

Reducing Recidivism:

Corrections directors in five states share lessons learned

In decades past, the corrections director's responsibility for offenders typically ended when they walked out the prison gate. No more. Today, those who run our state correctional systems are deeply invested in the chapter that follows incarceration – reentry and efforts to keep ex-offenders from committing new crimes.

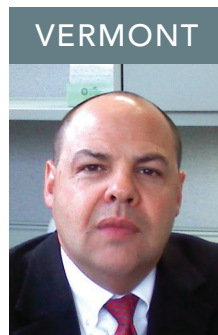
Pew's Public Safety Performance Project spoke recently with five state corrections directors about their strategies for reducing recidivism and the barriers that complicate the job. The overall message? Helping offenders succeed after incarceration is everyone's business, and a top priority for states in lean economic times.



Harold W. Clarke
Director



Justin Jones
Director



Andrew A. Pallito
Commissioner



LaDonna H. Thompson
Commissioner



Max Williams
Director

Q Over the past decade, more corrections leaders are embracing recidivism reduction as a goal. What does this mean and why is it happening?

A THOMPSON: Historically, our goal was to protect public safety through incarceration, and it really wasn't our job to make sure the transition after that went smoothly. We had programs to keep inmates busy but not much to

prepare folks for life after prison. With the budget crunch, the sheer numbers of people incarcerated and the length of time we were keeping them came to light and legislators became aware of the huge expense. That gave us an opportunity to do things differently.

A WILLIAMS: It seems to me that the idea of reducing future criminal behavior has always been part of the mission of

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— Justin Jones, Director
Oklahoma Department of Corrections

corrections, this concept of rehabilitating. It may have been underfunded or lost as a priority, but it's always been there. What we're seeing now is this aligning of issues. One, we know more today than we used to about how to do it effectively – how to apply evidence-based programs and practices and how to target the right people. And secondly, we're looking to provide better value to the citizens of our states. The better value is that these people come out and don't re-victimize and return to prison.

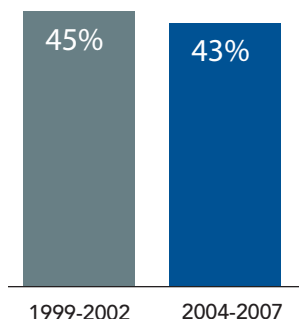
A CLARKE: The economy is causing us to take a closer look at how we're spending taxpayer dollars, and we recognize that we can't afford to keep building prisons as a short-term solution to public safety. What we're after is lasting public safety. And the way to get there is to have effective reentry programs. Incapacitation by itself will not do it.

Q Where does reducing recidivism fit in along with other goals?

A JONES: Most people would say that No. 1 is protecting the public, No. 2 is protecting employees, and the No. 3 goal is to protect offenders. But if you reduce recidivism you are accomplishing all those goals. When you address offenders' criminal risk factors, apply proper supervision, and reduce recidivism, you reduce victimization. And by having offenders engaged and busy at the institutional level, you keep them from assaulting one another and protect your employees at the same time.

A WILLIAMS: For me, reducing recidivism stands shoulder to shoulder with the other obligations we have of running safe and secure institutions. Part of our mission is clearly trying to change offender behavior, and if we do that, public safety improves. Unfortunately, if you look at how the resources are allocated, in my budget probably 90 percent goes to the first half of that equation – running safe and secure institutions – and a relatively small portion goes to the rehabilitative side. So the trick to operating in this era of shrinking resources is to leverage some amount of the other piece of the budget, so it's not just a counselor's responsibility, or a programmer's responsibility to reduce recidivism, but it's the job of custody staff as well.

Four in 10 prisoners return within three years of release



SOURCE: Pew Center on the States, *State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons* (2011), pp. 10-11.

Q Is it reasonable for policy makers and the public to expect the state to reduce its recidivism rate when resources for field supervision and pre-release and post-release services are shrinking?

A PALLITO: I think it's definitely in the state's control. The state spends money on substance abuse treatment, medical care, mental health services, job training programs, housing development, and many other services needed by many people coming out of prison. So we have the tools to influence whether people succeed or fail. What we have to do is make these services for offenders a priority and pay for them by controlling costs in other parts of the correctional system.

A JONES: In Oklahoma, we've had to cut our budget almost 20 percent in the last three years, but there are good and bad things about the recession. The good thing is it forces you to really examine the programs and make sure they're

working, and cut them if they aren't. It also requires us to increase collaborations with non-government partners, like volunteer organizations, offender advocacy groups, foundations, non-profits, and other concerned stakeholders, and ask them to do different things. So if you have someone leading a church service for inmates, you say, 'Gee, would you mind tutoring 10 inmates in math as well?'

A THOMPSON: In Kentucky we're lucky to have some enlightened legislators who understand that we can't cut the recidivism rate unless we have resources to supervise folks in the community. So we did get some additional staffing for that. But our challenge remains resources in the community – substance abuse and mental health treatment, job training and placement, housing – especially in rural areas. They are not there. So when we send inmates back closer to home for their transition, some of those areas don't have those resources. And even in urban areas we don't have enough.

Q To what extent do governors and legislators look to corrections administrators to spearhead statewide recidivism reduction plans? Who are other critical partners and what strategies have you used to engage them in your efforts?

A PALLITO: They squarely put it on us and they're correct. We are the ones with the tools, the ones with day-to-day

experience with offenders. But if you accept that the department is the expert in risk assessment, expert in treatment, expert in reentry decisions, then we need the authority that goes along with that, and other parties don't necessarily want to give that up.

A THOMPSON: That has been one benefit of the budget crunch. In the past, corrections was really a stand-alone agency in a way. Now everyone understands that these folks are coming out of prison and that it's a commonwealth issue, not just a department issue. Our governor put together a Reentry Task Force that includes other state agencies so we take a broad look at the goal of helping people stay out. So all these hurdles convicted felons have – housing, transportation, work – they get addressed by all these partners. We make the case that if these folks succeed, if we make this investment in them now, then it's fewer future victims, more tax money, all those good things.

A CLARKE: Reentry doesn't occur in a vacuum. It occurs in a community. So we need to rely on the community these offenders are going back to as partners. I'm talking about social services agencies; rehabilitation services; employment commissions; housing agencies; community mental health; medical care providers; nursing homes; the state Department of Motor Vehicles. In Virginia we are creating local reentry councils that are spearheaded by the Secretary of

Public Safety. They are still evolving in some communities, but these councils bring together different stakeholders to coordinate services. This is not an issue corrections owns. It's everyone's job.

A JONES: Even though the governor will always go to the corrections director and say, 'What are you doing about recidivism,' the fact is you have to engage all of the criminal justice partners, all your community activist groups, even inmate advocacy groups in the effort. Foundations are another key partner for us, because it turns out that a lot of the work they're doing overlaps with stuff we're trying to do with offenders and their families. The potential connections are endless.

A WILLIAMS: Several years ago we organized a Reentry Council, and through an executive order from the governor I got all the other major state agencies who have responsibilities that impact our folks to sit around a table, along with county representatives and others, and look at the barriers to effective reentry. This council has established statewide goals and objectives, many of which relate to essentials like housing, employment, and continuity of health and mental health care. The other key partners are the counties, which run probation and parole in Oregon. I can do certain things at my level on broad policy, but successful reentry has to happen locally and it's very, very difficult to drive that from a state office.

Q What are the most important policy steps states can take to reduce recidivism?

A JONES: The most important step is to embrace science and ensure all your programs and practices are evidence-based. Next you need to use a risk assessment tool at sentencing and for any type of release mechanism, such as parole. It's also essential that sentencing enhancements and other ways states adopt increasingly punitive measures be based on research and not anecdotal cases. Finally, they should retool employee training and implement quality control to track staff's use of evidence-based techniques such as motivational interviewing.

A THOMPSON: Sometimes it takes some legislative assistance to clear roadblocks for offenders, who already have a challenge returning to their communities. I also think it's critical to have a general policy statement that helping people transition back is a commonwealth issue, and then to back it up by funding initiatives that will assist reentry.

A WILLIAMS: I think one key piece is the conversation about how we use prisons in the first place, or the idea that we should focus the limited and expensive resource of prison beds on serious crimes, and allow for lower level offenders to be managed through sanctions locally. That's a much more cost-effective and results-driven

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— Max Williams, Director
Oregon Department of Corrections

approach. Beyond that, policies that support targeting high and moderate offenders for our treatment and supervision dollars is another key piece. We know now that sorting people through use of a validated tool and figuring out who is most likely to reoffend, and then targeting them with our services and supervision, is the key to success with recidivism. Along with that, we need to apply programs that are evidencebased. It's one thing to identify and target the right people, but then you have to match the right program to the person proven to have the risks and needs that particular program addresses.

A CLARKE: It's very important that there be an articulation of a clear and unwavering vision. In Virginia, we have the executive order that Gov. McDonnell issued to all agency heads and others laying out the importance of reentry and expressing mandates for all of us to follow. The other

helpful thing is developing structures for inter-agency planning, so there is a system where we all come to the table to think and plan for reentry. And of course it's important that at the very top, they recognize that there will be occasions where we get high media attention when some offender does something foolish, but that we have to stay the course. That's essential.

Q What data should policy makers ask for to track progress toward a lower recidivism rate in their state? Are those data typically available?

A JONES: The first thing is to decide on a definition of recidivism. Then you should look at incarceration rates and also rearrest rates, as those are indicative of offender activity and law enforcement engagements that are predictors of future incarceration. Tracking program participation is next, so that you have intermediate objectives that are being met to gauge progress. Corrections leaders need to make sure that programs include specifics about how progress is measured in relation to expected outcomes, and establish those data sets. Most of the key data should be readily available, or built into program contracts when they're established.

A THOMPSON: I will look at the number of parole violators I have now and then the number after we make our changes under new legislation. How many are coming back for new crimes, how many for something else? You can also look at the

type of offender coming back – their crime type, their risk level for custody. Then you can find out what kind of programs they were involved in, how they spent their time when they were out, and you develop trends and a picture of what's going on.

A WILLIAMS: We should look at some immediate markers that we know have a linkage to recidivism. Those might be abscond rates, rates of stable housing, employment, mentorship engagement, participation in post-release substance abuse and mental health programs, and so forth. Obviously sanction data on certain defined risk groups are indicators that may be more specific to the effectiveness of the system and more timely than the sometimes clunky recidivism numbers. In some cases, these other data are tougher to obtain or require our partners and nonprofits to track or report data that may not ultimately end up in the system. We as state leaders should require that contractors, cooperative agreements, reentry councils, and others identify the right data points, build data collection into their contracts and then establish baselines by which progress and performance can be measured.

Q What do you see as the appropriate federal role in supporting state efforts?

A PALLITO: I think those at the federal level can really help now by serving as champions for reentry, mostly through Second Chance Act money to help states transition these people out of prison.

Incarceration rates are high and so more people than ever are coming out. Many of them can't find a job or a place to live, so they need transitional housing, a multitude of programs, help with employment training. That's where the feds need to step up, and provide some real leadership.

A CLARKE: The federal government should serve as a repository for best practices, like a warehouse where states can access information. And as they've already done, they can help us by piloting national models of important programs, like Transition from Prison to Community. They should also provide grants to states to allow them to pursue initiatives, and help to set a national agenda for corrections.

A JONES: The federal role should be coordinating nationwide information sharing about what works and best practices. Also, we need them to provide seed funding for initiating best practices in jurisdictions that can demonstrate that all levels of government are invested in reducing recidivism. And we need them to invest in exploring innovation that is not on the best practice list yet. One final thing – we need the feds to promote science over politics. There is so much polarization around corrections. We need some mechanism to bring people together around best practices and effective correctional approaches, rather than having the debate dominated by sound bites about “tough on crime.”

A THOMPSON: Research is a big deal for me. Our department does not have a funded research person, so I need all the help I can get on data about what works and what doesn't. This is important because sometimes a legislator or member of the public will express interest in, say, boot camp or another program, and we need to have the research to prove that another type of program works better. I also value the training the federal government does and would like to see that expand so we not only understand best practices, but know how to put it all to work at home.

Launched in 2006, the Public Safety Performance Project seeks to help states advance fiscally sound, data-driven policies and practices in sentencing and corrections that protect public safety, hold offenders accountable and control corrections costs.

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Harold W. Clarke

Director, Virginia Department of Corrections

Previous Experience

President, American Correctional Association

President, Association of State Correctional Administrators

Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Correction

Secretary, Washington State Department of Corrections

Director, Nebraska Department of Correctional Services

Warden, Nebraska State Penitentiary

Justin Jones

Director, Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Board Member, Council of State Governments Justice Center

Co-Chairman, Reentry Committee, Association of State Correctional Administrators

Commissioner for Correctional Accreditation, American Correctional Association

Previous Experience

Deputy Director of Community Corrections, Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Regional Director of Institutions, Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Warden, Probation and Parole Officer, Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Andrew A. Pallito

Commissioner, Vermont Department of Corrections

Vice President, Northeast Association of Correctional Administrators

Previous Experience

Management Executive, Vermont Department of Corrections

Deputy Commissioner, Vermont Department of Corrections

Fiscal Analyst, Vermont Agency of Human Services

LaDonna H. Thompson

Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Corrections

Co-Chairwoman, Training Committee, Association of State Correctional Administrators

Regional Representative, Executive Committee, Association of State Correctional Administrators

Previous Experience

Deputy Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Corrections

Correctional Officer, Kentucky Department of Corrections

Max Williams

Director, Oregon Department of Corrections

Vice Chairman, National Institute of Corrections Advisory Board

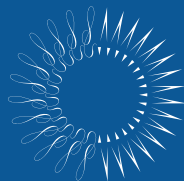
Previous Experience

Chairman, Oregon House Judiciary Committee

Chairman, Oregon Legislative Counsel Committee

Member, National Conference of State Legislatures Executive Committee

Attorney, Miller Nash LLP



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901 E STREET, NW, 10TH FLOOR • WASHINGTON, DC 20004

WWW.PEWCENTERONTHESTATES.ORG