller, or are they used as leverage in marketing and fundraising campaigns without compensating the individual?
- Does the organization censor or filter out advocacy topics that are deemed too controversial either for the community or for the organization's board members?

Faith-based organizations have initiatives designed to help incarcerated individuals with the support of religious organizations and principles. They seek to provide the tools, resources, and spiritual guidance needed for a successful transition, focusing on personal growth, healing, and transformation. One key component of faith-based reentry programs is addressing the underlying causes of criminal behavior through spiritual development.

Questions to Consider:

- Does the organization's assistance come with strict religious guidelines, requiring participants to adhere to specific spiritual practices and teachings? Being forced to conform can be emotionally overwhelming for individuals who do not identify with or believe in these faiths.
- Do participants have to follow strict guidelines? In certain instances, participants may feel "imprisoned" again by participation. This lack of freedom could hinder reintegration.
- Are individuals required to sell products (e.g., baked goods, newspapers) on street corners or parking lots as "outreach?" This exploitative and degrading practice uses the client's circumstances and recently released status to gain sympathy from the public.
- Are work schedules and work-life balance taken into account when mandating program attendance?

Community-based organizations provide services to released individuals. While these services vary depending on the resources available, organization size, and location, the most common are job training and placement, educational opportunities, housing assistance, and substance abuse treatments.

Questions to Consider:

- What populations does the organization serve, and what are their qualifications to serve this population? Young adults may require different types of support than older individuals, such as educational guidance or vocational training opportunities. Individuals with a history of substance abuse may benefit from specialized treatment programs to address their addiction and prevent relapse.
- What geographic area does the organization serve? Urban areas often have more comprehensive programs with access to various services such as job training, education, housing assistance, and mental health support. Rural areas may face significant challenges due to limited resources and fewer community organizations.
- How well-resourced is the organization, regarding staff capacity and budget? The size of the organization factors in the types of programs and services provided. Larger organizations tend to have more work specialization but may also have more restrictions.

Reentry Services

There are two approaches to providing reentry services: direct and indirect.

Direct reentry services are designed to address the myriad challenges formerly incarcerated individuals face. These services recognize that individuals released from prison often struggle with securing stable housing, finding employment, and reconnecting with family and community support networks. Direct reentry services help individuals build the necessary skills and provide a smooth transition by assisting individuals in navigating through overwhelming bureaucratic systems.

Indirect reentry services provide only minimal support and rely heavily on the individual to navigate the challenges of reentry independently. Indirect services often do not address the underlying issues that led to the individual's criminal justice involvement in the first place. These services offer resources such as job fairs or referrals but do not provide the comprehensive assistance that direct reentry programs offer.

Both direct and indirect reentry services are essential for a thriving reentry ecosystem. Incorporating both enhances individuals' chances of breaking the cycle of incarceration and promoting a healthier, more inclusive society for all.

Programmatic Considerations

- Do program requirements for attendance take into account **work schedules** and work-life balance?
- Is there any **cost or fee** associated with program participation that shifts the financial burden of reintegrative efforts to the client?
- Does the organization expect individuals to volunteer for events and programming without **compensation**?

TYPES OF REENTRY SERVICES

Employment Services

One of the most crucial reentry services is employment assistance. Gainful employment is a parole/probation requirement in Texas. Obtaining stable employment is fundamental for financial stability, self-sufficiency, and reducing the likelihood of returning to incarceration. To achieve this, an individual must acquire a job that pays a livable, sustainable wage and allows for advancement. Employment Services may include application and **résumé assistance, interview training, and employer access** and referrals.

Education & Academic Skills Training

Providing education and skills training in a reentry program can significantly improve the chances of a successful transition. Many correctional institutions lack comprehensive educational and academic skills training programs, making it difficult for individuals to acquire basic academic skills or pursue higher education while serving their sentences. This lack of access to education puts released individuals at a disadvantage, as they may struggle to compete with others in the job market who possess formal education credentials.

Education and academic skills training may include **GED programs, vocational training, pre-college and preparatory classes, and higher education opportunities** that empower individuals to pursue alternative career paths.

Reentry organizations should work closely with educational institutions, fostering partnerships to develop policies supporting released individuals' transition from their prison-based program to campus. In addition to assisting individuals in securing basic necessities, organizations should include help registering for school, academic mentoring, and connecting them with student support services on campus.

Most formerly incarcerated people experience financial hardship upon returning to the community, making it challenging to cover even basic costs, not to mention the added expenses of education or training. Financial aid for individuals with a criminal conviction is complex and requires proactive research and outreach before release and during reentry. Collaboration by community organizations, higher education institutions, and private entities can make it easier for individuals to find and apply for scholarships open to or designed for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Housing Support

Locating safe and secure housing as a formerly incarcerated individual is challenging. Landlords often deny leases to individuals with felony convictions, and most individuals cannot rent housing in their own name, requiring someone else to rent on their behalf. This approach assumes that people with a criminal record pose a higher risk of engaging in illegal activities in the future. Obstacles such as **credit and background checks** can also hinder finding a permanent residence.

Reentry housing support includes **temporary shelters, transitional housing, or assistance locating and applying for affordable housing** options. Reentry organizations that do provide housing usually have waiting lists. With limited financial resources, these halfway houses struggle to accommodate the demand for their services, leaving individuals on the waiting list indefinitely.

Peer Support and Mentoring

Connecting individuals to peer support groups and mentorship programs is vital. Peer support groups allow for shared experiences, providing a sense of community and fostering positive personal transformations.

Mentors who have successfully reintegrated into society after incarceration can provide **guidance, support, and insights** into navigating the challenges individuals face adjusting to life after prison. Mentors provide emotional support, share their experiences, and offer practical advice on navigating various difficulties, such as finding housing, managing personal finances, and maintaining positive relationships.

Most organizations host monthly or bi-monthly meetings. These are usually led by someone directly impacted by the criminal justice system. These meetings provide a place for discussing reentry barriers individuals face. Organizations that host recurring meetings and send email reminders tend to have a better reputation among peers. Also, individuals who are consistent in participating tend to fare better than those who do not attend regularly.

Many mentoring supports are now offered through virtual meetings. This can remove barriers to access based on geography and transportation, but organizers should be careful not to exclude individuals unfamiliar with virtual meeting software.

Measuring Success & Collecting Data

Recidivism has historically been used as the primary measure to determine the success of reentry programs. However, attempting to measure success solely based on recidivism oversimplifies reentry and hinders the development of effective strategies tailored to varying circumstances.

A successful reintegration process must encompass individual growth, community reintegration, access to employment opportunities, and addressing the underlying causes of crime. Broadening the lens can create a more holistic and practical approach to rehabilitation that prioritizes personal transformation, social support, and managing the systemic challenges those reentering society face.

Measuring success in a reentry organization involves several vital indicators. **These indicators include a low recidivism rate, successful employment outcomes, and overall well-being and quality of life improvements.** By tracking these measures, a reentry organization can assess its impact and make any necessary adjustments to its programs and support services to ensure the successful reintegration of individuals into society.

Appreciating the intricate nature of reentry for individuals is essential, recognizing the need for tailored approaches that account for individual circumstances. Comprehensive solutions that address the challenges individuals face upon reentry and promote successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society require an in-depth understanding.

Data should be collected to measure:

- Are clients fully employed, and are they earning a family-supporting wage?
- Are clients receiving direct substance abuse support through the program?
- Do programs help individuals develop connections in their community through church, support groups, or other activities?

The goal of reentry programs is reintegration, which includes more than remaining arrest-free for a specified period. **Ultimately, a successful reentry organization empowers individuals to make positive changes, provides them with the necessary tools for success, and supports their journey.**

Conclusion

The importance of program officers gaining knowledge of prison education programs and criminal justice reentry resources cannot be overstated. It ensures informed decision-making regarding resource allocation, improves evaluation mechanisms, supports program development, and contributes to the broader societal conversation about rehabilitation and reformation.

Reentry and post-secondary opportunities offer formerly incarcerated people a chance to reintegrate into their communities successfully. These initiatives provide supportive environments where individuals can regain their self-esteem, develop new relationships, and strengthen their social networks.

Understanding the various metrics and indicators will give comprehensive knowledge to program officers to assist in making evidence-based decisions, leading to the continued improvement of criminal justice reform efforts.

While society tends to ostracize those convicted of criminal offenses, it is crucial to understand the importance of funding organizations that support and reintegrate these individuals into the community. Regardless of an individual's criminal history, every human possesses inherent rights and deserves to be treated with dignity.