

BRANT CHOATE

Rehabilitating California's Prisoners

With Lawrence Troxler III and Ryan Welch

In 1983, at the age of twenty-one, Michael Johnson¹ had a deadly confrontation with a drug dealer and was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to fifteen-years-to-life. He spent the next twenty-eight years in California prisons.

While incarcerated, Johnson earned his drug counselor certification through an offender-mentor certification program. He cofounded a program that tutors offenders to take their General Education Development high school equivalency test. He also became a licensed x-ray technician and was a team coordinator for California's Alternatives to Violence Project.

After release, Johnson earned a bachelor's degree in psychology, graduating summa cum laude. He is an alcohol and drug counselor in two different California counties and a lead facilitator for an Alternatives to Violence Project in his home town. Johnson's efforts were recently recognized by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Johnson is well remembered by those remaining within the walls of the prison; his life continues to shine as a beacon of hope to those who knew him. "I have been helped greatly by the kindness of others," Johnson remembers. "I was shown unconditional love and compassion. I want to pass that on to everyone I meet."

Vincent Morales was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. As he came closer to his release date, he realized he needed skills in order to support his family. He chose a woodworking arts program, where he developed carpentry skills with an emphasis on crafting guitars. Upon release, he taught his son and brother his artistry. Over a period of years, they developed a family business where Morales and his son now build high-end guitars for famous artists.

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Justine Sultano struggled with substance abuse for a long time, eventually committing a crime and receiving a five-year prison sentence. While in prison, she took advantage of the rehabilitative services offered by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), participated in self-help groups, received substance-use disorder treatment, and pursued academic and career technical education programs.

While in prison, Justine mastered software programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Upon her release, she entered a rehabilitation facility in San Francisco, where she learned how to send emails, create a résumé, and search for a job. After eighteen months, Justine found a desk-clerk position at a local business. After leaving the rehabilitation facility, she enrolled in a prison-run program that provided transitional housing and emotional support; it also helped her navigate the court process to regain custody of her daughter.

Sultano states, “I used to be a person who pointed fingers at others for my problems, but through the programs offered by CDCR, I learned to be honest and upfront with who I was, and where I wanted to go, and CDCR’s programs helped me get here.”

Justine completed her journey with CDCR on 9 September, 2015, successfully finishing her parole. Today, she still works at the local business, has custody of her daughter, and plans to attend school this year to further her career.

Every day, men and women are released from prison and return to their homes and communities. Unfortunately, many will commit another crime and return to prison. CDCR has the tools to break the cycle and give offenders the skills that will enable them to be productive members of our communities.

Assessment

The Division of Rehabilitative Programs (DRP), the rehabilitative arm of CDCR, provides programming and teaches skills to both prisoners and parolees to reduce their reconviction or return-to-prison rate, three years after release from a CDCR institution. As part of CDCR, DRP exists to help prisoners leave prison with better life and job skills, more education, and the confidence to reintegrate into our communities. This process begins the moment they enter the prison system through the community reentry process.

Once a convicted felon enters the prison system, their likelihood of being convicted of a new crime is based on a range of risk factors. CDCR uses the California Static Risk Assessment (CSRA) tool to calculate an offender's risk of being convicted of a new offense after release from prison. Based on their criminal history and demographics, offenders are designated as having a low, moderate, or high risk of being convicted of a new offense after release.

CDCR uses the Correctional Offender Management and Profiling Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) tool to assess an offender's criminogenic needs and inform decisions regarding placement, supervision, and case management.

Once a prisoner's needs are assessed, a correctional counselor assists them with program placement. Prisoners have many in-prison rehabilitative services and programs available to them statewide, including treatment for substance abuse, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), academic and college education, and technical training.

According to CDCR's 2014 Outcome Evaluation Report, offenders who received in-prison Substance Abuse Treatment (SAT) and completed aftercare returned to prison at a lower rate (20.9 percent) after three years of follow-up than offenders who did not receive in-prison SAT or aftercare (55.6 percent). Statewide, the three-year return to prison rate—CDCR's primary measure of recidivism—for all offenders released in fiscal year 2011-12 was almost double (54.3 percent) the rate of offenders who received in-prison SAT and completed aftercare (20.9 percent).²

CBT addresses negative patterns of thought that can potentially lead to criminal relapse. Negative patterns might include anything from substance abuse, anger mismanagement, strained family relationships, and a propensity to think about committing crimes. These negative patterns are addressed through treatment, individual and group discussions, counseling, motivational interviewing, role-playing, and other methods. CBT programs help prisoners determine what leads them to certain actions and how to avoid situations that can trigger relapse.

Continuing Education

DRP's Office of Correctional Education (OCE) provides education programming developed to prepare prisoners upon their release. OCE has established an array of educational programs that enhance the prisoners' skill levels while

providing effective tools and resources to reduce recidivism.³ In fact, many enter prison with poor literacy skills and no vocational trade or college diploma.

Most prisoners attend classes for at least thirty hours per week in a traditional school setting with desks, marker boards, and a teacher. Mobilizing thousands of students throughout state prisons and classrooms presents organizational and safety challenges, but DRP is committed to organizing classes based upon a model that provides individualized, self-paced programs for each prisoner. Those who fail to meet the behavior standards are not allowed to attend classes.

During incarceration, prisoners are tested for basic reading comprehension. If a prisoner demonstrates skills lower than a ninth-grade level, they are enrolled in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program, offering more remedial levels of education.⁴ ABE is an academic program emphasizing reading, writing, and mathematics. ABE prepares prisoners for entry into a high school equivalency or high school diploma program, which they can complete in prison.

The OCE currently provides 19 CTE programs designed to train prisoners for a career path in multiple employment and vocational sectors upon release.⁵ These sectors include building and construction, energy and utilities, finance and business, public service, manufacturing and product development, and transportation. Many CTE programs include green employment skills relevant to solar, geothermal, and smart energy management practices. Each program aligns with a positive employment outlook within the state of California, providing opportunities to earn a livable wage.

For many prisoners, having the ability and opportunities to earn a livable wage marks the difference between relapsing into crime or becoming a contributing member of the community.

Others focus on a college education, many receiving Associate of Arts degrees in Sociology, Human Services, Business, and General Studies.

The Transition

Transitioning back to society can be intimidating for prisoners; often the world has shifted dramatically during years of incarceration. The shock of little-to-no contact with the



outside world, followed by release into the community fueled with new technology can be overwhelming without assistance. The Male Community Reentry Program (MCRP) is one of CDCR's efforts to support the transition back into society.⁶ CDCR contracts with established community providers for housing, treatment, and other rehabilitative services.

To ease reentry into society, the MCRP allows eligible prisoners to serve the last six months of their sentences in a contracted provider's community facility instead of state prison. Not quite the same as a halfway house, an older term now used to designate sober living homes, in the case of MCRP men are still "in custody." Parole is also technically a version of being "in custody," and yet the MCRP function is both pre-parole and pre-release. The significance of this is found when many inmates today, especially with so many increased commuted sentences from major sentencing law changes, never become paroled. MCRP participants are assisted in obtaining their California identification and Social Security cards—both necessary to find employment. Résumé writing, professional certifications, and job search assistance are also provided. If a qualified participant finds

a job while participating in MCRP, they are allowed to work while still serving their remaining sentence, and the money they earn is saved for use upon release. In addition, prisoners in the MCRP are provided access to a wide range of community-based rehabilitative services designed to deflect negative thought patterns that can lead to relapse, such as CBT.

Some prisoners close to release from prison may not be eligible for the MCRP due to their level of offense or medical/mental health needs. Instead, they are assigned to an in-prison reentry program, where they can receive similar rehabilitative services such as CTE classes, substance-use disorder treatment, anger management and family relationship counseling, and trauma informed gender-responsive treatment for women. While some of these programs may be available to prisoners with longer sentences, the in-prison reentry program's primary focus is to prepare those who will soon return to our communities. Reentry programs provide prisoners, within 18 months of release, with training for career readiness, job search skills, and practical financial literacy to facilitate a successful reentry into their communities.

Technological Advances

Like other educational institutions, California's prisons are harnessing technology to better reach students. Implementing new technology in California prisons poses a raft of challenges due to the physical space, location, security, connectivity, firewalls, and funding requirements. However, these challenges are not insurmountable.⁷

E-readers allow prisoners enrolled in college correspondence programs to study for their classes with digital textbooks. They also allow prisoners living in high security areas to continue their education through independent study.

Streaming television channels exponentially increase the quantity and quality of media content currently available for education, rehabilitation, and training purposes within California's prison system.

Four channels were branded and designated to stream specific content to aid prisoners in different stages and areas of their rehabilitation process. The four channels managed by and streamed to the institutions directly from CDCR headquarters focus on four subjects critical to the success of a recently released prisoner.

Freedom TV focuses on how to prepare for reentry to society. Formerly incarcerated individuals and community members help prisoners prepare for the roadblocks they may face upon reentry. *Wellness TV* provides inmates information on developing and maintaining healthy habits. This channel teaches the factors that affect wellness of mind and body. *Education TV* streams academic programming complementing the lessons taught within the education classes developed by OCE and community colleges. *Employment TV* teaches job search techniques, interviewing skills, résumé building and financial literacy.

Continuing Rehabilitation

Some prisoners, depending on the duration of their sentence, may not complete all programming by the time of their release. To address this issue, Community Reentry Services (CRS) offers rehabilitative DRP services outside of prison.⁸

CRS works with contracted community-based partnerships statewide, creating a network of services for parolees. This network provides education, substance-use disorder treatment, transitional housing, life skills training, financial planning, and assistance in reestablishing family relationships.

Thus, DRP displays a commitment to provide prisoners ongoing rehabilitation in an effort to prevent recidivism. Relapses, especially in criminal thinking, can be very hard to avoid and sometimes take years to overcome. Reducing recidivism is, therefore, a continuous effort—an effort that requires more than conventional tools.

The Way Forward

Part of the effort to ensure quality and proper programming for prisoners includes a governor-commissioned “Lifer” advisory committee, consisting of 20 to 30 formerly incarcerated men and women who successfully reintegrated into society. Under the direction of DRP, this advisory group meets to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the in-prison and community reentry system.

As portrayed on reality television shows and often in the news media, California prisons can be very difficult, violent places. The media often misses, however, the many positive programs available to those who desire to change. Tens of thousands of California prisoners are enrolled in some form of rehabilitative program—most want to change. Many are carrying books, not shackles. Many encourage peace, not violence. Most will return to our communities. It is our duty to help them become productive citizens when they do. **B**

Notes

Photographs by Peter Merts.

- ¹ Actual names of formerly incarcerated individuals have been withheld, keeping with CDCR policy.
- ² California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Office of Research, 2014 *California Outcome Evaluation Report* (July 2015): 11.
- ³ OCE Information Page <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/oce.html>.
- ⁴ Adult Basic Education <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/adult-basic-education.html>.
- ⁵ Career Technical Education <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/career-technical-education.html>.
- ⁶ Male Community Reentry Program <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/male-community-reentry-program.html>.
- ⁷ CDCR Technology Advances <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/technologyInit.html>.
- ⁸ Office of Offender Services <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/os.html>.