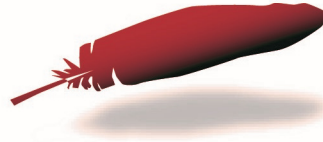


National Indian Health Board



Reentry Series Part I: Need for Reentry Efforts

This article is the first in a series that will look at successful reentry strategies with a special focus on offenders with a history of substance abuse, including meth use. The National Indian Health Board will run this series in the Visions newsletter on a quarterly basis.

Over the last several years, many corrections facilities nationwide have faced budget cuts leading to closures and severe overcrowding. Those serving American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) populations have been particularly hard hit. Overcrowded facilities and high prisoner to guard ratios are associated with higher rates of internal violence. Lack of funding also limits detention healthcare and rehabilitation programs, including those specifically geared toward AI/AN's. Policy makers for some systems have sought to address funding shortfalls by releasing lower risk offenders. When added to offenders already slated for release, some communities are seeing large numbers of offenders re-entering the community. This has caused concern for public safety and an apprehension that some offenders may not be successfully rehabilitated. The search for successful strategies has renewed attention and interest on reentry programs.

Finding Solutions

Efficient and effective ways of assisting offenders successfully reenter the community answer these concerns. Reentry programs that help keep offenders from reoffending and returning to detention facilities are cost-effective for communities as well as beneficial for individuals. These programs may focus on assisting with job placement, facilitating access to drug-free housing, connecting offenders with behavioral health services, or providing other valuable supports.

All of these approaches share a critical component -- community collaboration. Achieving this level of community support can be challenging, however. For many Tribal communities, stigma surrounding incarceration poses a formidable challenge. Fortunately, Tribal courts, and other Tribal institutions, can provide a forum to bring community stakeholders into the reentry process while breaking down stigma.

Eugene White-Fish, Chief Judge of Forest County Potawatomi, explained that Tribal courts often take a healing and teaching approach that fosters community collaboration. "The community has the ability to carry on the healing process and to *habilitate* the individual --to teach something that has never been taught to them, rather than to *rehabilitate*—to teach something that has already been taught." Judge White-Fish also believes that habilitation of the community to overcome stigma can be possible over time. Engaging the community in the reentry process can help ease tensions and clarify negative assumptions about an offender.

Identifying and Overcoming Challenges

Substantial numbers of prisoners have a history of substance abuse and/or mental illness that may be directly related to the crimes they committed. Given this fact, reentry services that go beyond supervision and disciplinary actions are vital in successful reentry of many offenders. Unfortunately, there is often a disconnect between behavioral health services and the criminal justice system. The two

parties have traditionally worked separately and even the language used to describe services for offenders varies. In the behavioral health system, providers use the term *aftercare* to describe services provided to clients in recovery and reentering the community. The justice system uses the term *reentry* to describe this period of time and the services offered to offenders.

To make reentry work, justice system partners and behavioral health providers must cooperate and coordinate with each other. This approach often requires memorandums of agreement, an understanding of privacy policies, and training, among other measures.

Methamphetamine and Reentry

Methamphetamine (meth) users that are released from detention run a particularly high risk of relapse and recidivism. Generally, meth users pose greater challenges due to the uniquely difficult nature of meth addiction and the extended/intensive treatment required. For this reason, Tribal programs addressing methamphetamine use may be especially valuable partners in reentry efforts. Some programs have already been deployed to serve this population, but there is much more work to be done.

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