

Ready4Work, a Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative

“Society pays a heavy price for crimes committed and for the incarceration of offenders. That price multiplies if offenders commit crime again. Therefore, the community has a strong interest in assisting ex-offenders to become successful members of the community, free of crime, living stable and productive lives.”¹

Jacksonville Community Council 2001

1. Community Need

According to the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, the majority of prisoners released in Northeast Florida are concentrated in Jacksonville, particularly in the region’s low-income, minority neighborhoods where poverty, unemployment, and other risk factors work against a successful re-entry. Most of the city’s poorest neighborhoods are located in Jacksonville’s federally designated *Empowerment Zone* (pop. 67,793) which is targeted for economic development and housing assistance because of its high poverty and crime rates.

Based on 2000 census data, Jacksonville’s poverty rate is 9.4 percent compared to the state’s nine percent, but the inner city Empowerment Zone neighborhoods have poverty rates ranging from a low of 22.2 percent to a high of 59.8 percent. This is also reflected in unemployment rates with Jacksonville having an unemployment rate of 4.8 percent compared to the state’s 4.4 percent (Local Area Unemployment Statistics, January 2005.) In Empowerment Zone neighborhoods, 2000 census data indicate unemployment rates averaging approximately seven percent.

Operation New Hope was created in 1999 as a community development corporation dedicated to the revitalization of Jacksonville’s declining neighborhoods. It recognizes that part of the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods is tied to helping ex-offenders reintegrate into the community by becoming contributing, productive residents. Therefore in addition to developing quality affordable housing it was felt that many in the inner city were lost in a vicious cycle of poverty that has led to crime. This innovative approach to community development has achieved high quality housing for many while also creating a new path out of crime through an intensive case management/jobs development initiative.

Every year, roughly 49,000 ex-offenders are released from jail or prison to live in Duval County². According to the *Florida Department of Corrections 2002-2003 Prison Release Report*, Duval County ranked sixth in the state for returning ex-offenders with a total of 1,401. For the same period, Circuit Four, which encompasses three counties in northeast Florida, had a total of 1,589, making Jacksonville home to 88 percent of the district’s returning ex-offenders from State facilities.

¹ Jacksonville Community Council Inc., Study: *Services for Ex-Offenders, A Report to the Citizens of Jacksonville*, Spring, 2001. (http://www.jcci.org/projects/reports/2001_services_exoffenders.aspx)

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National studies³ indicate that over two-thirds, or 66% of released prisoners re-offended or were re-imprisoned for a new offense within 36 months of release. **Operation New Hope's recidivism rate is 5%.** Information from the *Florida Department of Corrections Recidivism Report, 2003* reports that inmates released between 1999-2001 had a recidivism rate of 65.6%. This represents a significant number of ex-offenders who cannot transition to a crime-free life. The recidivism rate for Jacksonville is 54 percent⁴. Though lower than state and national figures, it represents a significant number of released offenders who pose a threat to public safety and property. The consequences of recidivism can prove debilitating to families and communities, but in neighborhoods suffering economic deprivation and high crime, these consequences only escalate a downward spiral.

In 2006, Jacksonville's murder rate was among the top 5% in the country. Jacksonville is on pace to have the highest murder rate in the state for the ninth year in a row. Many local criminologists believe that most violent crimes were committed by persons who began committing petty crimes that eventually escalated to a violent crime. It is also believed that effective intervention programs could have prevented many violent crimes.

To address the issue of prisoner reentry, *Jacksonville Community Council, Inc.*, initiated a study in 2001 to identify the needs of ex-offenders and the services needed to promote successful reentry. This study has been a useful road map for Operation New Hope during the development of its very successful re-entry initiatives. The study identified the lack of employment assistance as a community-wide "gap" and recommended a more proactive approach in helping ex-offenders prepare for, find and maintain employment. Recognizing that job security is a major factor in lowering recidivism, Operation New Hope's *Ready4Work* project leverages existing community efforts to employ ex-offenders.

2. Project Design and Service Strategy

In 2003 ONH was selected by The White House to develop and implement a federally funded national re-entry model called *Ready4Work*. This project was designed to facilitate the re-entry and employment of 125 ex-offenders. The Operation New Hope-Ready4Work project looks to expand capacity on the experience and lessons learned from its three-year White House Demonstration grant that has generated tremendous results. Our goal is to expand these services to a much broader group by continuing to develop more employment opportunities in high-demand/high growth industries.

The program goal is to both prepare the offender prior to release and to help ex-offenders successfully reintegrate by implementing a continuum of care that will support 1) meaningful long-term employment, 2) stable housing, 3) substance abuse and mental health treatment, and 4) the establishment of family and community relationships that support long-term reintegration efforts.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Reentry Trends in the U.S., (www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/recidivism.htm)

⁴ Florida Corrections Commission 1999 Annual Report (www.fcc.state.fl.us/fcc/reports/final99/9imp/html)

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To accomplish this goal, the project has the following objectives:

- Provide job readiness training, placement and support to qualified ex-offenders targeting high-growth/high demand jobs based on participants' employment needs.
- Provide intensive case management for all participants that incorporate social service providers, law enforcement and corrections officials, education entities, health care providers, families, employers and faith-based organizations to support re-entry.
- Provide each participant with a trained mentor to strengthen social networking and support re-entry activities.
- Expand partnerships with government agencies, social service providers, faith and community-based organizations, business and economic development organizations to ensure a broad range of opportunities for participants and program sustainability.

Plan to increase employment opportunities: Through past experience with the Ready4Work program, ONH has determined that the most effective results are achieved when ex-offenders and staff work together throughout the re-entry process in an intensive case management model. For ONH, the employer is the "client" and the job-ready, ex-offender is the "product" delivered.

Most job-related re-entry services such as assessment, work readiness, job placement, post placement support, follow up and case management are provided directly by ONH's trained staff of case managers/career counselors, job readiness trainers and job placement specialists (job developers.) Hard skills training is generally provided by employers who do on-the-job training.

A demand-driven approach in job development emphasizes seeking jobs in high-growth and high-demand occupations. Through its partnership with *WorkSource*, the local Work Force Development Board, Operation New Hope tracks the region's high-growth/high demand occupations and targets employers in these industries for job development. Past experience has shown that high growth/high demand industries frequently have problems filling their workforce needs and are receptive to hiring ex-offenders. Marketing is done primarily through job developers who work one-on-one with employers and through the staff who interface with various community groups giving presentations and promoting the work of ONH. Operation New Hope markets its participants as "ready for work" and supported by a network of individuals that help the ex-offender succeed in his/her job. The primary employers currently served by Operation New Hope are in the construction and service industries, two high growth/high demand sectors.⁵

Support service partners include the *Duval County Health Department* and *Shands Jacksonville*, for primary care, *Gateway Community Services* for substance abuse treatment, *Community Rehabilitation Center* for mental health services, *Jacksonville Housing Partnership* for affordable housing and HUD programs, *Florida Department of Children and Families* for social service referrals, and numerous community-based organizations that provide other support services such as housing, counseling,

⁵ WorkSource/First Coast Workforce Development Inc. Occupational Survey, prepared by Eriss Corp., 2005. (<http://www.usworks.com/jacksonville/>)

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transportation and other basic needs. ONH case managers provide counseling for post-release social service opportunities and refer participants to appropriate programs.

Education, GED, Certification & Literacy: Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) is ONH's primary education partner helping participants obtain high school diplomas or GEDs. FCCJ offers extensive courses in basic education and GED preparation as well as classes toward an associate degree and certificated training programs in many employment skills. The FCCJ Dean of Workforce Development serves on ONH's Ready4Work board. A unique element of ONH's training program is the financial literacy component. This course teaches participants basic money management skills, avoidance of credit card debt, and predatory lending practices.

3. Organizational Experience

Operation New Hope is a not-for-profit community-based organization served by people of faith. Its mission is to revitalize and sustain economically and ethnically diverse communities in Jacksonville where people are proud to live. In the 4TH quarter of 2003, ONH implemented Jacksonville's Ready4Work program, an ex-offender workforce development initiative of the U.S. Department of Labor, Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Ready4Work mobilizes local coalitions to work together for sustainable ex-offender re-entry and to improve outcomes for participants and the communities in which they live. During the three years of the Ready4Work program ONH served over 500 participants. The White House released the results of this initiative on March 22, 2007 and the success has exceeded everyone's expectations.

Data is compiled and reported weekly, monthly and quarterly. ONH purchased a tracking system called ETO- Social Solutions that is in place to collect data and generate reports. Program evaluations are reviewed periodically with staff and adjustment or improvements are continually made to meet stated goals and objectives. The University of North Florida school of Criminology has agreed to assist in data collection, analysis and reporting.

5. Results and Funds Leveraged

In Florida, inmate admissions in state prisons increased 10.4 percent from 28,882 in 2002-03 to 31,896 in 2003-04. Nationally, prisons and jails held 2.13 million inmates, up 2.3 percent over the previous year. Those entering prison for a crime committed on or after October 1, 1995 serve a minimum of 85 percent of their sentences. Approximately 97.5 percent of inmates admitted to prison over the past year were sentenced under the 85 percent law meaning increased costs for the state prison system. In FY 2003-04 the total daily cost per prisoner was \$48.23, an increase over the 2002-03 total of \$47.36. Private institutions were even higher averaging \$56.11 per day.⁶

In 2007 the cost to incarcerate in the Duval County Jail is \$61/day or \$22,265 to incarcerate one prisoner for a year. With a base of 500 (number to be served) and a local recidivism rate of 54 percent, 270 participants could be expected to be re-incarcerated within three years at a cost of \$6,011,550. However, with the ONH program of success at

⁶ Florida Department of Corrections, Budget, 2003-2004 Agency Annual Report

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maintaining a **five percent** re-incarceration rate and helping these individuals stay crime free, the program could save the state over **\$5,454,925** (\$6,011,550- \$556,625) annually.

Through a dynamic relationship with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and the Florida Department of Corrections it is now very apparent that developing a seamless re-entry transition is not only possible it is critical. With more rehabilitation taking place behind the walls communities have to become better prepared to partner with criminal justice partners receive individuals upon their return. Operation New Hope has proven to be a great community partner in the important hand off between offender and ex-offender.

The following outcomes are the benchmarks for measuring the ONH'S program performance:

- **Recidivism rate: 95 percent** of participants will not return to jail/prison due to the conviction of a new crime during the first year of program participation.
- 100% of participants will receive case management services
- Entered employment rate: 75 percent will enter employment within six months of enrollment.
- Employment retention rate: 70 percent will be employed for 90+ days after they begin work.
- A referral specialist will follow-up on 100% of every referral made to an outside partner.

The ONH-Ready4Work program will save approximately \$5.4 million per year in corrections costs and leverage funding from public and private sectors that is difficult to accurately quantify. However, we estimate (conservatively) the leveraged funding will be over \$2 million for housing, substance abuse and mental health treatment, primary care and on-the-job training alone. In the Ready4Work program 63 percent of job training costs are covered by business contributions. Other leveraged funding includes educational assistance, literacy training, clothing, volunteer mentor hours, and other support services.

ONH has developed a successful re-entry model that combines solid best practices in all of the major re-entry program components. This model could be duplicated around the state and could assist many communities in developing:

- Improved public safety
- Increase in workforce productivity
- Stronger families
- Tremendous reduction in incarceration costs

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