



**What Works in Reentry**  
**SEVEN LESSONS LEARNED IN MICHIGAN**

*Dennis Schrantz, Senior Policy Analyst*

**SUMMARY**

1. **UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE WORK:** Politicians are the ones who make the decisions ultimately that will allow executive branch agencies to flourish. Politicians need incentives and successes and the work has to be “easy” for them to support.
2. **FOCUS ON BUDGET & UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF REENTRY IN THE LARGER JUSTICE SYSTEM:** The work on prisoner reentry is directly related to the need – now recognized by nearly every state in the nation – that we cannot sustain the high levels of budget for corrections and we must reduce prison populations. When addressing the need for improved prisoner reentry, start there.
3. **DEDICATION TO STRATEGIC PLANNING:** It is impossible for major system changes to take shape without highly disciplined strategic planning that focuses like a laser beam on implementation activities and challenges. There are four cornerstones to the planning that has to take place – which must be done collaboratively with stakeholders both inside and outside of corrections and parole agencies: (1) Start with accurate offender assessment; (2) Make certain programs and services are designed to assure success one offender at a time; (3) Move toward success-driven parolee supervision that stresses the role of the supervising officer as a coach rather than a surveillance officer; (4) Focus on staff development and change management – not just “training”
4. **FOCUS ON CORE FUNCTIONS AND SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM CHANGE:** Corrections and parole agencies are complex and it is difficult for leaders and staff to be able to effectively wrap their arms around the myriad of issues that are needed for sustainable system change. Focus on “Core Functions” and use consultants and contractors to help provide the competency and capacity to address them:
  - **Mid-level organizational structure:** Corrections and parole agencies must have mid-level managers who are competent and capable of overseeing the facility, field, and community work required to improve prisoner success.
  - **Resources for staff:** All line staff must have the tools and resources necessary to improve prisoner success. Most corrections and parole agency budgets do not provide staff with incentives, rewards, technology, and training that will be required to conduct business in the new ways required by the system changes required for improved reentry.
  - **Fully integrated policy and procedure:** Corrections and parole policies and procedures must eventually reflect that prisoner re-entry is not just an “initiative” but is standard operating procedure.
  - **Internal and external collaboration:** Effective and strategic collaboration with prison staff, parole agents and community-based agencies will be key in determining the short, intermediate, and long-term success of former prisoners.

- **Budget alignment:** To ensure that the allocation of resources is consistent with policies and procedures, the entire corrections and parole agency budgets should be analyzed to determine if current expenditures are supportive of the new vision of prisoner reentry.
  - **Measurement and evaluation.** To ensure that corrections and parole agencies develop and implement new and innovative ways to measure prisoner success and failure, more resources need to be allocated to evaluating evidence-based practices and researching risk-assessment tools for the wider criminal justice continuum, some of which may not yet exist and may need to be developed.
  - **Engage other state departments:** State departments other than corrections and parole agencies should be represented on a State Policy Team and should be directed by the Governor to enact policies and procedures that promote prisoner success and remove barriers to prisoner success.
  - **Quality and Quantity.** To ensure data drives decisions aimed at improving policies, procedures, and programs on an ongoing basis, correction and parole agencies must develop and implemented quality-assurance mechanisms that continually assess program fidelity, staffing efforts, and prisoner outcomes.
5. **Local Ownership and Comprehensive Prisoner ReEntry Planning:** Community leaders must own prisoner reentry. In Michigan, we developed local Steering Teams which were responsible for developing and reaching consensus in a collaborative manner on a local, community-based Comprehensive Prisoner ReEntry Plan. The Plan had to address 16 service areas such as housing, employment, substance abuse services, mental health, transportation, victim services, and the involvement of local law enforcement and faith-based institutions. For each of these 16 service areas, the Comprehensive Plan described the local assets that are in place to increase the potential for success for former prisoners, barriers that impede maximum use of these assets, gaps in services, and proposed solutions to address the barriers and gaps. Thus, the plan builds upon existing services and embeds their use within the context of comprehensive service delivery.
  6. **Local Management and Community Coordination:** Local community coordinators are the essential staff to the prisoner reentry process at each of Michigan's 18 regional sites as they are responsible for staffing the Steering Team and assisting with the development and implementation of the locally-approved Comprehensive Plans. Their responsibilities include coordinating and monitoring the use of Comprehensive Plan funds, the effectiveness of the service delivery system, outreach to and education of the public, and collaboration with service providers, justice system professionals and the public.
  7. **Public Education and Outreach:** Nothing could have been more important in Michigan in taking the MPRI up to scale than continual public education to change public perception about prisoners returning to our communities. Taxpayers must recognize identifying the need for services and provision of services as public protection strategies - not as coddling convicts. This requires an enormous dedication of purpose that must be carefully developed, implemented, managed, monitored and reported upon. Local reentry boards comprised of elected and other officials offer many avenues to educate the public and special stakeholder groups. Fundamental to full community support, for example, is the support of law enforcement officials such as chiefs of police, sheriffs and prosecutors who dedicate their careers to fighting crime. Their involvement on the local Steering Team and participation in the development and the execution of the Public Education Plan was essential to gain and sustain their on-going support.

## **What Works in Reentry** **SEVEN LESSONS LEARNED IN MICHIGAN**

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Over the course of the last decade, prisoner reentry in Michigan has moved from a political ideal to a robust, state-wide effort with 18 regional reentry community sites that serve all 83 counties and a \$57 million budget. Performance has been tracked in terms of parolee violations and revocations to prison while a more sophisticated evaluation is being implemented that will measure former prisoner arrests and convictions as well. The results thus far for the Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative (MPRI) are promising, based on data from nearly 20,000 former prisoners:

- A 32% reduction in parolee failures resulting in a revocation to prison;
- Based on parolee success, the Parole Board increased the parole approval rate from an average of 48% to over 56% - nearly 70% of all prisoners are now paroled at their court given “Truth in Sentencing” date;
- While the parolee population has increased over 40%, technical violations were reduced by 42%. The parolee population increased from 17,000 to over 20,000.
- As the centerpiece of the state’s prison population reduction efforts (down 12% in just three years), driven in part by budget reduction goals, reentry was critical to saving over \$900 million over the course of the decade from 2005 to 2015 by closing 20 prison facilities.

Michigan stakeholders learned many valuable lessons during this period of change. Some of the more important learnings are as follows:

### **1. UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE WORK**

Politicians are the ones who make the decisions ultimately that will allow executive branch agencies to flourish. Politicians need incentives and successes and the work has to be “easy” for them to support. The recent report by the American Civil Liberties Union, [Michigan Breaks the Political Logjam: a New Model for Reducing Prison Populations](#) (by Elizabeth Alexander, *Director*, National Prison Project of the ACLU; November 2009) addressed this issue and stated, in part:

*While it may seem obvious that locking up more people would lower the crime rate, the reality is much more complicated. Sentencing and release policies, not crime rates, determine the numbers of persons in prison. Michigan’s new initiatives to reduce overcrowding began in 2007, when the Michigan Department of Corrections initiated programs that have been refined over time. As a Michigan Department of Corrections official bluntly stated in testimony to the Michigan legislature, these steps “have broken the political logjam that has consistently stymied many prior justice policy reform proposals,” by providing incentives for various*

stakeholders to support the initiatives and without requiring politically-sensitive reductions in statutory penalties for criminal offenses.

Overall, with the implementation of the MPRI program and the development of focused re-entry preparation within the prison system, the percentage of prisoners paroled on their ERD has increased to more than 70%. As a result, the percentage of prisoners serving time past their ERD fell from 31% to 25% in just two years.

The history of over-incarceration in Michigan illustrates why the fact that over-incarceration results from deliberate policy choices about punishment rather than directly from crime rates is actually good news. As a persuasive body of evidence demonstrates, with an effective criminal justice policy, public safety can be improved, crime rates lowered, and our massive over-incarceration reduced. Michigan's experience is important because it demonstrates that common sense can in fact beat demagoguery and that smart-on-crime policies can actually triumph.

In a very real sense, the issue of prisoner reentry needs to be “marketed” so that carefully constructed messages about the public safety goals are emphasized. The political process needs to be corralled so that politicians on both sides of the aisle see the effort as a “win-win”.

## **2. FOCUS ON BUDGET & UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF REENTRY IN THE LARGER JUSTICE SYSTEM**

The work on prisoner reentry is directly related to the need – now recognized by nearly every state in the nation – which we cannot sustain the high levels of budget for corrections and we must reduce prison populations. The July 2009 Vera Institute of Justice Report, from the Center on Sentencing and Corrections, The Fiscal Crisis in Corrections: Rethinking Policies and Practices makes this point quite clearly:

*States across the United States are facing the worst fiscal crisis in years. Declining revenues are forcing cuts across virtually all government functions, including corrections, which for many years had been considered off limits. The budgets of at least 26 state departments of corrections have been cut for FY2010, and even those whose budgets have not been cut are reducing expenditures in certain areas. This report, drawing on a survey of enacted FY2010 state budgets and recent legislation, looks at how officials are responding to these reductions and how others are mobilizing to find efficiencies and savings. Most of the activity is occurring in three areas:*

**Operating Efficiencies:** *Though many state corrections departments squeezed out efficiencies during the last recession, they are trying to eke out even more savings now. States are reducing healthcare services or joining in purchasing agreements to lower the cost of inmate pharmaceuticals. Many states have reduced corrections staff, instituted hiring freezes, reduced salaries or benefits, and/or eliminated pay increases. Others are consolidating facilities or halting planned expansions. Still others are eliminating or downsizing some programs.*

**Recidivism Reduction Strategies:** *High rates of failure among people on probation and parole are a significant driver of prison populations and costs in most states. To cut down on new offenses and the incarceration of rule violators, several states are strengthening their community corrections systems. Many states began these efforts in the past few years as part of the national emphasis on helping people successfully return to the community following their release from prison. States are now bolstering both their reentry programs and community supervision programs and working to improve outcomes for people on supervision.*

**Release Policies:** *The biggest budget savings come from policy changes that impact how many people come into prison and how long they stay. Staffing typically accounts for 75 to 80 percent of corrections budgets, so substantial cost reductions can be achieved only when the prison population shrinks enough to shutter a facility—whether a single cellblock or an entire prison. In FY2010, states looking for large cuts have turned to*

*release policies and found that they can identify some groups of people who can be safely released after serving shorter terms behind bars. Given that current state budget deficits are expected to continue and possibly increase over the coming years, states will need to continue to find ways to control corrections costs.*

*Each year, the decisions will become more difficult. Management strategies may extend operating efficiencies, but the resulting cost savings are likely to fall short of what states will need to make ends meet. When deeper cuts are required, states will have to shift expenditures from costly prisons to far more economical investments in community corrections and confront controversial questions about which people really need to go to prison and how long they should stay. State governments are beginning to rise to the challenge of cutting corrections costs while maintaining or even boosting public safety.*

### 3. DEDICATION TO STRATEGIC PLANNING

It is impossible for major system changes to take shape without highly disciplined strategic planning that focuses like a laser beam on implementation activities and challenges. A recent publication from the The Crime and Justice Institute in Boston, Priorities and Public Safety: ReEntry and the Rising Costs of our Corrections System, (December, 2009) made this point well and tied it to the dawning political reality that what we are doing in our justice system is not achieving the best bang for the buck:

*Despite the rising cost of corrections, the public does not appear to be getting the public safety benefits it expects. Rates of recidivism have continued to reflect widespread failure of the criminal justice system in changing offender behavior. Across the country, recidivism rates exceed 50%. Thus, despite a massive increase in prison construction in order to house more than two million people, state and federal leaders have not built a sustainable structure for preparing offenders to return to the community and become effective members of society. **The lack of planning has, according to recent research, led to the probability that our corrections population and corresponding expenditures will continue to rise for the next several years....** Budget crises present an opportunity to change (ineffective) policies despite the political risk because the public is more focused on wasteful government spending. Nowhere is this more evident than in corrections and sentencing policies. (Emphasis added)*

There are four cornerstones to the planning that has to take place – which must be done collaboratively with stakeholders both inside and outside of corrections and parole agencies:

- Start with accurate offender assessment.
- Make certain programs and Services are designed to assure success one offender at a time.
- Move toward success-driven parolee supervision that stresses the role of the supervising officer as a coach rather than a surveillance officer.
- Focus on staff development and change management – not “training”

#### 4. FOCUS ON CORE FUNCTIONS AND SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM CHANGE

Corrections and parole agencies are complex and it is difficult for leaders and staff to be able to effectively wrap their arms around the myriad of issues that are needed for sustainable system change. In Michigan, we focused on several “Core Functions” which we knew we needed to address in order for system change to be sustained. We used consultants and contractors to help provide the competency and capacity to address these:

- **Mid-level organizational structure:** Corrections and parole agencies must have mid-level managers who are competent and capable of overseeing the facility, field, and community work required to improve prisoner success. The top priority for organizational change is to create the capacity to move the inter-workings of the entire Department. Creating a sufficient layer of mid-level managers allows the front-line staff to continue implementation and operational activities and administrators ample time to engage in strategic-planning and assessment activities.
- **Resources for staff:** All line staff must have the tools and resources necessary to improve prisoner success. Most corrections and parole agency budgets do not provide staff with incentives, rewards, technology, and training that will be required to conduct business in the new ways required by the system changes required for improved reentry. It is thus necessary to analyze and realign existing resources to ensure budgetary barriers are addressed.
- **Fully integrated into policy and procedure:** Corrections and parole policies and procedures must eventually reflect that prisoner re-entry is not just an “initiative” but is standard operating procedure. Work is needed to modify existing, and/or create new policies and procedures that help operationalize the new vision of prisoner reentry so that it is sustained and institutionalized as the new way of doing business.
- **Internal and external collaboration.** Prisoner success must begin inside the prison, and must be sustained when the prisoner re-enters the community. Prison “in-reach” that is bringing parole authorities and community human service advocates into the prisons is an operational imperative in order to improve prisoner success. Effective and strategic collaboration with prison staff, parole agents and community-based agencies will be key in determining the short, intermediate, and long-term success of former prisoners.
- **Budget alignment.** To ensure that the allocation of resources is consistent with policies and procedures, the entire corrections and parole agency budgets should be analyzed to determine if current expenditures are supportive of the new vision of prisoner reentry. Expenditures not associated with prisoner success should be eliminated and reinvested in areas that bolster prisoner success. Emphasis should be given to mid-level management and technological infrastructure.
- **Measurement and evaluation.** To ensure that corrections and parole agencies develop and implement new and innovative ways to measure prisoner success and failure, more resources need to be allocated to evaluating evidence-based practices and researching risk-assessment tools for the wider criminal justice continuum, some of which may not yet exist and may need to be developed. It is imperative to redefine how policy makers and practitioners view and use risk assessment for all of criminal justice including discussions that address the underlying causes of recidivism (e.g., housing, employment, mental health).
- **Engage other state departments:** State departments other than corrections and parole agencies should be represented on a State Policy Team and should be directed by the Governor to enact policies and procedures that promote prisoner success and remove barriers to prisoner success. The issue of prisoner

re-entry must become a matter of concern for the entire state in order to build the capacity and competency to take the work up to scale.

- **Quality and Quantity.** To ensure data drives decisions aimed at improving policies, procedures, and programs on an ongoing basis, correction and parole agencies must develop and implemented quality-assurance mechanisms that continually assess program fidelity, staffing efforts, and prisoner outcomes. These agencies must view program and staff evaluation as a priority line item in the fiscal operating budget. The quantity and quality of data needed to support these mechanisms will require new approaches to data entry, such that data entry is a transparent part of doing the job, not a separate add-on job that seems to have no meaning or use. Corrections and parole agencies must use data to make decisions at the mid-management, administrative, and executive levels to such a degree that staff feel the data is important and that staff are concerned with its accuracy and that it represents their efforts.

## **5. Local Ownership and Comprehensive Prisoner ReEntry Planning**

Community leaders must own prisoner reentry. In Michigan, we developed local Steering Teams which were responsible for developing and reaching consensus in a collaborative manner on a local, community-based Comprehensive Prisoner ReEntry Plan. The Plan had to address 16 service areas such as housing, employment, substance abuse services, mental health, transportation, victim services, and the involvement of local law enforcement and faith-based institutions. For each of these 16 service areas, the Comprehensive Plan described the local assets that are in place to increase the potential for success for former prisoners, barriers that impede maximum use of these assets, gaps in services, and proposed solutions to address the barriers and gaps. Thus, the plan builds upon existing services and embeds their use within the context of comprehensive service delivery.

The Comprehensive Plan also addressed critical issues such as case management approaches for accountability, monitoring, and performance measurement and ways to educate the public about the crime-fighting goals of the MPRI. The Comprehensive Plan became the basis for requests to the Michigan Department of Corrections for annual MPRI funding as well as requests for support from federal, other state, local and foundation funding sources.

Local collaboration is at the heart of the Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative and the MPRI Model. Collaboration requires stakeholders to meet and to make decisions together. This is different than cooperation, which can be done in isolated silos by simply sharing decisions. MPRI requires a full participatory process in order to change the way the public views, accepts, and responds to former prisoners within the context of the local justice system – that is now more participatory and transparent. It is only through full community participation in this collaborative work that we will be able to sustain the model when the initiative phase of our work concludes in 2011.

## **6. Local Management and Community Coordination**

Local community coordinators are the essential staff to the MPRI process at each of Michigan's 18 regional sites as they are responsible for staffing the Steering Team and assisting with the development and implementation of the locally-approved Comprehensive Plans. Their responsibilities include coordinating and monitoring the use of Comprehensive Plan funds, the effectiveness of the

service delivery system, outreach to and education of the public, and collaboration with service providers, justice system professionals and the public.

### **Public Education and Outreach**

Nothing could have been more important in Michigan in taking the MPRI up to scale than continual public education to change public perception about prisoners returning to our communities. Taxpayers must recognize identifying the need for services and provision of services as public protection strategies - not as coddling convicts. This requires an enormous dedication of purpose that must be carefully developed, implemented, managed, monitored and reported upon. Local reentry boards comprised of elected and other officials offer many avenues to educate the public and special stakeholder groups. Fundamental to full community support, for example, is the support of law enforcement officials such as chiefs of police, sheriffs and prosecutors who dedicate their careers to fighting crime. Their involvement on the local Steering Team and participation in the development and the execution of the Public Education Plan was essential to gain and sustain their on-going support.