

# **PERSPECTIVES ON REENTRY IN CENTRAL ARKANSAS**

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## **A Summary Report**

As part of a larger initiative to improve the experience of ex offenders in the Central Arkansas Community, Clinton School Students Kimberly Caldwell, Ben Kaufman and Ryan Ubuntu Olson interviewed a diverse set of reentry stakeholders to understand their perspective on the issues facing this underserved population and opportunities for transforming lives. Interviewees include an ex-offenders, city employees, a college professor, an after school program manager, a racial and cultural diversity program officer, and members of the health and addiction community, among others.

From these conversations, the team recognized four key areas affecting the reentry experience and the community members and service providers working in the field:

1. Ex-offenders are not just a sum of their problems, but rather whole people who are rebuilding their lives. Their struggles are interrelated and require a holistic approach for success.
2. The ex-offender population is incredibly diverse, meaning that even within subpopulations like men, women, juveniles, etc., there is great variance in need and experience. Thus, any systematic approach to improving reentry must allow for flexibility based on the needs of the individual.
3. The lives of ex-offenders are caught up in and impacted by many systems and institutions such as the criminal justice system, poverty and embedded racism. Any real change in the experience of former offenders in Central Arkansas will require critical analysis of and change in the larger context of these systems.
4. Different service providers and interested community members are starting to come together to affect change in reentry, but more collaboration and inclusion of diverse services will be necessary to change the trajectory of recidivism in the community.

These findings are interconnected and build on the awareness gained from the previous statement. To address these findings, the team has identified four recommendations for the Central Arkansas Reentry Coalition to implement as part of their strategic plan.

1. **Applying holistic approach to care:** To engage a holistic approach towards care for ex-offenders, members of the coalition should help their clients understand the opportunities for complementary or seemingly-unrelated services in the community. This can be achieved by utilizing the database consisting of coalition members. In the future, the coalition may seek to employ a case management approach to services, having one individual help a former offender navigate the systems to receive the care that they need.
2. **Allowing flexibility for diverse needs:** In administering current programs and creating new programs, coalition members should ensure cultural, social and political awareness, and create opportunities for clients to express and understand their own diverse experience. Further,

coalition members should examine their intake processes and employee sensitivity towards diversity to ensure quality service with attention to the flexibility required for individuals.

3. **Addressing institutional barriers:** The coalition should seek to better understand and address the systemic barriers to success both leading to and following imprisonment. These barriers should be discussed openly, without judgment by the coalition in an effort to generate community- and policy-level opportunities for change.
4. **Collaborating for maximum impact:** Members of the coalition should continue to collaborate to seek Second Chance Act funding. Additionally, the coalition should actively recruit new organizations and community members to join who will bring diversity in perspective and approach, focused foremost on the myriad needs felt by ex-offenders.

Again, these recommendations are interrelated and cyclical; success in each of these areas should increase understanding and ability for progress in others. The team has identified questions to help guide the coalition through conversations about applying these findings and recommendations. Additionally, the team has identified potential new coalition members to engage as the group carries out its mission to align services and create opportunities for former offenders, families and at risk youth to achieve a full life out of the prison system.

