
Creating Better Transitions at Indiana's Plainfield Reentry Educational Facility

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This year in Indiana, more than 17,000 offenders will be released from the state's prisons. These men and women—particularly those who have served lengthy sentences—face significant challenges as they return to the community. Most have inadequate job skills, little work experience, insufficient education, poor personal management skills, and few social support systems. They are in need of housing, employment, education, medical and mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and a variety of other services to help them live as productive and law-abiding citizens. Furthermore, they generally return to the same environment or situation that fostered their criminal activity in the first place, so it is not surprising that nearly 4 out of every 10 will recidivate within the next 3 years. Many do so within the very first month following their release—returning to prison, keeping already troubled families and neighborhoods in emotional and financial turmoil, perpetuating the criminal cycle, and jeopardizing public safety.

Nationwide, the issue of recidivism is a significant and growing concern as increasing numbers of offenders are released from incarceration. The Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) currently houses approximately 25,000 adult offenders, and the number of new commitments continues to increase each year. In order to accomplish its paramount duty of maintaining safe and secure facilities, the IDOC demands the second largest portion of the state budget, with direct expenditures approaching \$600 million last year. Yet the cost to the public is compounded dramatically in both dollars and additional victimizations when ex-offenders commit new crimes and return to prison.

Focus: Reducing Recidivism

Recognizing that successful reentry is critical to reducing recidivism, the IDOC in 2005 initiated a comprehensive strategy to reduce the state's recidivism rate by focusing its mission toward successful offender reentry. By implementing better procedures for case management, strengthening connections with agencies at the state and local levels, and establishing new partnerships with community stakeholders, the IDOC has improved how offenders are prepared for their return to the community.

These efforts employ evidence-based practices and a broad, systems approach in addressing the key areas of education, job training, housing assistance, substance abuse treatment, medical care, and mental health treatment. This work has placed Indiana as one of the nation's leaders in prisoner reentry initiatives.

The flagship of Indiana's reentry initiatives has been the development of an innovative new facility with a mission focused entirely on preparing offenders for their return to the community. The Plainfield Reentry Educational Facility (PREF) opened in January 2006 and is the first of its kind in the country. Set on 240 picturesque acres (the former site of the historic Indiana Boys' School), PREF is a unique facility that specifically targets the key areas of education, vocational training, and life skills development.

The PREF Philosophy

At the core of PREF's approach is the notion that reentry is a philosophy, not a program. PREF has an operating capacity of 404, offering an open environment and a daily operation that reflects the "real world" to which the offenders will soon be returning. The adult male population is referred to as "residents." Residents wear civilian clothing rather than typical prison uniforms, and the entire facility operates in a culture of respect and mutual support. Establishing and acclimating to this environment has been a significant challenge for staff and residents alike, as PREF works to change not only the culture of traditional corrections, but also to confront the attitudes and beliefs of a society which is still very focused on retributive, punitive justice.

The foundation of PREF's unique program is the work of reentry specialists, who are specially selected and trained case managers. They maintain low case-loads that allow them to work closely with the residents to provide highly individualized programming and case management. Focused reentry planning is based on each resident's Reentry Accountability Plan (RAP), which identifies areas of specific need and targeted interventions to help the resident resolve these problem areas and prepare them for successful and productive living in the community.

In facilities throughout the IDOC, most offenders participate in a variety of programs designed to support successful reentry, including education, vocational training, substance abuse treatment, and cognitive-behavioral programs. The department also mandates a standardized 65-hour, pre-release curriculum that addresses issues such as life skills training, educational advancement, accessing community resources, and job search training. (A modified 15-hour curriculum is also available as release circumstances warrant.)

PREF is unique in that it addresses each of these areas as a "full immersion" experience, rather than as an isolated program. While PREF's programming focuses intensively on the key areas of education, vocational development, and life-skills training, a variety of other important need areas are also addressed, including substance abuse treatment, family reunification and parenting, anger management, and problem-solving. Custody and facility maintenance staff assume non-traditional roles and are an integral part of a comprehensive Unit Team, working closely with the residents as teachers, supervisors, coaches, mentors, and role models.

Program Elements

Though PREF is a minimum-security facility and may appear to be more like a laid-back college campus than a correctional facility, it is in fact a highly demanding program. All residents have volunteered to participate and are approved through a meticulous application process. Qualifying residents must meet stringent classification criteria, be within 12 to 24 months of release, and commit themselves to participating in a program that is far more demanding than those in the larger, higher-security facilities in which they may have spent many months or years. Residents are responsible for their own success, and they are held to the highest standards of conduct. Those who do not meet or maintain PREF's expectations for behavior, attitude, or participation are terminated from the program and transferred to another facility appropriate to their classification and risk level. In return, the PREF program offers its committed residents a number of unique and valuable opportunities designed to provide them with the best chance for success after their release.

Education and vocational skills development. All residents participate in educational or vocational programming. Those who have already earned a high school diploma or GED and have obtained a vocational training certificate or have an occupational specialty are classified into appropriate jobs. Residents may work either inside the facility or on one of several "outside" job assignments. Educational programs cover the full spectrum from basic literacy to GED preparation and testing. Vocational programs provide skill-based training in occupations that include business services, building trades, culinary arts, electronics repair, landscape management and horticulture, and small engine repair. PREF also has partnered with the Indiana Department of Workforce Development to create the "Major Opportunities" program. This groundbreaking program provides qualified residents with classroom instruction and on-site, on-the-job training. The program is currently in a pilot phase with the Indiana Department of Transportation. Residents who successfully complete this program become eligible for regular, full-time employment with that agency upon their release.

Employment assistance. A variety of classes and workshops assist residents in developing basic employability skills and preparing résumés. To supplement these programs, PREF also employs a full-time, on-site representative from the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, who works closely with area employers and the facility's Unit Teams to match qualified and appropriate residents with viable employment after release. Assisting residents with the wide variety of employability issues that confront ex-offenders is a key focus at PREF. The ability to obtain and maintain stable employment is most often the critical difference between succeeding in the community or returning to prison.

Families and children. Family reunification is also an important focus in preparing many PREF residents for release. Specialized programs help prepare the men to return to their families as husbands and fathers. "Inside Out Dads" and "Reading with Dad" help residents re-establish their parenting role. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) is a recognized best-practice program that strengthens the marital bond and reduces divorce rates,

commonly high among ex-offenders. A representative from the state's Department of Child Services/Child Support Bureau is on-site regularly to assist residents with child support issues and help develop achievable payment plans if necessary.

Financial services. PREF residents also have the opportunity to establish a savings account. Lincoln Bank, a local financial institution, has partnered with PREF to provide residents with this invaluable service, unavailable in any other prison setting. PREF residents receive a debit card for use at the facility, manage their own account funds, and on release have an established, active bank account. This unprecedented opportunity gives ex-offenders a solid foundation that is critical for establishing and building financial independence and responsibility.

Life skills. Important life- and social-skills training opportunities are provided throughout the resident's stay at PREF. A variety of classes, workshops, and volunteer-facilitated programs all focus on helping the resident successfully transition from "inmate" to community citizen. But it is the facility-wide PREF culture of support, teamwork, and mutual respect that is perhaps the most critical training opportunity of all. It is this culture that provides an ever-present role-modeling of the values and character traits necessary for success in the demanding life ex-offenders will face after they are released from incarceration.

Coordination at Release

Since PREF opened in January 2006, more than 200 residents have completed the program and been released to parole or probation. Approximately 75% of these releases are to state parole supervision, and 25% are to county probation. PREF currently averages about 10 releases each month. At all facilities throughout the IDOC, representatives from parole work closely with the offender's Unit Team. PREF is unique in that the local parole district office is actually located inside the facility, which provides for an effective collaboration and allows parole staff to play an active, integral role in helping residents prepare for release.

In Indiana, probation is administered by individual county courts that do not fall under the direction of the IDOC; however, PREF's Re-Entry Specialists collaborate closely with the designated probation office to ensure that critical issues of housing, employment, and transportation are addressed prior to the residents' release. In the event a resident is to be released without any formal post-release supervision, PREF's Re-Entry Specialists work intensively with the resident and community service providers to identify appropriate and accessible resources that will provide necessary aftercare and support services.

While it is too early to draw any data-based conclusions, early numbers indicate that only 5% of the residents released by PREF thus far have been returned to IDOC custody. Ultimately, of course, the success or failure of this new approach to reentry preparation will be determined by the residents' ability and willingness to use the tools and resources PREF provides. Nevertheless, PREF is a working example of the IDOC's commitment to reducing recidivism and providing for greater public safety in Indiana. ♦

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