

The PNO Approach to Reentry: Address Paramount Problems First

At Project New Opportunity we've learned that people leaving prison after years of incarceration often need help dealing with one or another problem that to them is paramount. The range of problems that confound people leaving prison is great and unpredictable. But once the most pressing problem is resolved, the Reentry Consultant and the client can move on to the next with increased confidence.

Two of our clients provide examples:

- **Sam Smith**, a veteran, served 12 years in federal prison for a drug crime. Transferred to a halfway house, he chafed at the restrictions and pushed the limits on the number of passes he applied for. PNO counseled patience. "Don't get frustrated, follow the rules," PNO staff urged.

Sam had plans. "Go slow," PNO staff counseled him. But in quick succession, Sam took a job at a supermarket, found a place to live, and married a new girlfriend. And then things became difficult. Sam felt diminished asking his wife to drive him to a minimum wage job that didn't pay enough to cover his share of expenses. Strains were quickly developing.

Sam's plans started to unravel. Applying for a driver's license, he was told for the first time of a lien against him, the outcome of a lawsuit arising out of a car accident two years before his conviction but brought after his incarceration. Whether a mistake or knowingly, the plaintiff represented that Sam was on active military duty and that the plaintiff had properly notified him of the suit through his branch of service. Sam, in federal prison, never learned about the suit. Now DMV was telling him he couldn't get a driver's license until he paid off a \$50,000 default judgment entered against him when he didn't appear in court in a case he knew nothing about and which was heard while he was in federal prison.

Sam went to a legal aid office that provides services to returning citizens. He was turned away at intake because the office, like a number of reentry-related programs, was funded only to help people returning from state, not federal, prisons. Sam brought this information to PNO.

PNO verified Sam's account with local court records. We spoke to the legal aid office's director, sending her copies of the court documents. She referred Sam to a private attorney familiar with DMV. She made the right referral! With one phone call the attorney convinced DMV to set the lien aside.

Sam successfully applied for his commercial driver's license. He got a job driving, earned a better income and is now making progress working through issues with his wife.

Later, Sam confided how close he had come to real trouble. Facing what seemed an insurmountable hurdle, he started driving without a license. Had police pulled him over for any reason, he could have been violated and sent back to prison. He stopped driving illegally, though, the day he learned he had a lawyer helping him and until after he passed his exam. Hope returned and he no longer took the risk. Sam later purchased his own car and is able to move around, enjoying his freedom driving.

- **Charles Channing** applied to PNO in 2016 after serving seven years of his ten year sentence. He was 46 years old, he did not know where he would live, and he did not have a job. He also needed help in applying for Social Security disability.

His application reflected tragedy. For "family status" Charles wrote in the word "widower." In the margin he explained: "My wife and oldest son was just killed in a car accident" two months previously. "I dealt with over 15 family members passing away this 6 yrs I've been in. My whole world will be different. I really don't have no help when I get out."

There was more: at the bottom of the application, Charles wrote: "My [two step] sons are out there, homeless they are staying at friends' houses. I have another son that I have not heard from."

Charles' provided the name and address for his aunt. The Reentry Consultant reached out to her and found out that Charles battled drug addiction before going to prison and the relationship with his step-children was "in a bad place." The Consultant learned that Charles' son was on the street, possibly using drugs.

The Reentry Consultant set the priorities: "Charles isn't going to be able to do anything until we help him find his son." The Reentry Consultant tracked the son down through the aunt. When finally reached, the young man wasn't ready to talk and hung up the phone. But now, at least, Charles knew his son was alive.

When Charles left the halfway house the Reentry Consultant steered him toward grief counseling for the loss of his wife and oldest son and encouraged him to attend NA/AA meetings. He provided Charles with information about applying for medical insurance and about employment and school options. The Reentry Consultant telephoned regularly, counseling Charles to "do the right thing."

Charles started a job with Goodwill. He found a room to rent. He spoke often to his Reentry Consultant who urged patience and that Charles keep attending groups. Charles got a higher paying job working with housing inspectors and began looking for a regular apartment. The Reentry Consultant guided Charles in the application process. Charles is now third on the waiting list for available housing.

Charles picked up a second job on August 31; on 1 September he called the Reentry Consultant filled with excitement to say that he had been able to buy a car at auction and was now better able to get to his multiple jobs on time.

Charles is living his life and enjoying his freedom. He left prison and despair.

Charles' journey is not over: the Reentry Consultant continues to support Charles' efforts to connect with his step-sons. As of yet they haven't opened up to him. Counseling with his step-sons, and reconciling with his son, encouraged by the Reentry Consultant, is still ahead.

Helping the returning citizen to resolve the most important problem first is an important part of the Reentry Consultant's work. Success builds the returning citizen's confidence in navigating the next step along the path to reentry. The Reentry Consultant stays with his or her client each step of the way. PNO's clients particularly appreciate that day-to-day availability from people who know and understand what they are experiencing:

- **Robert Roush**, who upon release lived with his aunt in Maryland, gained employment in a barbershop where, within a month, the owner was trusting him with the keys, worked past the discouragement of initially failing his driver's test, thanked his Reentry Consultant. PNO's reentry resources were very helpful, he said, but the most important part of his experience with PNO was having someone to talk to: "It gave me hope; just knowing someone cares, it helps out a lot."

- **John James** wrote his Reentry Consultant at the conclusion of our work with him:

Thanks to you and PNO for your assistance with my reentry process. I followed up on your leads and listened very carefully to the advice you offered. I now find it all to be rewarding. Just my conversation's (sic) with you were valuable. Finding it relaxing and relatable due to like past experiences.... I am grateful for the time offered to me.

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For more information about PNO's strategies for successful reentry, see our web page at www.projectnewopportunity.org or contact us by email to: mjenkins@communityalternatives.org