



The Wichita Assembly Community Reconnection – A New Beginning for Offenders

February 1-2, 2002

Sponsored by Wichita State University
Coordinated the Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs

A Report to the Community *Wichita Assembly* **Community Reconnection -- A New Beginning for Offenders**

The Wichita Assembly, *Community Reconnection -- A New Beginning for Offenders*, convened on the Wichita State University campus, February 1 and 2, 2002, to provide a neutral environment and structured forum to discuss the challenging issues of offenders re-entering the community. The Assembly was jointly sponsored by the City of Wichita, Sedgwick County, and the Kansas Department of Corrections. Nearly 125 Wichita area citizens with diverse professional, economic and social backgrounds met to address the issue. Citizens represented perspectives from neighborhoods, non-profit agencies, faith-based organizations, business, elected leadership, state and local governmental agencies, victims, and offenders. Mr. Mike Hill, who served as Sedgwick County Sheriff for sixteen years before stepping down in January of 2001, chaired the Assembly.

Participants prepared for the Assembly by reviewing background papers on offender-reentry issues, such as employment, housing, support services, and community safety, compiled by Dr. Paul Cromwell, director of the School of Community Affairs and professor of criminal justice at Wichita State University. Keynote speaker Bob Miller, former governor of Nevada, challenged participants to find common ground on the issues of reentry and emphasized the long-term, costly community impacts of avoiding the issues. Mr. Kip Kautzky, director of the Iowa Department of Corrections addressed national trends regarding offender reentry, with specific information on the Iowa model; and Ms. Ellen Halbert, director of the Victim Witness Division, District Attorney Office, in Travis County, Texas, and editor of the *Crime Victims Report*, spoke of her personal experiences as a victim and her continued work with offender reentry.

Participants then divided into work groups to consider the critical issues of offender reentry, specifically housing, employment, community services, and community safety, and address the following questions:

1. *What are the three main concerns to be addressed?*
2. *What recommendations do you have to address these issues?*
3. *What should be the role of government, business, community and neighborhoods, non-profit organizations or others in implementing each recommendation?*
4. *What do you feel are the most realistic recommendations to implement?*

After addressing issues of offender reentry in work groups, participants reconvened in full session on Saturday morning, and heard and discussed reports on the recommendations of each group. Participants were then asked to identify recommendations of highest priority, and this process produced substantial agreement, which is summarized in the following “Sense of the Assembly.”

Sense of the Assembly

The Wichita area is experiencing a growing issue of reintegrating criminal offenders back into the community. According to the Kansas Department of Corrections, the inmate population has increased by 84 percent since 1985. During fiscal year 2001, nearly 1,500 offenders were released from state correctional facilities into Sedgwick County. Similar numbers of releases are projected in the next few years.

In returning to the community offenders face overwhelming challenges of reintegrating into society and finding acceptable housing arrangements, employment opportunities, and support systems. Returning offenders often jeopardize citizens’ sense of security for life and property. Almost 60 percent of those returning most recently were re-incarcerated because of a parole or probation violation, in other words, a failure in the reentry process.

Community Safety

Community safety represents a primary concern for all involved with offender reentry. Citizens often feel disconnected from the reentry process and are not supportive of offenders returning because of safety concerns. Community safety issues identified included more effective communication, citizen and neighborhood involvement, decision-making processes, and monitoring of offenders.

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- Appoint an Offender Reentry Taskforce

The Wichita City Council and Sedgwick County Board of County Commissioners should appoint a taskforce comprised of diverse representation of the community, including government, business, neighborhoods, faith-based and service agencies to: 1) review and implement recommendations generated at the Assembly; and 2) re-evaluate the make-up and effectiveness of existing boards.

- Establish Community Paroling

The Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC) should work with the City of Wichita, Sedgwick County, and neighborhoods to implement “community paroling.” Similar to community policing in concept, community paroling would assign parole officers and services by designated areas, not by traditional case method, and would allow parole officers to become more familiar with neighborhoods and the parolees living within neighborhoods.

- **Plan for Offender Reentry Upon Prison Entry**

KDOC should encourage offenders to begin planning for reentry upon prison entry and provide early access to programs addressing reentry issues. Current sentencing and parole guidelines should be reviewed and revised to include more incentives for offenders to prepare for reentry.

- **Create Advocacy Teams to Assure Services for Returning Offenders**

The Offender Reentry Taskforce and the KDOC should work with local government, business, neighborhoods, faith-based, and service agencies to establish advocacy teams. The teams would provide grant writing to secure funding for programs, develop mentoring programs for offenders and establish self-help programs for offenders returning to the community, similar to the work done by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Employment

Past criminal behavior affects employability. Having a legitimate job also lessens the chances of offenders re-offending following release from prison; however, most offenders confront diminished prospects for stable employment and decent wages throughout their lifetimes. Issues associated with employment include job skills and training, job placement, lifestyle changes, and employers' reluctance or restrictions in hiring offenders.

- **Establish a Private/Public Sector Partnership for Employment of Offenders**

The Offender Reentry Taskforce, City of Wichita, and Sedgwick County should organize a partnership with KDOC, business organizations, and community agencies on workforce and employment issues to improve communication, coordination and networking among community players regarding employment of offenders.

- **Identify Employers and Industries Likely to Employ Offenders**

The Offender Reentry Task Force, City of Wichita, and Sedgwick County should organize a partnership with KDOC, the business community, and existing workforce and employment agencies to identify employment opportunities available to offenders. Participants at the Assembly recognized that safety issues restricted the employment of offenders and therefore emphasized the need to work with employers and industries most open to employing offenders.

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- **Increase Post-release Job-related Programs that Emphasize Soft Skills**

KDOC should work with social service agencies to address offenders' deficiencies in soft skills, specifically punctuality, appropriate attire, social skills, stress management, among other issues that foreclose long-term employment opportunities for offenders.

- **Recognize and Publicize Employment Success Stories of Offenders**

The Offender Reentry Taskforce should work with KDOC to publicize stories of successful reentry into the workforce by offenders.

Community Services

Support services assist offenders with successful reentry. The services required to meet the special needs of offenders are not always available upon release or are not well coordinated.

- **Implement a Systems Approach to Offender Reentry**

The Offender Reentry Taskforce and KDOC should implement a systems approach to offender reentry to ensure that each offender has access to appropriate services. Ideally, a facilitator would be available to assure that each offender has access to case management, community information, treatment programs, faith community, victims and victim services, supervision agencies, community parole officers, and other essential support services.

- **Conduct Periodic Assessments of Collective Risk and Service Needs of Offender Reentry**

The Kansas Department of Correction should conduct for the community periodic assessments of collective risks and service needs posed by offenders returning to the community. The community should be made aware of the risks of criminal behavior as well as services needed to help deter criminal behavior. These assessments would also allow service providers to measure needs of offenders against availability of programs in the community.

- **Establish a Victim-Offender Reconciliation Initiative**

KDOC should work through District Advisory Boards, neighborhoods, faith-based organizations, business organizations, and other community agencies to expand public education on offender reentry, remove stereotypes, and reduce fear of offenders returning to the community.

Local nonprofit agencies and the faith community serving victims and offenders should work together to establish a community initiative on victim-offender reconciliation drawing from models that have proven to be successful in other areas in the nation.

Housing

Returning offenders often face challenges in finding suitable housing. Housing presents problems for several reasons including limited financial resources, family disconnection, and location of housing facilities.

- **Investigate Options to Improve Housing for Offenders**

The Offender Reentry Taskforce should investigate options to secure funding for housing for offenders, develop a process to ensure housing arrangements are made prior to reentry, and develop housing programs related to reentry.

- **Expand Public Education on Offender Reentry**

KDOC should work through District Advisory Boards, neighborhoods, faith-based organizations, business organizations, and other community agencies to expand public education on offender reentry, remove stereotypes, and reduce fear of offenders returning to the community.

- **Review City and County Ordinances Regarding Offender Housing**

The Offender Reentry Taskforce should make recommendations to improve current and proposed ordinances regarding offender housing, evaluate the current process to site facilities for offenders, and improve communication with the community.

SPECIAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

Assembly Steering Committee Members

Dr. Ed Flentje, *Director and Professor, Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs*
Misty Bruckner, *Assembly Director*
Mike Hill, *Assembly Chair*
Cathy Holdeman, *Director of Administrative Services, City of Wichita*
Mark Masterson, *Director of Department of Corrections, Sedgwick County*

Margie Phelps, *Director of Release Services, Kansas Department of Corrections*
Kent Sisson, *State of Kansas Regional Parole Supervisor, Kansas Department of Corrections*
Maggie Flanders, *Graduate Assistant, Hugo Wall School of Urban and Public Affairs*

Assembly Speakers and Facilitators

President Donald Beggs, *Wichita State University*
Marla Flentje, *Facilitator*
Joan Scarlett Bayens, *Facilitator*
Ted Jester, *Facilitator*
Ann Koci, *Facilitator*
Keith Lawing, *Facilitator*
Linda Hamilton, *Facilitator*
Lisa Haase, *Facilitator*

Mayor Bob Knight, *City of Wichita*
W.L. "Kip" Kautzky, *Speaker*
Ellen Halbert, *Speaker*
Commissioner Tom Winters, *Sedgwick County*
Secretary Charles Simmons, *Kansas Department of Corrections*
Marilyn Scafe, *Speaker*
Anthony Winn, *Speaker*
Doris Vogel, *Speaker*

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