

PNO Briefing Paper

REENTRY FROM THE BUREAU OF PRISONS (BOP)

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) provides somewhat limited and fragmented [information about the release process and reentry](#) on its web site, including a brief [description of its halfway house system](#), and two reentry-related publications: [Making Changes](#), which is a somewhat idealized description of select programs; and, a [Directory of National Programs](#), the latter a listing BOP's educational and vocational programs that appears to have been updated May 18 2017. People who want to assist or encourage individuals in custody should encourage them to make use of the prison library, most of which have these and other publications, directories and guides to reentry services and instructions for steps to take to obtain state and social security identification.

In 2016 the Department of Justice published an aspirational [Roadmap to Reentry](#) which outlines five "principles" about what "should be" provided to every inmate.

Despite having the largest single prison inmate population of any United States' jurisdiction, the Bureau of Prison's reentry process has received very little attention until recently.

The BOP's reentry efforts are necessarily hampered by the distance between individuals and the location to which they will be released from custody. Many federal prisoners are hundreds if not thousands of miles from home or the place to which they will return. Moreover, inmates in any one BOP facility are likely to be drawn from 20, 30 or more states or localities. Distance and the fact that only a few inmates will actually be returning to any one location make it very impracticable for the staff in any one federal prison to obtain current information about social services, charitable groups, housing and employment in most of the locations to which a few individuals will return each year. Any vocational programming will be general, likely designed to improve work skills or meet the requirements needed to obtain a certificate, rather than tailored to the type of work that is available or the skills that are needed in any one location.

The BOP has made an effort to improve reentry in recent years. Unit staff are instructed to assist federal inmates obtain needed identification and social security card, and to provide information or allow the use of the library as the inmate researches prospects. Nearly all federal facilities have a "Reentry Coordinator" charged with collecting information and making it available to inmates and to assist individuals seeking specific resources.

Reentry from the BOP is complicated because multiple agencies are involved *in seriatim* in the process. An inmate will be transferred from the BOP to a BOP-contracted halfway house six months or less from the date he or she is to be released. The halfway house is usually operated by a private contractor or as part of a state or local correctional facility, including county jails. They differ considerably in services they provide and the attitudes they evince toward individuals under their control and supervision. Some act as a correctional facility policing inmates who are released during the day; others have an array of services, counselors and advocates assisting the individual.



Most individuals released by the BOP are obligated to a period of supervision by federal probation. Technically probation's authority over the individual leaving the BOP starts on the day of release. Practices vary, but in some locations federal probation barely meets its clients until after they leave the halfway house. In other locations, however, federal probation staff interview individuals who are still in the halfway house, discuss program issues and advise the individual on options and services.

Some of the halfway houses in which PNO clients are situated encourage communication and visits with Reentry Consultants; others impose bureaucratic barriers to visits or consultations.

A space of recent reports by multiple fact-finding groups and federal agencies detail specific issues and problems with the federal reentry/ halfway house process and operations:

- The congressionally-chartered bi-partisan Charles Colson Commission on federal prisons published a fairly sharp criticism of federal reentry in its final recommendations for the federal prison system, [*Transforming Prisons, Restoring Lives*](#), in January 2016. Key findings are found at pages 50 – 54.
- The Deloitte consulting firm completed a [major assessment of BOP's Residential Reentry Centers \(RRC's\)](#) or halfway houses; the firm's report was published in August 2016.
- The Office of the Inspector General, United States Department of Justice completed and published its [Audit of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Management of Inmate Placements in Residential Reentry Centers and Home Confinement](#) in November 2016.

(The Office of the Inspector General had previously published a [Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Release Preparation Program](#) in August 2016 which bears on utilization of halfway houses and the limited extent to which inmates are provided information about halfway houses in advance of release to a halfway house.)
- On 30 November 2016, three months before the end of the Obama administration, Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates circulated a memorandum, "[Reforming Federal Halfway Houses](#)," which made findings and requested both a more standardized array of services from contract halfway houses and changes in the rules and regulations applicable to inmates residing in those halfway houses.
- In June 2017, Families against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM) completed a survey of inmates. Its report, "[Using Time to Reduce Crime](#)," discusses the strengths and weaknesses in BOP's reentry-related programming from the inmates' point of view.

PNO's approach to federal reentry was designed to address some of the key concerns raised in these reports. For example, the federal audits and the Colson Task Force identify as a problem the communication between BOP and agencies responsible for various aspects of an inmate's reentry (halfway houses and Federal Probation) and other federal agencies (e.g., Department of Veterans Affairs). PNO's practice is to start to work individually with federal inmates at least six months in advance of the date they might be expected to be transferred to a halfway house, inform each client about the steps that will follow, connect the client with family members and people in the community whenever possible and connect the client with relevant programs and services before they are on the street.

PNO staff know that an inmate's transition from prison to halfway house can be difficult. Often communications between the inmate who is transferred to a halfway house and the Reentry Consultant is interrupted. Once in a halfway house, an inmate may be subject to distractions and misinformation from fellow inmates and visitors.

The transition to probation supervision can also be disruptive.

PNO tries to ease the way forward. Whenever possible and needed, PNO's consultants will work closely with the individual as he or she is transferred to a halfway house --- sometimes involving multiple intermediate destinations – and then as the individual leaves the halfway house under probation supervision.

PNO's role in the overall reentry process is to facilitate the flow and exchange of information between the person anticipating release from the BOP and his or her family, social, community, service agencies and potential employers, addressing the problems in communication between agencies and branches of government identified in each of the major assessments of federal reentry.

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