

## PNO's Program and Accomplishments April 2018

### THE PNO STORY:

In 2015, critics had observed that the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) had long lacked a proactive, well-planned and coordinated approach to reentry and to providing the assistance that would help each returning prisoners establish independent, self-supporting lives after years of incarceration. Studies reported recidivism rates of about 45%.

Consequently, in the fall of 2015, criminal justice experts and professionals in the federal Administration fretted about the release of what would be almost 1,700 recipients of presidential sentence commutations and the early release of nearly 31,000 successful petitioner for reductions in sentences for drug crimes. Would they become recidivism statistics, fueling opposition to further grants of clemency and reductions in sentences?

To answer this concern, Malcolm C. Young, and staff of the Center for Community Alternatives designed Project New Opportunity (PNO). The program they created reaches out to eligible individuals while they are still in the BOP, helps them begin to prepare to rejoin their families and communities or to begin anew, and provides continuity as they are transferred from distant federal prisons to the BOP's contract halfway houses and then to Federal Probation for supervision. PNO draws upon the skills and leadership of formerly incarcerated individuals who have successfully navigated the difficult path to freedom to advise and guide PNO clients as they make the same transition.

PNO launched in Washington, D. C. on April 27, 2016. It serves federal inmates returning to locations in and near the Eastern District of Virginia, the Northern District of Illinois and the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. In July 2016, Project New Opportunity hired Norman Brown, whose life sentence was commuted by President Obama, to serve as PNO's Deputy Project Director.

Today, 80 or more than half of PNO's 153 clients have been released. They are overcoming barriers and getting back into their communities. Many have successfully secured employment and reunited with their loved ones.

To get this far, PNO:

- Speedily designed and built a nimble, first-of-its-kind reentry program for federal prisoners. PNO developed training materials, interview guides and directories of reentry programs and services, and built a customized intranet for secure file-and information-sharing.
- Successfully implemented strategies to inform federal prison inmates of PNO's services: through their Federal Defenders; with notices posted by BOP's reentry coordinators; through social media; with a campaign utilizing Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM's) 30,000-inmate email contacts; and, by announcements sent by Federal Probation in Washington to district offices.
- Established an informative web site ([www.projectnewopportunity.org](http://www.projectnewopportunity.org)) for clients and their families which also serves as a repository of research and a platform for PNO's policy statements.
- Forged a dynamic team: Malcolm C. Young with four decades' experience in criminal justice and sentencing reform; Norman Brown with years of experience counseling inmates on the inside and teaching courses on reentry for fellow inmates; Reentry Consultants, the majority of whom have been incarcerated and all of whom are informed and sensitive counselors for PNO's clients; and, the CCA research and leadership team under Executive Director David Condliffe.



- Reached across agency lines to collaborate with: BOP's senior staff; leading local reentry organizations; federal defenders; federal probation officers and offices; administrators of federal Halfway Houses in Chicago and Philadelphia; Reentry Coordinators in the Philadelphia offices of the U. S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania; and, Federal District Court Reentry Courts.

#### PNO'S SERVICE TO CLIENTS:

- A client-driven reentry planning process that starts during incarceration with a focus on meeting specific goals and challenges.
- Reentry Consultants, the majority of whom were themselves formerly incarcerated, are uniquely equipped to establish trust and counsel their clients on a personal, individual level.
- Reentry Consultants address concerns typically overlooked by reentry programs including: client's anxiety in advance of release; post-release fears of being watched, confronted from ahead or jumped from behind; inability to make a firm decision or respond to multiple choices; struggle to reunite with a child or lost relative; or, the compulsion to retreat from contact with others.
- Reentry Consultants connect their clients to services, agencies, and organizations who can assist them with material problems confronting them: from homelessness and unemployment to dealing with accumulated traffic tickets or back child support.

(Malcolm C. Young and Norman Brown describe PNO's approach to reentry during [hearings before a committee](#) of the Council of the District of Columbia on PNO's website).

#### ADVOCACY:

PNO advocates for: reforms in the federal reentry process; a case management approach to reentry; employment of previously incarcerated individuals to assist those now being released; and, adequate local funding for reentry services. PNO's experience, innovative approach to reentry and dedication of its staff make it a credible advocate.



PNO endorses national Second Chance Month. In an Opinion Piece published on its web site PNO encourages participants and leaders who have joined together to support Second Chances to promote adequate public funding for reentry services.

#### OUTCOMES:

PNO was the subject of a study by Marsha Weissman, Ph.D., a senior policy fellow at CCA. *Project New Opportunity: An Innovative Model for Reintegration and Reentry* describes the genesis of the Project, the profile of our clients, the results of a survey of clients, and outcomes.

The study reported that as of August 2017, based on self-reporting and anecdotal information, no PNO client had been in trouble, arrested or accused of violating conditions of release. (Currently, PNO makes the same report, with 83 clients released, 26 for more than one year.)

The study describes aspects of PNO which are unique among most reentry programs:

[U]nlike most reentry programs that focus on the development of instrumental skills that formerly incarcerated people need to access social and economic opportunities, PNO addressed the uniquely disruptive and confounding impact of incarceration. In operation, PNO recognized that the web of disorientation and psychological disconnection that accompanies the movement from custody to freedom needs to be addressed as well as preparation for employment, a justifiably reentry concern.

The study explains the success that PNO has to date had with its clients. Research has shown that leaving prison without being prepared for the culture shock of returning to freedom “is often the stress that undermines reentry success.” People leaving prison benefit from having insight into their own reentry challenges.

The study also attributes PNO's success to the fact that most of its Reentry Consultants were themselves formerly incarcerated.

“[N]avigation” support, particularly when provided by peers, can be essential to successful adjustment because it is empathetic, founded in shared experiences with issues and concerns grounded in the context of daily life. A commonality of language, culture, condition and typically race, ethnic and class status with the “navigator” helps people become more comfortable in disclosing the challenges they are facing and asking for and accepting help.

Weissman conducted a survey to measure PNO's effectiveness in helping clients work past what has been called the “complex milestones in the reintegration process.” Survey questions explored the needs identified by participants and whether key elements of the PNO model – inside/outside connection, connection to Reentry consultants – operated as intended and met reentry needs as defined by participants.

The study's survey found that more than one-third of PNO's client were incarcerated for between 11 – 15 years and another quarter or more for more than 16 years. It also revealed a shocking reality behind incarceration in the BOP: “An astounding twenty-six percent (26%) of respondents never had a visit during the entire time they were incarcerated.”

In response to questions about what they valued about PNO's services, “[a]most two-thirds of respondents cited the ability to have contact while still incarcerated with someone who will be there for them when they get out as a primary benefit of the program.” Help in finding housing followed next.

Survey participants reported that their consultant really knew what they were going through and listened to their concerns and needs as they defined them. This was expressed in comments that respondents added in their survey responses. For example, one person offered, “I am very impressed with my reentry consultant... he's experienced in what I am going through” and another said, “Nothing like getting help from someone who has been in my situation.”

The study provides more information and analysis from the survey and recommendations for program operations. The Author anticipates that the study will be published as a research brief from the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA). A copy for the use of interested parties may be obtained by request to PNO.

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