



Close To Home:

Building on Family Support for People Leaving Jail

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Executive Summary

Research shows that incarcerated men and women who maintain contact with supportive family members have greater success after their release—such as better employment outcomes and reduced drug use—than those who do not. Although corrections practitioners and policy makers often understand the positive role families can play, they may not know how to draw on people’s loved ones as a resource. To date, most research and programming in this area have focused on prisons. Because jail is substantially different—most notably, time served there is usually shorter—it is not clear that policies and practices that work in prisons can be applied successfully in jails.

To gauge the effectiveness of family-support strategies for people in jail, the Close to Home project of the Vera Institute of Justice provided training and technical assistance to staff at three jails in Maryland and Wisconsin. Specifically, Vera piloted facility staff’s use of the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT)—a series of questions designed to stimulate incarcerated individuals’ thinking about supportive family members as a resource—along with complementary communication techniques intended to help people living in these jails plan for their return to the community. These activities were accompanied by qualitative and quantitative research aimed at gauging participant and staff attitudes toward the work.

The project’s name, Close to Home, reflects the fact that people in jail are often geographically close enough to their family and friends that it is relatively easy for them to maintain contact. Notwithstanding this fact, the three facilities in this initiative were diverse in terms of size (small, medium, and large) and setting (urban and rural). Within these facilities, the project concentrated on three types of jail populations: people who had been sentenced; those who were awaiting trial or who had been incarcerated for a parole violation; and those near the end of their sentence who were preparing to return to the community.

Vera’s interviews and surveys with jail staff, incarcerated men and women, and family members at all three facilities found that social networks are important for the populations studied. Regardless of their sentencing status or length of incarceration, jailed men and women indicated they relied on family and friends to support them and assist in planning for reentering the community. Their stated reentry needs, besides emotional support while in jail, included housing, employment, and child care, and they said they anticipated relying on their loved ones throughout the process of reentry. Among the many types of support that participants received or expected to receive from their families, the most commonly voiced were the expectations that their families would help them stay drug free and meet their parole obligations.

These findings are consistent with findings from earlier Vera pilots of the RIT in prisons and in juvenile facilities. They suggest that jail staff—both corrections officers and case managers—can help incarcerated people identify supportive family members and help them use those resources as they prepare for the next step, whether that is going home or transferring to another jail, an immigrant-detention facility, or a prison. Additionally, use of family-oriented questions appeared to build rapport between staff and people in jail, improving their perceptions of one another.

FROM THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Many adult and juvenile justice systems are adopting family-focused tools and methods for working with the people in custody. Vera's Family Justice Program has provided some of these agencies with training, tools, and consultation that offer line staff safe and reliable strategies to help incarcerated people maintain contact with loved ones and incorporate them in constructive plans for returning to the community.

The size of the jail population across the United States has created an urgent need for counties to capitalize on the reentry efforts championed in these other systems. To date, however, no one has been able to determine if what works to build strong family support for people in and leaving prisons and juvenile facilities would also apply to men and women in jail.

Vera's Close to Home project is determined to fill that knowledge gap. By applying Vera's signature methodology—trying something new and keeping careful track of the resulting data—we are pioneering useful, generalizable knowledge about providing family-oriented tools and strategies in a jail setting.

As this report demonstrates, the initial evidence from our effort suggests that jails are indeed a fertile and practical arena for effective transition planning informed by family support. Although more remains to be done to determine how to optimize participant success and reduce recidivism, the evidence suggests that it is reasonable to believe that such efforts have the potential to improve public safety by reducing crime and victimization.

We look forward to continuing this line of inquiry in the coming months and years. We also look forward to working with and learning from our peers in this exciting, worthwhile, and timely endeavor.



Margaret diZerega

Director, Family Justice Program

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Introduction

Most policy research and innovation concerning people who are reentering the community after a period of incarceration has focused on prisons. Only in recent years have people in the criminal justice field paid more attention to the subject of going home from jail.

The word “jail” describes a broad range of settings typically categorized as small, medium, or large (See Figure 1). Jails can house people along the spectrum of involvement in the criminal justice system. This includes men and women who are awaiting trial, arraignment, or disposition, but have not been convicted of a crime.¹ People in jail awaiting trial have either been denied bail, had their bail revoked, could not afford to post bail, or their families and friends did not pay bail (often because they were unable to do so). Some people in jail are serving a sentence, have had their parole or probation revoked, or are awaiting deportation. Jails can also house those who are returning to their community after serving a sentence in a state or federal prison.

As has been well documented, many people in jail suffer from mental illness, substance use, and/or co-occurring disorders—circumstances often exacerbated by a lack of stable housing.² Sixty-four percent of people in jail have diagnosed mental health conditions, and 68 percent have reported harmful use of alcohol or other drugs in the year before their admission.³ Many jails, especially small or rural facilities, lack the resources or expertise to serve these populations. When untreated, these conditions contribute to people cycling in and out of the justice system; many return home in the same condition or worse than when they departed, commit new crimes, and are re-arrested. Moreover, even though people may stay in jail for a relatively short time and are held closer to their homes and families than their counterparts in prison, incarceration often triggers personal upheaval, such as losing custody of children, a job, or housing, that can undermine successful reentry.⁴

Research on people returning from prison shows that family members can be valuable sources of support during incarceration and after release. For example, adults who had more contact with their families while in prison and report positive relationships overall are less likely to be arrested again or re-incarcerated.⁵ Families can also motivate formerly incarcerated people to seek or continue drug treatment or mental health care.⁶ Families are the most frequent providers of housing for newly released people and often assist with childcare.⁷

In 2007, the Family Justice Program, then operating as the independent organization Family Justice, created the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT) to help corrections staff identify incarcerated people’s family resources. (The Family Justice Program interprets “family” broadly to include immediate, extended, and elected family members, such as romantic partners, friends, neighbors, and clergy.) The RIT—eight carefully crafted questions designed to facilitate conversations between corrections staff and incarcerated people about family support—was developed for use in case management and reentry planning as a complement to standard corrections risk and needs assessments.⁸ (See “The Relational Inquiry Tool: Sample Questions,” page 6.) Incarcerated people and their case managers would use this information

to connect with family members who could help them meet some of their reentry needs. In a practical sense this interaction could reduce the number of community-based social service referrals. Longer term, it also was expected to lead to better outcomes overall.

The RIT was successfully implemented in prison settings in Oklahoma and New Mexico, as documented in the Family Justice Program report *Reentry is Relational*.⁹ The Family Justice Program conducted the Close to Home project to examine the tool’s relevance for jail populations, using a slightly modified version of the original questions that took into account the disruptive effect of a jail stay on the lives of incarcerated people and their families. The project also sought to learn more about the roles jail staff and facility culture can play in fostering family and social support for people preparing to leave jail and returning to the community.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Jails Participating in the Close to Home Project

FACILITY	LOCATION	CAPACITY	AVERAGE DAILY POPULATION	CATEGORY ¹⁰
Green Lake County Correctional Facility, Green Lake, Wisconsin	Rural	108 ¹¹	66	Small
Montgomery County Pre-Release Center, Rockville, Maryland	Urban	177	170	Medium
Montgomery County Correctional Facility, Boyds, Maryland	Urban	1,028	760	Large

Project Overview

THE RELATIONAL INQUIRY TOOL: SAMPLE QUESTIONS

The Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT) uses questions like these to prompt corrections case managers and incarcerated individuals to have conversations that might not happen otherwise:

- “In thinking about your family support when you get out of prison/jail, what are you most excited about?”
- “In thinking about your family support when you get out of prison/jail, what do you think the greatest challenges will be?”
- “How did you help your family and friends before you came to prison/jail?”

The Family Justice Program launched the Close to Home project in October 2009. The project, which concluded in April 2011, proceeded on two tracks. Vera staff trained personnel in three jails in Maryland and Wisconsin to use the jail version of the RIT and, in the course of this training, conducted research on participant attitudes and expectations. The jail version of the RIT replaced any reference to “prison” with “prison/jail.” The language shift reflects the range of people incarcerated in jails—those who were in jail and would be released, those who were in jail after spending time in prison, and those who would be going from jail to prison.

Part of the research was qualitative. Project staff gathered information from men and women incarcerated at each facility, and from their families, to understand their perspective on jail practices regarding family relationships and the degree to which people in jail rely on loved ones during incarceration and after their release. Vera staff also surveyed jail personnel about the implementation and use of the RIT. This survey data was analyzed using quantitative research methods.¹²

One goal of the research was to assess the utility of the RIT in facilities that are diverse in terms of size and location (See Figure 1). A second goal was to gather information about incarcerated people’s families and other sources of social support, their experience maintaining contact with family members while in jail, their thoughts about preparing to return to the community, and the impact of their incarceration on loved ones. Vera staff conducted surveys with incarcerated men and women and gathered additional information during interviews of randomly selected residents who completed the RIT. The family surveys asked similar questions to learn about family members’ perspectives and opinions. The jail staff surveys collected feedback about their experiences using the RIT in their facility. In all, project staff conducted 65 interviews and surveyed 311 incarcerated people, 81 family members, and 69 staff.

As noted earlier, the participating facilities—the Green Lake County Correctional Facility (GLCCF) in Wisconsin and the Montgomery County Correctional Facility (MCCF) and the Montgomery County Pre-Release Center in Maryland—represent the diversity that characterizes jails across the United States. GLCCF is located in rural Wisconsin and, like most U.S. jails, houses a small, homogenous population.¹³ The two Maryland facilities, selected for participation by the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, provide additional diversity. The Montgomery County Correctional Facility is typical of large urban jails, with a racially and ethnically diverse population. The Montgomery County Pre-Release Center is a low-security community correctional facility focused on preparing people incarcerated in the federal, state, and local systems to return to the community.

Vera trained participating jail staff to use the RIT to ask incarcerated people about their strengths, challenges, and the supportive people in their lives. Staff

were also trained on the benefits of family support for people in jail, how to introduce the tool, and ways to follow up on the information participants share. Before implementing the tool at each site, facility work groups—comprising staff ranging from case managers to parole officers—identified policies and practices that could be more supportive of incarcerated people’s relationships.

This report provides an overview of the general project findings about the importance of family to people incarcerated in jails, as well as practices and policies that encourage contact between incarcerated people and their families. It also describes the specific lessons from implementing the RIT in each jail.

FINDINGS

The Close to Home project produced two types of findings: Those that were consistent across the three sites and those that were specific to the individual sites. The following section describes the general findings and examines the site-specific findings.

GENERAL FINDINGS

As noted earlier, information was gathered from incarcerated people through surveys and interviews, while information about families and staff came from surveys alone. The following three sections describe findings that pertain to each of these groups.

Incarcerated people. Among incarcerated people, 84 percent reported that their family members continued to be supportive. Most people planned to rely on their family (82 percent) and friends (74 percent) to help them meet their needs, with a much smaller percentage (40 percent) planning to rely on services from agencies such as government or nonprofit organizations. In comparing the findings to similar project work with prison facilities, Vera staff found that a greater percentage of people in jail than in prison reported that they rely

Figure 2: Comparing Results from Vera’s Research in Jails and Prisons

“WHICH PEOPLE DO YOU PLAN TO RELY ON WHEN YOU RETURN TO THE COMMUNITY?”	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS IN JAILS	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS IN PRISONS
Family	82.1	92
Friends	73.8	66

on friends (See Figure 2).¹⁴ Sixty-seven percent of incarcerated survey respondents were parents. Almost all of their children (97 percent) lived with a family member, and 66 percent of those children were living with their other parent.

Eighty percent of respondents in jail reported having visitors, and 40 percent said they had at least one visit a month. These visitation rates were higher than what Vera found in similar surveys of people in prison.¹⁵ Among people incarcerated for up to two years, those in prison were visited an average of 9.5 times a year while those in jail received an average of 16 visits a year.¹⁶

Respondents who reported having close relationships with their mothers, fathers, and significant others also had higher numbers of visits. Overall, 66 percent of survey participants said that they grew closer to or remained close to some loved ones during their incarceration. Thirty-four percent reported that they had grown apart from some family members during their incarceration.

Vera also found that 59 percent of men and women welcomed the opportunity to discuss their families with jail staff. This noteworthy finding runs counter to a common perception among corrections personnel that incarcerated people are unwilling to talk with them about personal matters.

More than half of the incarcerated people (53 percent) who participated in the surveys and interviews received treatment for substance use. Almost two-thirds of those in treatment (62 percent) reported that it was helpful. While over half of the sample (58 percent) was eligible for bail, 96 percent of those people reported that neither they nor their family and friends could afford to pay it.

Visitors. The majority of family members (85 percent) reported visiting at least once a week. Visiting family members listed numerous barriers to staying in contact with their loved one, including distance (29 percent); costs—such as gas, tolls, and for some, renting a car—(24 percent); and facility rules (23 percent).¹⁷ Family members drove an average of 30 miles each way to visit and also reported the cost of phone calls as a significant barrier to communication (39 percent).

While a large majority of visiting family members reported that staff welcomed them when they visited (78 percent), almost as many said they did not receive any information about their loved one from staff (76 percent), and some said staff did not reach out to family members with concerns or questions they had about the incarcerated person (68 percent).¹⁸

Staff. Most personnel (99 percent) said that families are an important resource for people leaving jail and that families may help people find stable housing and employment, improve drug treatment outcomes, and reduce recidivism.¹⁹ However, only 64 percent of staff reported engaging family members in case management or reentry planning, and 58 percent reported that families were involved in their facility's programming.

IMMIGRANTS INCARCERATED IN COUNTY JAILS

Men and women from outside the United States who were incarcerated in the jails participating in the Close to Home project described the hardship and expense of staying in contact with their families. At Montgomery County Correctional Facility, where incarcerated people received one first-class stamp a week, it could take more than a month for a person to save enough postage to mail a letter to another country.²⁰ The interview participants suggested that the facility's commissary sell international calling cards so that people could reach family and friends abroad. Having access to such resources could be especially important for undocumented immigrants who may need to contact people in the country to which they will return, especially those who can help them if they are deported.

As Figure 3 shows, people who identify as Latino received fewer visits than people of other ethnic groups. (Latinos constitute the largest immigrant group incarcerated in Maryland jails, according to unpublished data from the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation. They were the only immigrant group incarcerated at Green Lake County Correctional Facility during the project.) On average, Latinos received 13 visits per year, as compared with Caucasians, who received an average of 22 visits per year.* The interview participants who identified themselves as immigrants reported that they do not receive as many visits as other incarcerated people; they explained that friends and family members who lack the identification required to enter the facility fear that visiting could trigger an immigration investigation.

Language barriers in the participating jails were also significant. Incarcerated people said they want programming and services in their first language. Many people reported being unable to participate in programming because they do not speak English.

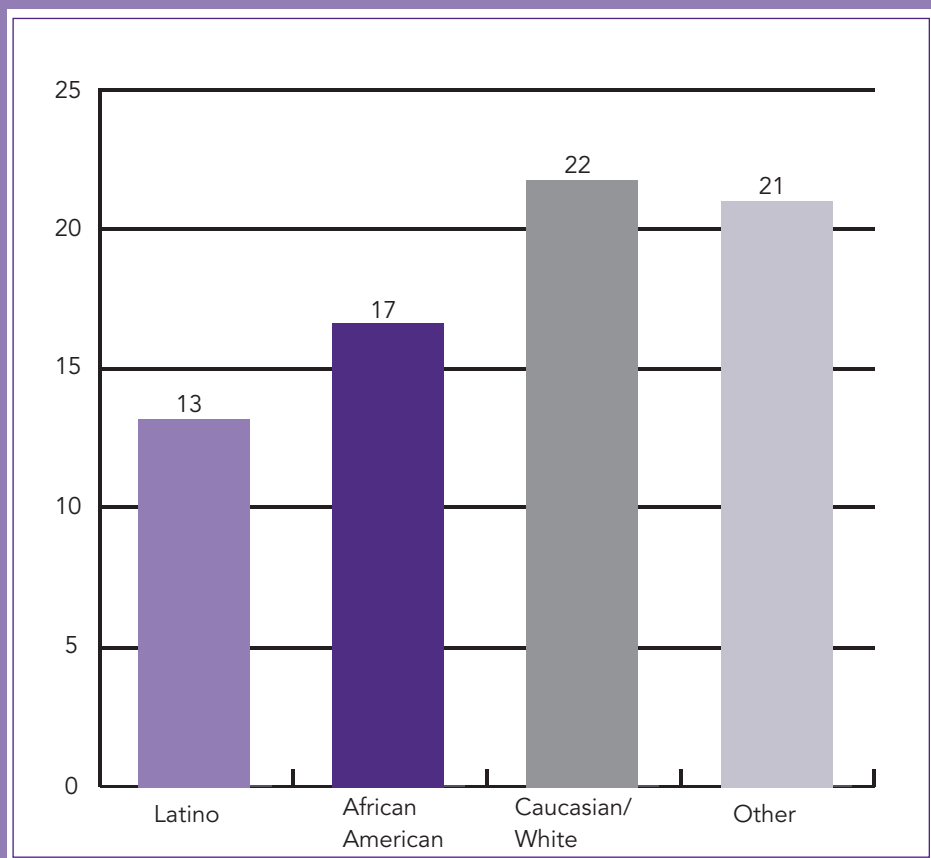


Figure 3: Average Rates of Visitation at Participating Jails Per Year by Race or Ethnicity (n=311)

* Differences are not statistically significant.

Site-Specific Findings

This section goes into detail about findings from each of the three jails.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

The Montgomery County Correctional Facility was the largest jail that participated in the Close to Home project. MCCF is located in an urban Maryland county less than 20 miles outside the District of Columbia. It holds men and women awaiting trial and those who are serving sentences of up to 18 months; 95 percent of people in the jurisdiction's jails are from the county and do not go to state prison; people of color are overrepresented; and most individuals are held under maximum-security supervision.²¹

MCCF has worked to create an environment that emphasizes what warden Robert Green calls “reentry for all.” This ambitious goal signals a commitment to prepare everyone at the facility to return to the community, even though some people will be transferred from MCCF to state or federal prisons. MCCF provides educational and vocational opportunities, as well as programming and treatment for mental health and substance use. MCCF has a dedicated re-entry case manager (see interview with Wendy Miller, page 11), and people who expect to be released within three months can voluntarily participate in case management services to prepare them for reentry.

While the Close to Home project was underway, MCCF struggled with budget restrictions that threatened some of the jail's programming and limited the staff's ability to integrate the RIT and family-oriented policies. Over just a few months, visitation policy at MCCF changed twice: the policy originally allowed two one-hour visits a week, then shifted to two half-hour visits per week, and was ultimately reduced to one 40-minute weekly visit. This was particularly hard for family members who could not visit at the same time; previously, they had been able to visit separately on different days of the week. Once the new limitations took effect, visitors were turned away if the person they came to see had already received a visit that week.

The effect of these policy changes had a statistically significant impact on visitation.²² Prior to the policy changes, approximately 62 percent of respondents reported receiving at least one visit per month. (On average, people received two visits per month.) After the policy changes, only 19 percent of respondents reported having visits once a month, with an average of one visit every two months. After these changes had taken effect, 40 percent of respondents surveyed mentioned facility restrictions as the main barrier to visitation. Seven of the 10 who were interviewed voiced frustration about the negative impact the changes had on their ability to see family members.²³

Because of fiscal constraints, correctional case managers were working on multiple housing units, with caseloads of well over 100 people. These large caseloads hindered their ability to implement the RIT effectively. Case managers reported feeling overwhelmed, resisted additional work (such as the RIT),

and often did not follow directions about the recommended way to administer the tool. For example, Vera staff trained case managers to use a script that explained the purpose of the RIT and described the importance of family in reentry planning. During interviews, some incarcerated people who had completed the RIT told Vera staff that certain case managers rushed through the questions, did not explain how information about family would be used, and complained of being forced to use the tool. After the pilot concluded, the reentry case manager and social work interns assumed responsibility for administering the RIT, limiting the experience of the tool to those who signed up for reentry case planning.

When MCCF staff administered the RIT according to Vera's guidelines, incarcerated people responded positively. For example, a man motivated by his young daughter to deal with his drug addiction told researchers that completing the RIT gave him an opportunity to think about and discuss his family: "It helped pick me up and change my attitude," he said, adding that the conversation changed his perception of his case manager and perhaps her perception of him. He noted that after the conversation, she completed paperwork to transfer him to a unit where he could participate in drug treatment and return to the community—and his daughter—sooner.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PRE-RELEASE CENTER

Like MCCF the Montgomery County Pre-Release Center is located in an urban setting. People incarcerated at the 171-bed facility are scheduled for release within 12 months. The average length of stay is between three and five months, and most people return to a community nearby.

The environment at the Pre-Release Center is more like a residential step-down program than a jail. The facility, constructed in 1978, provides a continuum of programming, has an open campus, and allows contact visits. Visiting is offered seven days a week, and as individuals rise in level, they can have unlimited visits. Staff refer to people incarcerated at the Pre-Release Center as "residents" and the personnel in charge of security as "resident supervisors." Case managers typically have caseloads of 18 to 25 men or women, allowing them to meet with people as needed. Families are included in case planning and can be trained as "sponsors." The sponsor program provides an opportunity for family members and other loved ones to help a resident develop his or her reentry plan, attend sponsor support groups, meet with the case manager, and obtain referrals to appropriate community services. (See interview with Stefan LoBuglio, "Speaking from Experience," page 13.)

All of these factors create a markedly different environment from traditional correctional settings. When Vera staff surveyed family members at the facility, 90 percent reported feeling welcomed by a staff member when they visited and 70 percent reported that staff reach out to families when they have questions or concerns about a resident.²⁴

Even though the Pre-Release Center has a long-standing commitment to engaging residents' family members, residents told Vera researchers that they

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

WENDY MILLER-COCHRAN,
LCSW-C*

REENTRY UNIT SOCIAL WORKER,
MONTGOMERY COUNTY
CORRECTIONAL FACILITY (MCCF)

"The Relational Inquiry Tool [RIT] is a welcome addition to the reentry social work assessment procedures at MCCF, especially since family involvement complements the professional and community services available to individuals returning home. Family relationships can be the most powerful resource available to men and women in jail, and this tool enables me to explore family relationships and identify other supportive people in the client's life. The RIT allows me to assess the level of support available to the client, and, if appropriate, seek to involve the support person [or people] as part of an individual's reentry planning.

Reentry clinicians can also utilize the RIT interview to gather information that could motivate our clients toward change and/or recovery. In situations when an individual may not be strongly self-motivated for change but has strong pro-social family relationships, discussions about improving the quality of those relationships can be an incentive for change. If the tool is administered thoroughly and thoughtfully, such a discussion will come naturally on the heels of the interview."

**From an interview conducted through e-mail*

view case managers more favorably than the more security-oriented resident supervisors. To bridge this gap, Vera recommended that resident supervisors administer the RIT in an effort to build rapport—and to that end Vera provided an introductory training on the importance of family to the success of incarcerated people’s return to the community. However, scheduling conflicts led administrators to ultimately decide that case managers, many of whom were already accustomed to using such an approach, would pilot the RIT at intake.

Vera staff interviewed randomly selected residents who had completed the RIT at the Pre-Release Center. Although the sample is small, six of the seven interviewees responded positively to the RIT.²⁵ The negative response was that intake can be a confusing and overwhelming process. One person reported that “the RIT would be better after orientation,” allowing time for residents to settle in before having important conversations about family.

Staff and policies at the Pre-Release Center help foster a family-oriented environment that emphasizes people’s strengths. Residents welcomed the RIT because it helped them draw up lists of potential visitors and reflect on people who had been supportive. It also helped some residents recognize that they may have people in their lives who are not invested in their success or may not influence them in a positive way.

GREEN LAKE COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

The Green Lake County Correctional Facility is the smallest facility that participated in the Close to Home project and had the most success shifting the facility’s culture through the line staff’s use of the RIT. The jail is in a small rural county in east-central Wisconsin with a population of about 19,000. GLCCF has an average daily population of 60, and the majority of incarcerated individuals are Caucasian.²⁶

During the Close to Home project, the GLCCF significantly changed both its physical space as well as its culture. In 2010, the jail moved from a 43-bed, linear-style courthouse jail that by all accounts was failing and outdated to a new, state-of-the-art facility. Administrators said that at the former facility, staff functioned merely as custodians and that education, mental-health, and substance-use needs of incarcerated men and women were not addressed. The sheriff and corrections administration used the move as an occasion to change the culture in the facility. The GLCCF would no longer just warehouse people, but would offer tools to help them succeed.

To meet their goal, GLCCF security staff participated in training from Vera on the RIT and supportive communication techniques. At intake, staff now develop a corrections plan with each incarcerated person to promote successful reintegration into the community. By completing the RIT, men and women at the GLCCF identify supportive people who can help them adhere to their plan. Concurrent with the Close to Home project, the GLCCF collaborated with strategic partners that provide educational, mental health, and substance use programming. Vera worked with the GLCCF to ensure that these programs centered on a family-focused approach.

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

STEFAN LOBUGLIO

CHIEF OF PRE-RELEASE AND REENTRY SERVICES, MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION AND REHABILITATION

“Family members help humanize the institutional environment. The commitment to work with families leads to an institutional culture that promotes respect and drives the rehabilitative focus of a facility. The respect we show family members leads to cooperation and compliance with program rules. We define family as the Family Justice Program uses the term: immediate family, an AA or NA sponsor, a pastor, even an employer—someone who is integral in people’s lives.

One of the problems we have in corrections is that our visiting policies, the geographic locations, and the entrance requirements can send negative [messages] to family members. It is as if we are communicating that we don’t want to make it convenient for families to be here. I believe engaging family transforms the relationship between the case managers and our clients. Our ability to work with people thoughtfully and deeply is enhanced when they know that we are not interested only in them, but their family. It turns developing a reentry plan—which in many jurisdictions could be a perfunctory process—into a very deep, insightful, strategic process that fully involves the client and the family members. In addition, involving families can improve public safety. This is not the 1950s and *Leave It to Beaver*. Relationships are complicated, but incredibly important. To not engage family members would mean that we’re missing many of the issues and challenges our system-involved individuals face.

When family members recognize and believe that we are here to help and have their loved ones’ best interests at heart, they want to work with us toward our common goals. We ask residents’ family members to come in and attend six training sessions to become official ‘sponsors.’ Having a sponsor allows residents to earn privileges such as a home pass for 8 to 40 hours. In a sponsor [training] group I once led, one woman spoke with real emotion. She had tears in her eyes and said that she loved her husband and was looking forward to having him return to her family, but was frightened. She had worked hard to become clean and sober; she had resumed parenting her children, who were with her in her new home; and she was the assistant manager at a coffee shop, where she was getting high praise for her work and commitment. She spoke about how this fragile balance would be upset with her husband coming home. As a result of subsequent discussions, she created a plan to have her husband articulate his expectations—of himself and the family. It led us to an honest dialogue and to much more thoughtful, relevant, and useful relationships for that particular family.”

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

LIEUTENANT JOEL GERTH*

GREEN LAKE COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY (GLCCF)

“At GLCCF, the RIT was originally administered by mental health staff. The enthusiasm and buy-in jail staff displayed during Vera’s training, as well as the introduction of a new avenue of communication between staff and the men and women incarcerated in the facility, were key factors in the decision to shift this responsibility away from mental health practitioners. Vera’s training and technical assistance helped staff feel confident in discussing these topics with incarcerated individuals and allowed staff to see positive changes in the incarcerated individuals they work with—a departure from the usual atmosphere of a correctional facility.

The impact on staff morale has been invaluable. Light bulbs of understanding are appearing above staff’s heads. The more they understand why they do the job and the impact they are capable of having on another person’s life, the greater the impact on morale. I believe this has given staff a greater level of confidence and has reduced the stress level in the facility.

‘Jack’ comes to mind as someone who really illustrates the impact of introducing family into various components of rehabilitation. At the age of 19, Jack had a history of violent outbursts and jail staff often had to physically intervene to keep him and others safe. As he began participating in the Recidivism Reduction Program, attending educational and mental health programming, staff saw a slow but steady change in him. Having been homeless prior to his incarceration, Jack’s biggest fear was being homeless again. His mental health counselor, with Vera’s encouragement, decided to engage his family, who, in turn, opened up the possibility of Jack returning home. This was a turning point for Jack; at the time of his departure from our facility, he was a trusted inmate worker and had a good rapport with the staff.

Jack left GLCCF to go to another facility, but his positive transformation was nothing short of amazing. He was less anxious, more outgoing, and had developed behavioral techniques that allowed him to better control his anger. Education, mental health counseling, and family involvement all played critical roles in Jack’s transformation. Without these elements operating in concert, I believe Jack would have continued to spiral down a violent path and may have left the facility worse off than when he arrived.”

**From an interview conducted through e-mail*

Staff unanimously reported that the RIT gave them a better understanding of the people incarcerated at the GLCCF, and 93 percent of staff reported that they would recommend the RIT to other jail professionals.²⁷ All of the incarcerated people interviewed at GLCCF spoke positively about their experience completing the RIT with corrections officers.²⁸ (Although the sample of incarcerated people was small, these findings are consistent with those from pilots Vera conducted in prisons and juvenile facilities.²⁹) One research participant stated that his perception of the officer who administered the tool changed after their conversations about family support. He said the interactions made him believe that the officer—someone he had previously not gotten along with—“really does care.” Another person reported that the RIT made him think about how to restore damaged relationships with positive people in his life. He said that he had disappointed his grandfather, and the RIT made him think of ways “to mend that broken bridge.”

The combination of a new physical space and new policies was reflected in GLCCF’s shifting culture. Leaders sought Vera’s guidance to ensure the changes at the facility stressed the role family and other supportive people can play. Staff, incarcerated people, and their family members responded enthusiastically to these reforms. Staff rapport with incarcerated people improved and, as a result, violations of facility rules decreased (see interview with Joel Gerth, “Speaking From Experience,” left).

Conclusion

The findings from the Close to Home project are consistent with earlier research that shows family and friends are the primary source of support for incarcerated people. Given that thousands of people cycle in and out of jail every year, it may be possible to reduce these numbers by testing and implementing ways that families can help people reduce the negative impact of short-term incarceration and fare better upon reentry to the community.

The response to the pilot at Green Lake County Correctional Facility shows that the Relational Inquiry Tool can help foster changes in a facility's culture when it is part of a larger organizational commitment to family. The results from all three jails that participated in this project suggest that such a new tool or a related program may be more likely to succeed when other changes are taking place to reinforce that innovation.

The size of the Maryland County Correctional Facility, the largest jail in this project, may have made implementation of the RIT more difficult. The case managers' workload and the series of changes in the facility's visitation policy limited MCCF's ability to adopt a more family-focused approach. Supervisors tried to support line staff by preventing them from taking on more work. Case managers said they did not believe the RIT would improve case management. Given these challenges, it is notable that the reentry case manager chose to continue using the RIT after the Close to Home project concluded, although only people who sign up to work with her will use the tool. In circumstances in which case managers have more resources and smaller caseloads, administrators may want case managers to use the tool, particularly in light of Vera's findings in prison and juvenile facilities that suggest the process strengthens relationships between staff and people they serve. The RIT may better prepare a range of incarcerated people to return to the community, not just those who sign up for reentry case planning.

The Montgomery County Pre-Release Center's long-standing commitment to involve family eased the introduction of the RIT. The challenge for the Pre-Release Center staff was to find ways to involve families even more by modifying their practices. The pilot revealed a need for security personnel (resident supervisors) to build rapport with residents. Some steps were made to use the RIT to accomplish that goal, but the impact of integrating resident supervisors into case management by administering the RIT remains to be seen.

It may surprise some readers that the jail where corrections officers—not case managers—administered the RIT had the most success. GLCCF staff responded well to Vera training, administered the RIT as trained, and everyone—staff, administrators, and incarcerated people—said that the RIT was valuable to them. Because of the overwhelmingly positive response to the pilot, correctional officers at GLCCF will continue to use the RIT with everyone held in their jail for more than two weeks. Practitioners and policymakers considering ways to engage families more or even ask more about them should note that GLCCF's

leadership consistently expressed support for a family-focused approach and envisioned security staff as role models.

The overall results from this project suggest that people in jails, like those in prisons, rely on family members—broadly defined—to support them while they are incarcerated and as they reenter the community. Moreover, it reveals that, at least in some jails, security personnel as well as case managers are untapped resources for helping incarcerated people connect with

social supports. However, accessing this potential may be contingent upon a shift in organizational culture toward a family-focused orientation, as evidenced by the different degrees of acceptance of the jail version of the RIT in the three pilot facilities. More work needs to be done to determine the most effective strategies for implementing the RIT, and whether or not proper implementation will yield the desired outcomes, such as positive behavioral change, a reduction in various disciplinary infractions in facilities, and lower recidivism rates. The present results suggest, however, that jails are indeed a fertile arena for developing family-focused reentry planning.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Disposition" refers to the criminal court's final decision on a case.
- 2 See B.M. Veysey, H.J. Steadman, J.P. Morrissey, and M. Johnsen, "In search of the missing linkages: continuity of care in U.S. jails," *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 15(1997): 383-397.
- 3 For more information on mental illness, Lauren E. Glaze and Doris J. James, *Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, September 2006). For more information on substance use, Jennifer C. Karberg and Doris J. James, *Substance Dependence, Abuse, and Treatment of Jail Inmates*, 2002. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, July 2005).
- 4 Amy Solomon, Jenny Osborne, Stefan LoBuglio, Jeff Mellow, and Debbie Mukamal, *Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community* (Washington DC: Urban Institute, 2008) p. 22.
- 5 Damian J. Martinez and Johnna Christian, "The Familial Relationships of Former Prisoners: Examining the Link Between Residence and Informal Support Mechanisms," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38, no. 2 (2009): 201-24.
- 6 For more on the role of families regarding mental health treatment, see: Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Substance Abuse Treatment and Family Therapy. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 39. DHHS Publication No. (SMA) 04 3957. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2004; for more on motivation on the ways family members help people remain drug free, see: Karen S. Dalton, "Beyond Transition—Working with Inmate Families," *American Jails* (May/June 2004).
- 7 For housing, see Nancy G. La Vigne, Christy Visser, and Jennifer Castro. *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004); Marta Nelson, Perry Deess, and Charlotte Allen, *The first month out: Post-incarceration Experiences in New York City* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 1999); Eileen Sullivan, Milton Mino, Katherine Nelson, and Jill Pope. *Families as a Resource in Recovery from Drug Abuse: An evaluation of La Bodega de la Familia*. (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2002); and Rebecca L. Naser and Christy A. Visser. "Family Members Experiences of Incarceration and Reentry," *Western Criminology Review* 7, no. 2 (2006): 20-31. For childcare see Lauren Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak. *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, 2008.
- 8 The RIT was developed with support from the National Institute of Corrections and in partnership with state departments of corrections in Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and Oklahoma, and the nonprofit organization Safer Foundation.
- 9 Margaret diZerega and Sandra Villalobos Agudelo, *Piloting a Tool for Reentry: A Promising Approach to Engaging Family Members* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2011).
- 10 Based on categories used in Mark Kellar, "The Rehabilitation Dilemma in Texas County Jails," *The Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice* 2, no. 2 (2005): 153-168. The jail categories are defined by average daily populations. Small jails have one to 49 inmates, medium 50 to 249, and large 250 or more.
- 11 The new facility, which opened in 2010, has a 108-bed capacity. The older facility, which closed in 2010, had a capacity of 48.
- 12 Quantitative analysis included mean comparisons (t tests), bivariate correlations, and descriptive statistics.
- 13 Sixty-seven percent of the GLCCF survey participants were Caucasian and 85 percent were male.
- 14 This comparison is based on surveys conducted in the Reentry is Relational project. For more please see diZerega and Villalobos Agudelo, 2011, p. 7.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 9. This is significant at the 0.001 level. It is worth noting there are no known studies that compare visitation patterns at U.S. jails and prisons.
- 17 Participants were allowed to pick more than one option. Each percentage represents the whole sample.
- 18 The results are based on 25 sets of visitors who completed a survey at visitation.
- 19 This is from the results of staff surveys in each facility (n=69).
- 20 This was the policy during the time research was conducted for the project.
- 21 For information on the overrepresentation of people of color in Maryland's corrections system and across the country, see Vincent Schiraldi and Jason Ziedenberg, "Race and Incarceration in Maryland," A policy analysis by the Justice Policy Institute commissioned by Maryland's Legislative Black Caucus. (2003), Washington, DC.
- 22 Vera administered a survey to 311 people incarcerated at MCCF. Surveys were administered before and after two changes to the visitation policy.
- 23 Vera interviewed 10 people at MCCF.
- 24 Vera staff administered a survey to 17 visiting families at the Pre-Release Center.
- 25 Vera interviewed seven people about their experiences with the RIT at the Pre-Release Center. The one person who reported not enjoying going through the RIT said the person who administered the tool was an intern and she felt "judged." Vera did not train interns to administer the RIT.
- 26 For research participants, the race/ethnicity frequency is as follows: Caucasian/White (22), Latino (6), and other or multiracial (5).
- 27 Vera surveyed 14 staff at GLCCF.
- 28 Vera interviewed six incarcerated people at GLCCF.
- 29 diZerega and Villalobos Agudelo, 2011; Ryan Shanahan, "Integrating Family-Focused Approaches in Juvenile Justice Reform". (Spring 2010) *The Link: A publication of the Child Welfare League of America*, 81(1), 1-6.

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