



# Reentry Review

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • OFFICE OF REENTRY

## CHANGING OUR THINKING ABOUT EX-OFFENDERS

*By Judge K.J. Montgomery*

Many people in Ohio are out of work. It is no surprise that men and women coming out of jail or prison are not employed. The Council of State Governments' Justice Center prepared a study about the correlation between employment and whether former prisoners will commit future crimes.

Some people may question why limited resources should be focused on this population when law-abiding citizens need jobs. This Department of Justice supported study noted that "successful reintegration into the workforce can make neighborhoods and families safer and more stable. Linking individuals who have been involved with the corrections system to jobs and helping them succeed can reduce the staggering costs to taxpayers for reincarceration and increase contributions to the tax base. If releasees and supervisees are working, their time is being spent in constructive ways and they are then less likely to engage in crime and disorder in their neighborhoods. They are also likely to develop prosocial relationships when their time is structured with work and they are able to help care and provide for their families."

Over the past years, there has been a more concerted effort to provide training and teach skills to prisoners before release from jail. The training includes programs like "Thinking for Change", which encourages individuals to make healthy choices in their daily lives. In Thinking for Change, the offenders role-play stressful situations that might occur in a job, family confrontation or with strangers. They try to shed "old ways" of thinking that may have gotten them into trouble in the past.

The DOJ study continues by noting, "[a]s the reentry movement has advanced over the last decade, there has been increasing awareness that helping individuals avoid re-offending can increase their success in reclaiming their lives and can improve neighborhoods and communities. This is particularly true for neighborhoods that typically receive a disproportionate number of individuals returning from incarceration, and which also tend to lack social service resources. Research confirms that these vulnerable areas already face high gang activity, poverty, and unemployment. This high unemployment - especially among those returning from incarceration - contributes to the destabilizing impact on communities and families."

Where are "those" neighborhoods in Ohio? In 2004, 28,177 prisoners were released from prisons across the state of Ohio - which, by the way, was 6 times the number of prisoners released in 1980. Almost 20% of those individuals returned to Cuyahoga County and, of those, 79% lived in the city of Cleveland. An Urban Institute Justice Policy Center report from 2006 noted that the Central, Hough and Union-Miles neighborhoods were home to 18% of those returnees.

### THE R.I.S.E. PROGRAM HELPS AT EUCLID JAIL

The Cuyahoga County jail is conducting a cutting edge program to ready some of their prisoners for the job market. The program called "R.I.S.E.", or Reintegration of Ex-Offenders, is funded through a Department of Labor grant. The program is voluntary and the prisoners participating are housed at the Euclid jail.

In order to be eligible to participate in R.I.S.E., the prisoner must have been convicted as an adult of an offense that is not a sexual offense. The conviction resulting in the jail sentence may even be a conviction under our city codes!

Before release from jail, the prisoner receives:

- An employment assessment
- Individualized employment planning
- Career exploration services
- Job readiness skills training
- ABLE or GED classes
- Substance abuse services, if needed
- Thinking for Change workshops

The program continues to serve offenders once released. Job readiness training, job placement and retention services continue in an effort to help the offender re-enter the community in a positive light.

### CHOPPING FOR CHANGE HELPS WOMEN...

Female prisoners at the Northeast Pre-release Center on East 30th Street have begun to participate in the new "Chopping for Change" program. Beginning in 2015, the work training program is intended to provide culinary skills training for women who have 6 to 9 months of their prison sentence remaining. Carefully screened participants receive day passes and transportation to Central Kitchen. Part of the Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry, Central Kitchen distributes food within Cleveland's homeless shelter system, which is prepared at a centralized location in Cleveland.

The women receive weekly classes for 3 months, learning the basics of cooking and kitchen safety and become SafeServ certified. They spend another 10 hours per week with Chefs Mark Ridenour and Brad Taylor, applying their learned skills in the Central Kitchen facilities. They even have the option to become recognized certified cooks by the American Culinary Federation, which can lead to meaningful employment in the many area eateries when their sentences are complete.

Central Kitchen is recognized as a trade school by the state of Ohio.

# An Artist in Reentry

By Jakob Hochendoner

In January of 2016, I was honored as a filmmaker when I was selected as a Creative Workforce Fellow for Cuyahoga County. I set out to dedicate my fellowship year to making films about issues surrounding reentry in Northeast Ohio and the country at large. In mid-February of this year, I attended the first Edwins Town Hall meeting at St. Dominic's Church, in an attempt to connect with stakeholders and learn more about the conversations surrounding reentry. I was also on a personal journey to find the inspiration and subject matter for my next film piece. Little did I know, lawyers, lawmakers and advocates would be the catalysts for my newest project, DISPARATE IMPACT - a multi-channel video installation about the barriers faced by people with criminal histories when applying for housing. The title was inspired by a recent HUD guidance concerning the Fair Housing Act, applying to how criminal history background checks have a discriminatory effect in housing selection.

At the Town Hall Meeting, I found myself listening and discussing alongside curious community members, substantial stakeholders and a cohort of returning citizens. Maria Smith, a lawyer at the Legal Aid Society, was a presenter at the event. When she took the stage, I did not anticipate the effect her presentation would have on me. "Do you have a beginner, intermediate or expert level of knowledge about reentry, about collateral consequences and about look-back periods?" she asked us. I felt I was somewhere in the middle; I knew some things, but was not an expert. I was at the presentation to learn more; perhaps I expected to have an artistic or intellectual epiphany in the midst of the presentations. I was surprised this was the first time I was hearing about the barriers people with criminal histories face when applying for housing.

Ms. Smith explained that not only do people with crimes like sex-offense and arson get denied from public, subsidized and private housing, but those convicted of a single felony, multiple misdemeanors or even those arrested for certain offenses, without a conviction, can be denied housing. Some folks are denied multiple times from various housing options. Others will be asked to leave once a landlord does a background check. Some federally subsidized housing authorities will ask convicted felons to wait until they are three to five years felony free in order to qualify for housing--some even longer.

I was baffled by my newfound knowledge. What are people in this position supposed to do while they search for housing? How many people are facing this now? Is there help for those people who get denied? Where do they go? How long do some of them go without long-term housing? By the end of the presentation I had found my next project: I would use filmmaking and storytelling to communicate this complex and seldom discussed issue to the public. After speaking to Ms. Smith, I became a regular attendee at the Reentry Housing Committee meetings. Since then, the committee has helped me in the creation of my new film project. I wrote a concept proposal for the exhibit and a pitch for the housing committee. The committee was totally on board and supportive of the idea. Then came the ask: I need to connect with your clients. Several clients came forward with interest. From there I presented to the Reentry Coalition, which led to more connections in the reentry community and more people to interview for the installation.

A TWO DAY TEMPORARY ART EXHIBIT AND COMMUNITY CELEBRATION IN CLEVELAND'S SLAVIC VILLAGE NEIGHBORHOOD – May 21st and 22nd, 2016

From 1:00-5:00 p.m.

Located at the 3725 East 54th Street

On May 21st and 22nd, 2016 the next generation of Rooms To Let: CLE will transform a neighborhood street as the innovative installation returns to Slavic Village for a third year. Led by Slavic Village Development, Rooms To Let seeks to re-envision one of Cleveland's most diverse and authentic neighborhoods, as it strives to illuminate a community in the midst of recovery. Dozens of artists and makers will create works in vacant homes-- some of which are slated for demolition as well as in those that will be rehabilitated. The event will also feature live music, as well as interactive and performance art.

I decided that "Rooms to Let," a free, public event in the Slavic Village neighborhood would be the perfect venue for my new project. Rooms to Let is an event in which curators alongside forty artists from Northeast Ohio will transform four abandoned homes into dynamic art spaces in the Slavic Village neighborhood. My video installation, DISPARATE IMPACT will be featured in a room in the "Healing House," curated by Chris Webb, located at 3725 East 54th Street. Chris sees the Healing House as a "response to Northeast Ohio's need for healing. With our area currently being under such a delicate (and often volatile) climate, I believe that Clevelanders need to begin having dialogue about the concept of healing on economic, racial, political, and social levels. Each artist with featured art in the healing house helps to foster this conversation in his/her own way; and it is exciting to see each artistic interpretation of "healing" come to live under one roof."

Over the month of April, I have conducted fourteen interviews with people currently living in the Cleveland area who have faced significant barriers to housing. Some of these people were flat out denied federal or subsidized housing when they returned from prison. Some have family and friends to stay with, while others are living in cars, shelters, halfway houses or temporary housing programs. Some of these people have since found a place to live on their own and others are still waiting for a place.

The video installation will feature between 8-12 portrait interviews. Audience members will be able to watch these interviews on television monitors with split headphones - allowing two people to watch at once - making it a shared experience. I also want the audience to feel the same need I feel to do something about this problem. When I started learning about criminal justice issues and hearing stories about people returning home from prison, I could not help but get involved. That was over a year ago.

A question that kept coming up during the interviews for DISPARATE IMPACT was, "what is someone supposed to do when they are denied a job or housing because of their criminal background?" Often the answer to this question is that a person goes back to doing what they know how to do to survive. This is a dilemma that as a filmmaker I am not equipped to resolve. However, my hope is that my art moves audience members to action: Whether a landlord sees the piece and wants to give someone a place to live or someone facing similar barriers feels like they are not alone, I want audience members to form personal connections with my installation.

More information about "Rooms to Let" can be found at [www.slavicvillage.org](http://www.slavicvillage.org).

# Citizen Circles Still Mapping the Road to Success

by Michael Davis and Vikki Pope

The catch all phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child," has quickly become a popular call to action concerning building a community as well. The challenges many returning ex-offenders face when transitioning back into the community has become a pressing issue, not just for our community, but our nation. Many statistics suggest the average offender is usually not prepared or equipped for finding jobs, housing, reuniting with families, or coping with everyday needs. Community partnerships are recognized as being an essential part of this transitional process of an ex-offender becoming a restored citizen. One of the major initiatives implemented by the Ohio Plan, by former Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Director Reginald Wilkinson, was the creation of a community collaboration called "Citizen Circles."

Citizen Circles are formed to create partnerships that promote positive social interaction and accountability for restored citizens upon release from an institution. It is comprised of committed community members who volunteer to assist restored citizens in making the transition from ex-offender back to a community member. Members of Citizen Circles take on roles as mentors, to properly equip circle participants in addressing the risks and challenges they face, which may result in criminal activity. The circles provide a variety of resources and networking that form a stronger support system that, in turn, increase individuals' chances for successful reentry back into the community. Returning citizens are able to make amends and demonstrate their value by forming positive relationships with community members, such as: local faith-based and community organizers, law enforcement, criminal justice professionals, employers, family members, neighbors, victims, service providers, and restored citizens.

Citizen Circles is currently under the direction of Cuyahoga County's Office of Reentry and chaired by Mr. Charles Bradford, co-chaired by Deacon Mike Davis and Veronica Robinson. There are Citizen Circle locations on the East and Westside of Cuyahoga County, which meet on a regular basis (usually once a month) to discuss participant progress, review plans, interview new applicants, and admit new members. By working together, circle members and participants develop a plan, by building a mentorship support system that addresses needs in the areas of substance abuse and mental health, education, employment, housing, family/marital support, peer support, and community service for returning citizens to promote responsible citizenship. Citizen Circles place high value on building and sustaining a commitment to community outreach, development and collaboration that encourages positive bonds with citizens by creating an environment that fosters acceptance. The program focuses on the future rather than looking back on the past, and participants gain more self-confidence and employable skills that assist them into becoming more productive citizens. For further information please access The Office of Reentry's website <http://reentry.cuyahogacounty.us/>, click on FAQs and scroll down to question 10 and click the Citizen Circle hyperlink.



## 'Ban the Box', Wanted now on College Applications

By Vikki Pope

The widespread campaign of banning the box on employment applications for ex-offenders is now spreading to eliminate the checkbox on college applications that asks the applicant if they have a criminal record. On March 29, 2016, Danielle Tcholakian reported in The Huffington Post that Kingsley Rowe, an administrator at New York University, is lobbying to give kids a fair shot. It is reported that Kingsley experienced an unfortunate accident with a hand gun nearly 30 years ago, which resulted in the death of a friend and also earned him a 10 year prison sentence. Because of this experience, Kingsley Rowe seems to understand the great importance of being given a true second chance at life. This Brooklyn native is now 46 years old and has obtained three degrees, one of which was earned while still incarcerated. Banning the box on an application disallows any bias on the first reading of all applications because the applications are processed without knowledge of whether any of the applicants have a criminal record. If an individuals' application is chosen for review based on qualifying skills, it not only affords them the ability of having their situation individually assessed but also an explanation of circumstances surrounding their case can be provided at that time. This eliminates the application being pulled and tossed during the initial application process, due to the checked box. Ex-offenders who have served time and moved through all of the necessary processes to become productive citizens should be given a fair chance at obtaining a quality life, or the system within itself is just setting them up for failure.

Office of Reentry WEBSITE  
<http://www.reentry.cuyahogacounty.us>

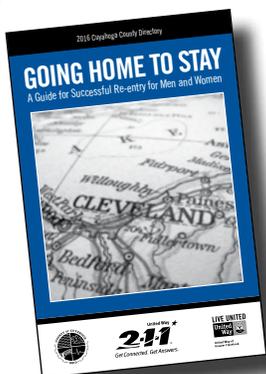
Resourceful, Informative and Simple  
It provides essential information about programmatic services for Cuyahoga County and throughout Ohio



# the re-entry business summit

building evolution. supporting transition.

On Friday, April 15, 2016, Northeast Ohio held its first Re-entry Business Summit at The Cleveland Convention Center. The event was completely sold out in advance and many vendors were present as well as businesses. This event was specifically designed to increase awareness on opportunities available to businesses that participate within the re-entry arena, and to also learn more about incentives and tax credit information available to businesses that hire ex-offenders. The event provided guidance, legal advice, and tax credit information, plus offered a real-life view of the rewards in hiring our returning citizens. The event hosted our Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, Judge Nancy Margaret Russo of Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Re-Entry Court, and Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections Director Gary Mohr. It created a great networking environment, with a wide array of employers seeking to hire motivated individuals ready and committed to starting a new career. This event was free and opened to the public.



To receive a copy of **Going Home to Stay**

contact First Call for Help at 216.436.2000 or go online and download a copy at: [www.211cleveland.org/pdfs/communityreentry.pdf](http://www.211cleveland.org/pdfs/communityreentry.pdf)

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