

Partnerships With Local Law Enforcement and Community Agencies: A Critical Component to Successful Prisoner Reentry Initiatives

By Ashbel T. Wall II and Tracey Z. Poole



As correctional departments around the country expand upon their mission of public safety to incorporate a greater emphasis on reducing recidivism through successful prisoner reentry, partnerships with law enforcement agencies and community service providers have become even more critical. As recently as the 1980s, many correctional departments, including Rhode Island's, operated as independent, somewhat mysterious and secretive entities. Information- and resource-sharing were the exception, not the norm. That has radically changed and interaction between corrections and a host of other state, federal and local agencies has become an integral facet of daily life for professionals in jails, prisons and community corrections nationwide.



Law enforcement and correctional officers work together at the Providence Public Safety Complex.

Partnering With Law Enforcement

The primary mission of law enforcement is to maintain peace and order and provide a safe environment. In these respects, it is fundamentally aligned with the mission of the corrections field. Although each domain has its own role and perspective, the goal of public safety requires integration and activities that interlock and interconnect. The message must be sent, from the top, that this approach is a priority at the highest level.

There are several underlying assumptions that must be in play if prisoner reentry is to be effective. All of them support the argument that corrections and law enforcement must come together to further these important ideas:

- Prisoner reentry is a statewide issue;
- The current approach to corrections is costly and the outcomes are not great;
- Solutions do not lie solely within correctional departments;
- Both human services and law enforcement must join together with corrections;
- Communities and community-based agencies must be part of the process;
- It is possible to create models that cut across existing bureaucratic structures;
- The work must involve changes in organizational culture and attitudes;
- Communication and data-sharing are essential; and
- Success can (and should) be measured.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the partnerships formed between probation and parole officers and police officers is the sense of mutual respect and connection that develops from working in tandem on a regular basis. It is unusual to hear of probation and parole officers described as “the two new rock stars of the city,” but that is how Col. Dean Esserman, the Providence police chief, described Rhode Island DOC probation officers Yolanda Harley and Geneva Brown at a recent gathering that included members of his staff, DOC officials and a reporter from *The Providence Journal*. Esserman added, “And I intend to buy tickets to their concert someday.”

The chief said he is enthusiastic about this “remarkable partnership” between his department and the DOC and its role in enhancing public safety in the state’s largest city. The Providence police officers are now wired into the DOC’s inmate database, INFACETS, and can access it from laptops in their cruisers or from police headquarters and substations. Within moments of arrest, police officers can determine whether individuals are on probation or parole, download offenders’ photos, and review other important details about their incarceration history.

Meeting probationers where they live is one of the cornerstones of probation. As a result of the partnership between the DOC and the police department, Brown and Harley have moved out of their comfort zone — working previously in the Superior Court and the District Court — and now have offices right alongside the police substation in District 7, a neighborhood with a startlingly high number of probationers. Historically, probation officers had been frustrated because they were desk-bound in the courthouse. Today, these two officers’ entire caseloads live within a 10-minute

drive. Brown and Harley conduct weekly home visits, participate in ride-alongs with the police and attend weekly staff meetings in Esserman's office to share information about probationers on their caseloads. They say they cannot imagine returning to "the old way" of doing business.

The willingness of District 7's Lt. Michael Correia and his staff to welcome probation officers into their substation and to work hand in glove with them has sent a message across the city that the DOC and the Providence Police Department will partner in every way possible to ensure the safety of the city's residents. Harley and Brown have been pioneers in this effort. Their supervisor and all of the administrators in probation and parole have been instrumental in making this relationship successful.

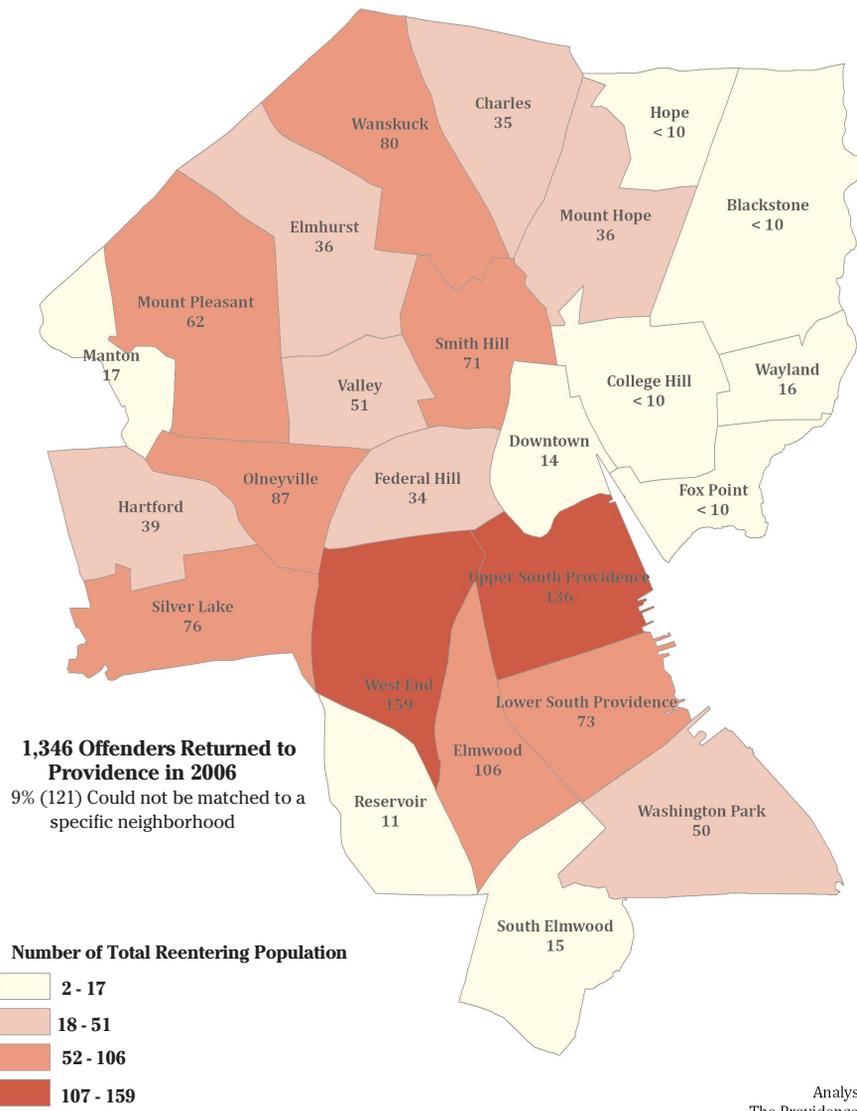
Once a month, new probationers from the district are invited to the District 7 substation for a "meet 'n greet" attended by critical staff from the police department and probation and parole. Their photos are taken and included in a personalized meet 'n greet flier, which is a handy way for police and probation officers to quickly identify and keep tabs on probationers. "Right away when they come in the room," Correia said, "they know something's different." Micheline Lombardi, who supervises Harley and Brown, sees these gatherings as an opportunity to show probationers that "we're not the enemy. [We want] to help them change the way they look at life and make better choices." Lombardi added: "This is a long-term partnership. We're taking it to the next level. Other districts now want what District 7 has."

Rhode Island's probation officers have among the highest caseloads in the country. While the state needs more officers, its fiscal crisis has made it imperative that new and creative options be considered. Since this partnership has only existed for about seven months, it is too early to generate hard data on the impact the partnership is having on recidivism. However, the sentiment shared by the police department and the DOC is that people behave better when they are being watched, and this collaboration greatly increases the level of supervision.

Of the approximately 20,000 Rhode Islanders on probation or parole in the state's communities, 6,600 lived in the city of Providence as of year-end 2007, according to the Rhode Island DOC's Planning and Research Unit. This partnership is bringing the focus of supervision down to the neighborhood level, and it shows that working together every day really makes the system work. It is a smart investment because it increases the state's ability to prevent re-offending, which involves additional victimization; leads to a churning of offenders through the correctional system; and drives up crowding and costs.

The DOC is interested in developing similar relationships in cities across the state and recently launched an initiative in Warwick, Rhode Island's second largest community. About 75 probationers residing in that city were invited to the police department for a meet 'n greet involving

Distribution of Providence's Reentering Population by Neighborhood, 2006



Data Source: R.I. Department Of Corrections, 2006 Sentenced Releases

Analysis By
The Providence Plan
4.30.2007

the Warwick Police Department and the DOC's probation and parole staff. They were addressed by A.T. Wall II, the corrections director; Lt. Thomas Hannon, Warwick Police Department; Robert Corrente, U.S. attorney for the state of Rhode Island; Col. Stephen McCartney, Warwick Chief of Police; and Christine Imbriglio, supervisor of Kent County Probation. Several community service providers also attended, including the Kent Center, Kent House, Vantage Point, Assisted Recovery, Addiction Recovery Institute, the Department of Human Services and West Bay Community Action. These providers were available at the conclusion of the presentation to offer assistance and information to attendees. Warwick Mayor Scott Avedesian dropped in on the gathering and also met with local politicians, probation and parole staff, the chief, and others in the neighborhood of Oakland Beach to discuss expanding the partnership to include more communities. "I'm enthusiastically supporting this and look forward to further expanding the partnership," McCartney said.

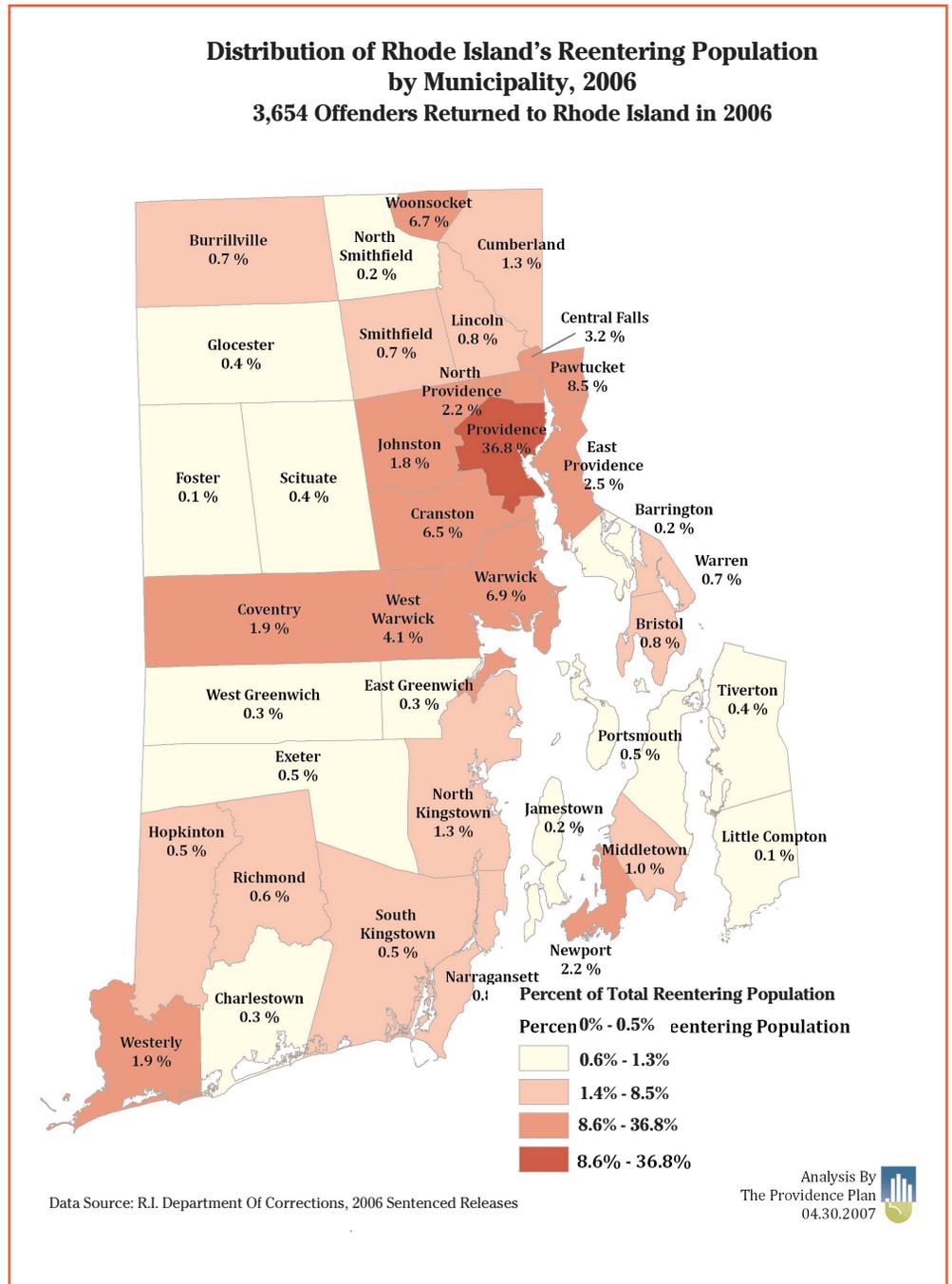
Regional Reentry Councils

The battle for successful reentry is ultimately won or lost on the ground in individual communities. The DOC has begun the process of creating local reentry councils in communities with the highest concentration of returning offenders — thus far in Newport, Providence, Pawtucket and Woonsocket. The reentry councils comprise local elected officials, upper managers from local service providers, senior probation and parole staff, law enforcement personnel, and representatives from faith-based organizations and the business sector. These councils are beginning to make an impact on the lives of the men and women in the affected communities who leave prison with the often daunting goal of never coming back.

The purpose of these regional councils is to create a seamless transition for offenders from prison back into their home communities by resolving the specific barriers — finding employment, health care and affordable housing — that often lead to a downward spiral. The councils also serve as advocates for effective inmate reentry. They have the local credibility to point out that reentry is an issue of community safety, and it affects every member of a community, whether directly or indirectly.

Newport's council. Spearheaded by the faith community in Newport, the regional reentry council there was the first to get off the ground in Rhode Island and has transformed the way the DOC and other social service agencies are able to assist inmates returning to this city.

At a recent meeting of the council, DOC probation and parole and transitional services staff; representatives of local agencies such as a faith-based nonprofit for ex-offenders and a local homeless shelter; the area hospital's social worker; mental health providers; the community police officer; and the city's part-time reentry coordinator gathered around the table to discuss the list of specific individuals to be released from prison in the next six months.





RIDOC Director A.T. Wall II addresses a crowd of 75 probationers at the Warwick Police Department during a recent “meet ‘n greet” involving RIDOC’s probation and parole staff, the city’s police officers, and area community service providers.

counseling and assessment and acts in coordination with East Bay Community Action. The two agencies work closely with DOC probation and parole staff and provide reports to the courts.

Nancy Hallman, probation and parole supervisor for Newport County, has found the regional council immensely helpful to her and her staff. “Even if someone is on straight probation [never incarcerated],” she noted, “we know we can contact someone from the council for assistance. With our heavy caseloads, having these community networking connections has taken some of the burden off of probation.”

Sue Windsor is a social worker with Newport Hospital. She encourages reenter-

Newport’s key players. “All of you are able to tell us things about these people we never would have known otherwise,” noted Sister Teresa Foley, professional/transitional services coordinator for the DOC. “The interchange of information has been wonderful and has allowed us to do better planning by knowing all of these interconnections.”

Roberta Richman, assistant director for rehabilitative services for the DOC, has been a driving force in getting these regional councils off the ground. She is pleased to see each council taking on a unique shape specific to the character and size of the community. “These people [returning offenders] are not an island unto themselves,” Richman said during a council meeting in Newport. “The police know them. Many of you around the table know them. This is where they have grown up and we at the DOC couldn’t possibly serve them as well without the helpful information you’re all able to provide us with. We share information and the responsibility for being there for people who are trying hard and can’t do it alone.”

The Rev. Cheryl Robinson runs Turning Around Ministries, a Newport nonprofit that mentors returning offenders for 18 months and helps them with needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and GED preparation or accessing college courses — all of the things that can become stumbling blocks and force someone back into old, harmful patterns. Robinson has been a leader on the Newport Reentry Council since it began.

Cheryl Newsome plays an equally pivotal role as Newport’s part-time reentry coordinator. She works with landlords to find housing for clients and accompanies them to court, homeless shelters or mental health appointments. Both Newsome and Robinson travel to the DOC in Cranston once a month to attend discharge-planning meetings.

Tom Reiser is a clinician with CODAC Behavioral Health-care, and his presence at the council meetings enables his staff to expedite the process of getting offenders enrolled in treatment within days of their release. His agency offers

ing offenders to get a primary care physician if they do not have one and works with discharge planning to ensure that services offenders receive in prison will continue. Windsor also works with probation and parole to ensure that released offenders have the medications they need.

Fernando Comas, probation officer in the sex offender unit who attends council meetings when a sex offender is on the release list, visits these offenders while they are still incarcerated to set them up with the services they will need upon release. “They function much better when people are involved and respond well to a helping hand,” he said. “We work to help them reenter society and allow people to observe that they can function normally.”

Also in attendance when possible are Christine Green, DOC discharge planner (contracted through the Urban League), who sets up court-ordered treatment and provides follow-up with clients for about a year; and Anna Harrison-Auld, administrator for adult outpatient and emergency services with Newport Country Community Mental Health Center. “We prioritize inmates when they’re released,” Harrison-Auld explained. “They can walk in on the day of discharge and have an application.”

Newport as a model. Thanks to this partnership, offenders returning to Newport are set up with coordinated services and are better able to function, unlike in past years when they would leave prison and get on a bus with nothing but a trash bag full of their belongings. The hope is to secure additional funding so a reentry center can be set up in downtown Newport and the results of these efforts can be tracked more formally. At one meeting, a discharge planner mentioned that only one of her clients has returned to prison out of all those released to Newport in the previous six or seven months. Robinson is only aware of two of her clients who have returned to prison. They were the ones who refused help.

Perhaps this model is so successful in Newport because of its small size and the close proximity of service providers. Maybe it is the fact that Jimmy Winters, community police officer and another important member of the council, has known most of the returning offenders and their extended families for much of their lives. Whatever the reason, it seems to be working.

Expanding the Effort

Providence Mayor David Cicilline has appointed his police chief to co-chair the reentry council there and has obtained grant money to hire a full-time reentry coordinator. In Pawtucket and Warwick, similar initiatives are just getting off the ground. In order for these efforts to be successful, three legs of the stool need to be in place to provide ex-offenders with the stability they need to reenter society.

Richman, who has been at this work for much of her 30-year DOC career, said: “First, prison officials need to begin preparing [offenders] for life outside the prison walls before they leave us. Then, the community has to put aside the stigma of dealing with people who have been incarcerated. But, most important, the offenders themselves have to want to make the necessary changes.”

Perhaps Cicilline said it best in his keynote address to the DOC’s offender reentry strategic-planning retreat back in September. The biggest challenge, as he sees it, is on an emotional level. Most Rhode Islanders’ gut reaction to the thought of devoting resources to ex-offenders is negative. It does not make sense to them. Those professionals engaged in this work see the benefits, but how do they persuade the

public? Clearly not with logic and evidence alone, according to Cicilline. It is really a matter of using different language to talk about this work so that it is not focused on individual offenders. It has to be about communities protecting themselves — people who do not want to be victims or to have their own neighbors victimized again. Any community that neglects this work is risking the safety of its citizens. “We are not building an ex-offender community support system but a community protection strategy,” Cicilline argued. “Changing our language in this discussion really isn’t political spin. It really is about communities.”

The two successful emerging partnerships with law enforcement and the four regional reentry councils in Rhode Island all play a critical role in the state’s commitment to effective prisoner reentry. It is through deliberate connections at the ground level that Rhode Island will begin to see a drop in recidivism rates and save taxpayer money by ensuring that the thousands of people released from prison each year will stay out. It is about a whole new way of doing business in corrections, and like any change, there are bound to be growing pains. In the long run, though, the gain will far exceed the pain.

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