

# EXIT STRATEGY FOR PAROLEES

Helping former inmates get a job and the services they need can cut the chances of returning to prison—and save money, too.

BY ALISON LAWRENCE

There are plenty of opinions about how best to improve the criminal justice system, but this fact stands out: Ninety-five percent of all inmates will one day be released from prison and, within three years, about 50 percent will be back.

Returning to prison—for everything from committing a new crime to violating parole—is referred to as recidivism, and it's a huge and costly problem for states. Lawmakers increasingly are turning to a growing body of information on what works and what doesn't in supervising offenders. They're using it to create policies that reduce recidivism, increase public safety and decrease prison costs.

And at least in some states, it seems to be working.

"If investments the Washington Legislature made in evidence-based programming are sustained," says Senator Karen Fraser "there will be a significant slowing in prison growth, and Washington will postpone by 10 years the construction of 2,000 additional beds. Postponing these costs would save us about \$630 million a year in prison budgets over the next decade."

The stakes could hardly be larger. In 2007, the U.S. state prison population was at 1.4 million inmates at a cost of \$34 billion to states, and parolee recidivism accounted for about one-third of all prison admissions. That year, the Pew Center on the States reported

that if nothing was done, the prison population would continue to grow to 1.7 million inmates by 2011 at an additional cost of \$27.5 billion.

Although states have been experimenting with programs to reduce recidivism for years, the federal government got behind the effort in 2008 with the Second Chance Act. The law provides grants to states, local govern-

ments and nonprofit groups to improve community safety by providing services that will help ensure offenders' successful transition back into the community.

The first round of funding in FY 2009 provided \$25 million for reentry programs that include employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, housing, help for families, mentoring and victims support. Victim ser-



**SENATOR  
KAREN FRASER  
WASHINGTON**

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VICES can include counseling and support services for the victim; ensuring payment of restitution; and notifying the victim when the offender is released. Funds are administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and have increased substantially in FY 2010 to \$100 million.

#### WISCONSIN WINDOWS

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections is using Second Chance Act funding to expand its Windows to Work programs in the Green Bay and Milwaukee areas.

“The Windows to Work program really is a new hybrid of the essential elements of reentry work we have done in the past,” says Senator Spencer Coggs, whose Milwaukee district is part of the expansion.

Windows to Work starts six months prior



**SENATOR**  
**SPENCER COGGS**  
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**REPRESENTATIVE**  
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to release. Inmates participate in weekly group sessions and develop a release plan with a coach, who will also help them after they are released. The goal of having the same coach in prison and after release “is to provide a seamless transition into services in the community” says Tracy Hudrlik, the Second Chance Act coordinator at the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

After release, inmates receive assistance

for at least a year.

“That neighborhood support is extremely important,” says Coggs, “because the first year back is crucial.”

At one location, participants can receive help finding a job, a place to live, food and clothing; report to their community corrections agent; and meet with their coach.

“Residence, employment, support and treatment are critical for success,” says Hudrlik. “Windows to Work addresses all four.”

But it’s just one piece of Wisconsin’s recent reentry efforts. A task force was created in the 2009 budget bill to oversee continued efforts throughout the state. A provision requiring the task force to report to the Legislature, however, on its effect on recidivism rates, to make recommendations on legislative and policy initiatives, and to put a strategic plan into effect was vetoed by the governor. This year, the Legislature added the provision back.

The reporting requirement “adds accountability,” says Coggs. “We want to make sure that the programs and policies for offender reentry are supported by evidence-based findings.”

In another effort to reduce recidivism, the Wisconsin Legislature allocated \$10 million to support programs such as Windows to Work that reduce recidivism and result in savings to the corrections budget.

“This new model targets resources toward behavioral change so that we will have fewer people returning to prison,” says Representative Mark Pocan, co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee that approved the appropriation. “That can save taxpayers billions of dollars, and an even more important result is that we will have fewer victims in our communities. That human savings is the greatest victory.”

#### ‘BIG ON WHAT WORKS’

Washington lawmakers, concerned about rising prison costs because of recidivism, also took steps to reverse the trend.



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WASHINGTON SENATOR KAREN FRASER



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**MIKE CARRELL**  
**WASHINGTON**

In 2007, the Legislature decided “to do something about the increasing recidivism rate,” says **Senator Mike Carrell**, by passing a package of legislation that “was a comprehensive rethinking of the prison system and the reentry process.”

The bill ensured that the reentry process starts the day an offender enters prison by creating a reentry plan based on risk assessments. Fraser says the program uses education and other treatment—cognitive behavioral therapy, substance abuse treatment and parenting skills—to help prisoners prepare for release.

“The Legislature’s investments in evidence-based programs for reentry were based largely on the Washington State Institute for Public Policy’s analysis of effective programs,” says Fraser, who is co-chairwoman of the institute’s board. The institute is a nonpartisan research organization for the Legislature.

For a self-proclaimed “tough on crime guy,” Carrell agrees with the usefulness of the institute’s work. “I’m big on what works. These reports are my criminal legislative bible on what reduces recidivism.”

The reentry plan also identifies what an inmate may need when released.

“We have found addressing offenders’ problems reduces their likelihood of committing further crimes,” Fraser says.

A place to live, an ID and a job are crucial first steps addressed during the final months of an inmate’s prison term. That’s why the Legislature’s bill helps inmates obtain a state identification card before release, which they need to cash a check, get a job and find a place to live.

While Carrell says the program is aimed at success for everyone, there are “sticks” for those who don’t play by the rules.

“If offenders are not getting it—if they come back to prison—then they don’t get a second chance,” Carrell says. “I call it one bite at the apple.”

The bill includes tighter parole regulations, like sending those who violate their parole three times back to prison. Also, those

who return to prison for a new crime are not eligible for early release.

Carrell says efforts to improve the reentry process and reduce recidivism are a work in progress. “I see it like building a house,” he says. “We have the foundation, walls and roof up but we still need the sheet rock and paint.”

In 2009, he co-authored a successful bill to provide housing vouchers to inmates who were in prison past their release date because they did not have approved housing. It is expected to save the state \$2 million a year.

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KANSAS REPRESENTATIVE PAT COLLOTON

**SIGNS OF SUCCESS**

In March 2010, the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States released a report that found, for first time in 38 years, the overall state prison population has declined.

“Prison populations and costs have been going up for so long that many policymakers just assumed there wasn’t anything they could do about it,” says Adam Gelb, director of the Public Safety Performance Project. “But it’s not fate. In the last couple of years, Texas, Kansas and other states have taken steps that keep the size of their systems in check while also protecting public safety and holding offenders accountable.”

Kansas, one of the 26 states that experienced a drop in their prison population, has seen notable success in their recidivism reduction efforts.

“We have experienced a 50 percent reduction in offenders coming back to prison for violations of their parole,” says **Representative Pat Colloton**. “But most important was the one-third reduction in new crimes com-



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Efforts have included upgrading technology to track recidivism; adding an earned time credit for completion of education and treatment programs; implementing reentry services and support; and training probation and parole officers on risk reduction supervision strategies.

Even with \$8 million in cuts to prison and reentry programming over the past two budget cycles, there has been sustained success in recidivism reduction in Kansas. Colloton attributes this, in large part, to the training of probation and parole officers.

“The officers firmly believe in this approach and even without traditional funding streams for programming many of the supervision practices are still in effect and officers are working very hard to find alternative funding for some of the programs.”

In recent months, the Legislature has renewed its support. “Cuts to corrections and public safety have been off the table since January 2010,” says Colloton, “and several appropriations bills that will restore some of the funding are in the works.”

While the Public Safety Performance Project did find an overall decrease in the prison population, 24 states and the federal system experienced growth. Indiana, Vermont and West Virginia experienced population increases of 5 percent or more, the highest rates in the nation.

The report concludes that the national drop in prison population is notable, but it is still too soon to say if there will be a prolonged trend of population decrease. What is clear is that states vary considerably in their prison growth rates, and the policy climate is different than that of the 1970s and 1980s when building prisons and putting more offenders in them was the go-to approach. ■

**CHECK OUT** an interview with Howard N. Snyder, chief of Recidivism, Reentry and Special Projects at the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).