

Inside and Out – Teaching the Recently Incarcerated How to Get to Work

LaGuardia Community College offered GED instruction to inmates at Riker's Island - a detention facility located near LaGuardia's campus. In recent years, for a host of reasons, that work was downsized. The GED instruction that LaGuardia offered was never seen as sufficient to support the successful transition of program participants from Riker's to the communities that they returned to. In an effort to offer a more comprehensive program that might actually help to prevent recidivism, LaGuardia recently partnered with The New York Department of Corrections to create a very ambitious program model thought to cover much of what would be required to give participants the tools to start a new page in their lives. The program included academic instruction and a wide variety of other resources, including additional training on LaGuardia's campus and a potpourri of financial incentives. Nineteen women were chosen to participate in the program. All women were scheduled to be released from Riker's between one to six months from the start of the program. A substantial part of this program was the offer of internships and job search assistance to a pool of women demonstrating a wide range and academic and life skills preparedness/deficiencies. This presentation will share the details and outcomes of this program as well as LaGuardia's planned next steps in this area.

Introduction

The United States has the highest incarceration rate of any nation in the world (Walmsley, 2012) and also imprisons more women than any other prison system (Hartney, 2006). Even though the number being released are increasing as fast as the number being incarcerated, the Department of Justice estimates that two-thirds of those released will return to prison in three years or less (James 2011). The literature cites a variety of reasons for these numbers but two stand out most: lack of education and employment training. Though many of these programs used to be available, these have been downsized or discontinued across the country due to funding constraints. Even when these programs and services are available there is often low participation rates resulting from lack of program awareness, insufficient personal motivation; and competing demands that may take precedence over pursuing education (Visher, Debus, and Yahner 2008). Nonetheless, the literature confirms that educating prison inmates is a cost effective approach to reducing recidivism. A study by the U.S. Justice Department, carried out by the Rand Corporation, confirmed that inmates who participated in prison education programs had a 43 percent lower chance of returning to prison than those who did not. Despite these findings, at the heart of the problem is the absence of a funding source for these programs.

On a more surprising note, there is also a growing body of evidence confirming that teaching emotional literacy to inmates is too proving an effective tool to reducing recidivism. Studies indicate that through the use of mindfulness-based practices, research driven approaches to behavior change, and the inspiration derived from the support of other prisoners, insiders can develop a real sense of hopefulness (Casarjan 2000). The evidence also suggests that emotional literacy training results in increases in self-esteem, moral maturity, and spiritual consciousness, as well as by decreases in hostility and depression. Finally, the evidence also suggests that

increases in emotional literacy can result in positive behavioral changes characterized by improved self-control, particularly of impulsive and aggressive behaviors as indicated through a decrease in number of disciplinary reports and decreased conflict with the law once released from prison. Undoubtedly, these are all characteristics that may help the released stay released.

Finally, one of the characteristics of a prisoner reentry model proven to work is a community-based after care component where participants maintain supportive relationships with outsiders that can help them keep focused, refer them to resources and monitor their use and strengthening of the tools they developed inside.

For many years LaGuardia Community College was a key player in providing education services to Riker's Island, a detention facility located near LaGuardia's campus. These services were provided on and off the Island. As with others, LaGuardia's services to Riker's were discontinued when the funding for such programs disappeared. Recently, LaGuardia's Division of Adult & Continuing Education partnered with the New York City Department of Corrections to reintroduce a program to a small population at Riker's. This program offered seventeen women the best of all worlds: a strategically designed academic and skills training curriculum, a curriculum rich in emotional literacy training and the support of a committed group of administrators, staff and instructors. The program was aptly called "Hired!".

Hired!

Hired was piloted for a small number of women at Riker's sole woman's facility, Rose M. Singer.* [Rose M. Singer, was an original member of the New York City Board of Correction. She was also founder and president emeritus of the Friendly Visitor's, a all-women service group that helped women in prison by referring them to resources and offering friendship.] The program was also LaGuardia's way of generating momentum for the

reintroduction of education offerings inside prison walls and to break new ground to see what mixture of education and therapeutic tools might best reduce the revolving door of recidivism.

Hired! was the name chosen for the pilot program for good reason. The goal of the program was to offer training that would provide enough skills in a short period of time to make program participants immediately employable upon release. Built into the program design were additional post-release supports from LaGuardia to help the women access resources and avoid some of the traditional problems associated with recidivism – employment, housing, benefit recertification, education and “go to” people that could help to resolve upcoming issues or make appropriate referrals. The program model included an innovative mix of academic and therapeutic offerings and a variety of other resources. The other resources included the offer of additional training on LaGuardia’s campus and a potpourri of financial incentives hoped to help program participants permanently sever their ties to Riker’s, other similar facilities and those habits tied to their past lives.

Fifty applications were reviewed, nineteen women were chosen, and eighteen actually participated in the program with seventeen completing. All women were scheduled to be released from Riker's between one to six months from the start of the program. A substantial part of the program was the offer of internships and job search assistance to a pool of women whose education levels ranged from less than a high school diploma to a Bachelor’s degree and from those with no computer skills to some more tech savvy than the instructor. The program focused on the development of customer service skills. This industry was chosen for a number of reasons:

- ease in operationalizing

- required classroom space and computers, both of which Riker's had available
- o favorable employment outlook
- o receptiveness to hiring the recently incarcerated
- o low barriers to entry

The program administrators agreed with much of the available literature, and as appropriately related in some of the Program's initial reports:

... "in-prison interventions need to be supported by community based aftercare. If you give services behind bars without aftercare, you get no effect of the intervention, no effect whatsoever."

http://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/Reentry_Courts.pdf

For this reason, the *Hired!* program also had the customary pre- and post-release components:

Pre-release Components

The program inside Riker's included three areas:

- Academic curriculum
 - o Customer service training
 - Professional Development
 - Interviewing
 - Job search strategies
 - Who are the more 'tolerant' employers
 - o Introduction to Computers
 - Resume building/design

- Explaining the gaps in work history
- Active listening
 - Engaged listening
 - Listening to learn
 - Listening for help to change/transform past lives
- Moral Reconnection Therapy (*MRT*) is a systematic treatment strategy that seeks to decrease recidivism among juveniles and adults by increasing moral reasoning. Its cognitive-behavioral approach combines elements from a variety of psychological traditions to progressively address ego, social, moral, and positive behavioral growth.
<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/Viewintervention.aspx?id=34>
- Transcendental Meditation
 - Provided by the David Lynch Foundation
 - a technique for reducing anxiety and promoting harmony and self-realization – a less intimidating meditative form where there are no “wrongs” in the practice.
<http://www.davidlynchfoundation.org/prisons.html>
- Additional Hard Skill Training
 - To further improve employability students also participated in the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Food Protection and American Health and Safety Institute CPR/First Aid/AED courses. These classes were scheduled outside of the Hired! schedule.

Post-release Components

Refresher

A five day individualized course where students would be scheduled to work with the “inside” instructor and the LaGuardia Career Development staff to: prepare a resume and cover letter; practice interviewing; learn how to use LaGuardia’s resources to look for employment; and access referrals to supportive services including benefits, health care, (transitional) housing, etc. It was always agreed that the Refresher would be individualized due to the different release dates, different skill levels and specific needs of program participants.

Internships

Following the refresher course, students were scheduled to enroll immediately in a two month 25 hour per week paid on the job training program (the “internship”). The goal of the internship was to allow students to practice how to apply skills acquired during the “inside” training in a real world setting; allow students to obtain work experience; and to allow students to earn money during this period to help with living expenses such as food, clothing, and shelter. It was also hoped this period would provide an opportunity for students to actively use the job search strategies they were introduced to from the “inside” training to successfully transition to full-time employment during or immediately following the internship.

Support Group/Reflection

Finally, to promote job retention, LaGuardia offered to host a monthly support group for program graduates – the reflection component. It was hoped that students would use this time to discuss the successes and challenges of their new work life and provide role modeling and/or receive guidance from staff and peers. Further, the LaGuardia team was prepared to discuss and encourage participants to pursue training and additional educational opportunities at the college and/or in outside communities

An additional goal of the program was to assist the students in accessing social services and housing upon release. After completion of the “inside” component program administrators hoped that students would have:

- a professional resume;
- be prepared for a job interview; and
- be employable and able to provide professional customer service.

Administrators also hoped for some intangibles, i.e., they hoped that as a result of the program the students would be better able to reason more constructively and would have greater capacity for resiliency in overcoming some of the “traditional” life issues and some of those issues directly related to their past. Finally, program administrators hoped that LaGuardia could provide a bridge to other services (like the “refresher” training) both outside the College such as referral to therapeutic communities, housing, employment, benefits and social services as well inside the College, such as high school equivalency preparation, non-credit, free (grant-funded) training and credit degree programs.

During the *Hired!* Program participants earned \$30 per week for participation and attendance which they were told would be paid to them each day they came to LaGuardia’s campus during the “refresher”. They were also promised additional items for their “after incarceration” participation with LaGuardia. These additional items included gift certificates for a pharmacy and a clothing store, a college T shirt and two unlimited metro cards. Students who were determined to be job ready were also promised referral to employment or the option to participate in a two month paid on-the-job training program at the College (an “internship”). Ultimately the program’s goal was to reduce the high rate of recidivism (estimated between 40-

60% depending on re-arrest rates or re-imprisonment rates) that has become a statistical constant for those calling Riker's home for even short periods of time.

The Students

Of the nineteen women initially chosen, seventeen actually completed the program. Three additional detainees were chosen to facilitate the Moral Reconciliation Therapy workshop. These women also benefitted from the Transcendental Meditation training but otherwise were not required to participate in the academic curriculum.

Demographics

Of the seventeen students that completed the program, though all were women, they were diverse in their ages, ethnicities and education levels. Eleven of the women were African American, five were Hispanic and one was white (neither Hispanic nor African American). Four of the women were in their late teens or early twenties, many were substantially older, five of the women had a Bachelor's degree or better, at least two had some college but no degree, and at least five of the women had no high school diploma or GED. A small population of the women had been "inside" multiple times, many of these had children and some even had grandchildren.

The Outcomes

At first blush the program outcomes are discouraging. Of the seventeen participants nine never came to LaGuardia after release. One of the detainees was transferred to a state prison, five came for one or two days and received some of the promised gifts and referrals.

Two of the students, however, provide hopeful results worth investigating further. These two students came to LaGuardia for an average of five days each. Both of these students are currently employed. One found outside employment and one accepted an internship in an office on LaGuardia's campus. Some of the distinguishing factors for these two students seemed to be their motivation to create a new life for themselves and their motivation to make the best of the

promises LaGuardia made, the increased number of visits to LaGuardia's campus, and their post-release relationship with the "inside" instructor, who happens to be a member of the faculty at LaGuardia.

Conclusions

Community based aftercare is one of the factors believed to reduce recidivism is the notion of community based aftercare. Hour Children is a prisoner reentry model that boasts one of the lowest recidivism rates known to this author. Hour Children begins its work with incarcerated mothers and their children inside the prison with a primary focus on reuniting the mothers with their children, providing advocacy and legal assistance. This work continues outside of the prison where Hour Children provides housing and a host of other services to the mothers and their children to support their successful transition from prison to the Long Island City community where they live together when they are released. The Program currently boasts a 3.5% recidivism rate, far lower than the 40% rate statewide reported by the New York State Department of Corrections (Hour Children: Supportive Services, 2010). The Program also maintains a strong community presence by operating local thrift shops, a food pantry, a daycare, an after school program and a summer day camp. This presence supports the integration of participating women and their families into the community where they live for up to two years as transitional residents or for even longer periods if they become permanent residents. One of the distinguishing factors of Hour Children is how the participating women transition from inside their prison homes where they have already been adopted into the Hour Children family to outside where this relationship continues somewhat seamlessly. There are no time constraints at Hour Children – participating women and families are allowed to get their "living" legs at their own pace with all the supports that the Hour Children program has to offer, which is often

referrals to outside resources. LaGuardia's Hired program surely had many of the elements available here, but maybe more is required.

On the whole, according to an initial summary of the Hired program, all participants were grateful for the experience. They reported that they learned a lot and were better prepared to get a job upon release thanks to the resume writing, customer service and job search training. The women also agreed that they found either the Moral Reconciliation Therapy or the Transcendental Meditation or both helpful as stress reducers and as tools they can use to keep them from returning.

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