

PNO Briefing Paper

PNO'S PROGRAM MODEL

Malcolm C. Young, together with Marsha Weissman, a long-time colleague and program design specialist and Executive Director of the Center for Community Alternatives in New York State, designed and implemented the PNO program model to serve individuals being released under the “Drugs Minus Two” reform¹ to two federal districts. Project implementation was initiated in November 2016. Following the initial launch, they and PNO’s staff further refined reentry strategies based on what works best for the Project’s clients. In this Briefing Paper, Malcolm C. Young describes how PNO was created and the thinking behind PNO’s strategies and unique and innovative approach to reentry from federal prison.

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PNO’s program model incorporated ideas that came out of my research and observations about employment-related reentry while a Soros Justice Fellow in 2010 – 2012 and an additional opportunity to consider these ideas in the context of the evolving future of work in an increasingly technological world, summed up in a paper published by the Soros Foundations in 2014 “[The Returning Prisoner and the Future of Work.](#)”

Other influences on PNO’s program design included: recent research and the reported experience of Second Chance Act program models,² consideration of the unique characteristics of the federal prison system which separates individuals from family and social supports for many years and by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles; the different and sometimes seemingly uncoordinated roles played by the BOP, its contract halfway houses, and federal probation; the lack of any shared effort or resources between federal reentry programming and local or state programs and initiatives for state prisoners; and, the success and striking humanity in a number of residential reentry programs. These included [St. Leonard’s Ministries](#) in Chicago, Illinois, the [Fortune Society](#) in New York City, and programs founded by leaders who themselves had been incarcerated, several of whom I met through the annual Soros Justice Fellows Conferences: [Norris Henderson and Calvin Duncan](#) who founded [The First 72+](#) in New Orleans, and [Susan Burton](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)) who founded [A New Way of Life Reentry Project](#) in Los Angeles,

¹ “Drugs minus two” refers to an amendment to the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines recommended by the U.S. Sentencing Commission and approved by Congress in April 2014 (officially designated Amendment 782). In August of that year, the amendment was made retroactive.)

² The collective experience of Second Chance Act-funded reentry programs affirm two of PNO’s key strategies: connecting federal prisoners to resources in their community in advance of release; and employing formerly incarcerated individuals as Reentry Consultants. See, Christine Lindquist, Janeen Buck Willison, Shelli Rossman, Jennifer Hardison Walters, and Pamela K. Lattimore, *Second Chance Act Adult Offender Reentry Demonstration Programs Implementation Challenges and Lessons Learned*, Research Triangle Institute, Raleigh N. C., and Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. (August 2015) at pp. 18 & 19, fn 10 (accessed on 1 June 2017 at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249188.pdf>)



My work on employment-related reentry was instructive. I came to appreciate the distinction between the private business-sector evaluation of employment training program and the outcomes that are emphasized by public or not-for-profit programs. The private sector employer looks almost exclusively to whether or not the training prepared the employee to do the work that the employer needed to have done in a capable and reliable manner. In contrast, the paramount question criminal justice professionals ask about reentry programs including those designed to improve employability is whether or not the program can be shown to “reduce recidivism.” While reentry employment programs may also consider whether the program results in job placement and the length of such placement, it does not often probe why a person was unsuccessful in obtaining work or was not retained as an employee.

Moreover, it became clear to me that measures of success from a criminal justice perspective are not very relevant to most business people making hiring decisions. For example, in the criminal justice world, a careful study showing that participation in a particular program was associated with a reduction in recidivism from, say, 60% to 40%, would be considered an impressive reduction. But few if any employers are going to hire anyone who they believe has a 40% chance of committing a new crime or getting arrested on a probation violation. The job will go to someone else. So, it seemed to me, we have to pursue a higher standard, one that is recognized in the business world.

Here, then, are the main elements in PNO's program design that flow from our ideas about effective reentry programming, knowledge about how the federal system operates, and the influence of individuals who have experienced incarceration and successfully transitioned to the free world.

1. Early preparation. PNO is premised on the value of the “inside/outside” connection both as a mechanism to build trust between the program and the client as well as the efficacy of early release planning. Whenever possible, PNO begins its work six months in advance of the date on which BOP is likely to transfer our client to a halfway house. At present that transfer occurs six months before the end of the individual's sentence, so our preferred window begins one year before the release date shown on the BOP inmate locator, at which time PNO assigns a Reentry Consultant.

PNO encourages its clients to begin to prepare for reentry in advance of the one year window. We send clients whose release dates are more than a year out a check list of things they can do to prepare and of things they can begin to think about.

2. Employ as Reentry Consultants individuals who have been incarcerated and managed a successful return. In the first months of operation, I observed the bond and trust that emerges almost immediately between people who are being released and Reentry Consultants or the Deputy Director who have been incarcerated and are making the transition to the free world. The larger share of Reentry Consultants now are exceptional people who were previously incarcerated and have made the transition from prison with great insight which they are eager and ready to share with people yet to be released and “reenter.” PNO teams up Reentry Consultants who have social worker or similar backgrounds with Reentry Consultants who have been incarcerated, much to the benefit of their clients.

3. Build a relationship of trust and confidence. PNO Reentry Consultants make every effort to gain their client's trust and confidence. Usually this must be done by communicating over the BOP's email system and so takes time. This has proven to be less an obstacle than I originally anticipated.

Building trust requires treating reentry planning as a partnership between staff and clients. Participants must be able to articulate their hopes, dreams and fears and empowered to accomplish those tasks that he or she should be able to complete. The reentry specialist need not nor should not do it all: release planning is a shared responsibility.

4. Identify and respond to the client's essential or primary needs and concerns first. Expect to proceed along a continuum.

PNO's initial strategy was similar to that of many reentry programs: our Reentry Consultants would help their clients prepare a multi-faceted comprehensive "reentry plan" covering the often-mentioned elements: housing, treatment if needed, employment, family reintegration, etc. We quickly learned that most of our clients had one or, less often, two paramount concerns which needed to be addressed before they could deal with issues that they felt to be secondary. These varied widely and unpredictably; part of our initial effort is to understand the challenge or the issue that is foremost in the client's mind.

We also learned that if PNO was able to help the client resolve the paramount concern, a problem was solved and we would then be better able to address the next issue or step to be taken. Meanwhile, the client's confidence in himself or herself and in the Reentry Consultant increased.

So in most cases, instead of designing a comprehensive plan with a list of tasks to be accomplished, PNO's Consultants assist their clients as they move along a continuum, overcoming one challenge or obstacle before moving onto the next, until a point of stability is reached.

5. Draw on the BOP's own staffing resources. The BOP has an assigned Reentry Coordinator to each prison location. Unit staff are charged with assisting inmates in reentry-related tasks such as applying for social security cards and providing access to reentry-related publications in institutional libraries. PNO and its clients have benefited from the cooperation and assistance provided by BOP's institutional staff, including arranging telephone calls and facsimile transmissions.
6. Attend to the period during which individuals move from a BOP facility to a halfway house. When inmates are moved from the BOP to a halfway house, they are dropped from Corrlinks, the BOP's email system. They have no access to telephones until they have been processed into the halfway house, and sometimes not then. As a matter of

policy the BOP does not disclose the location of the halfway house to which an individual is assigned.

Once in a halfway house, the individual encounters a new set of acquaintances, a new set of rules and regulations, and varying degrees of help with local transportation, access to computers, and encouragement to gain employment or find housing. Much depends on the halfway house, and opportunities some of which may not be in the individual's best interest. This period of transition is critical. If we have not established a firm relationship, we run a risk of losing contact with our client.

7. Coordinate with federal probation. Most but not all individuals released from the BOP are supervised by federal probation officers. Probation officers must approve housing and any change in location. Technically federal probation has jurisdiction only when the individual leaves the halfway house. Some probation offices start their work with individuals in advance, however. The information that federal probation receives from BOP or the halfway house is sometimes incomplete. On the other hand, federal probation officers have access to some resources. We have worked with probation officers who make every effort to assist individuals under their supervision. Within limits of confidentiality, PNO has exchanged information with probation officers with positive outcomes as the result, and seeks to increase this level of a working relationship.
8. Support our clients until they are stabilized in the community to which they return. Generally PNO's assistance focuses on connecting the individual leaving prison to family, community and agency resources which will provide needed services and support. Exceptions occur when Reentry Consultants have expertise that is useful to a particular client, as has been the case for employment or addressing veterans' benefits, in which case the Reentry Consultant will provide direct services.

Not all clients need the same level of support. We were surprised that about 40% of PNO's client expect to have a job after they leave the BOP and that more than we expected do succeed in finding work. Contrary to stereotypes, many have very supportive families who are clearly willing and able in providing assistance and solid advice. So again, each client's situation varies, and PNO adjusts to the particular situation.

PNO steps back when the connections have been made and the client appears or feels himself or herself to have stabilized in their setting. But as far as the client is concerned, PNO does not "close cases." PNO remains available and clients are invited to reach out to their Reentry Consultant or the main office for assistance or advice at any time. Some have done so.

These are the main elements of PNO's program model. The essential bottom line is that PNO helps the individual leaving federal prison connect to family, community resources and agencies that will be most helpful as the individual navigates their way back to life in the free world. For that individual, PNO is the one constant and consistent resource as he or she moves from the BOP to a halfway house and then to federal probation supervision. In this work, PNO and its clients benefit from the experience and insights of a group of exceedingly capable, empathetic

yet highly directed Reentry Consultants and staff who have lived through and successfully returned from incarceration.

On a personal note: It is deeply rewarding to be involved in a redemptive, humane Project that is doing its part to correct for the negative impact that lengthy incarceration has on so many of America's citizens, and to work with people whose own life stories provide hope and inspiration. We expect success for our clients and that PNO will serve as a model approach to reentry for states as well as for the federal system.

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