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The Role of Prerelease Handbooks for Prisoner Reentry*

*This research was funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

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Jeff Mellow, Ph.D., John Jay College of Criminal Justice
James M. Dickinson, Ph.D., Consultant, Annie E. Casey Foundation

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PRERELEASE PROGRAMS ARE a growing priority in correctional systems throughout the nation to prepare prisoners for their reintegration into society. Several states with formal reentry programs report that recidivism rates for those who complete prerelease programs are significantly lower than for those who elect to be released without any programming (Finn, 1998; Nelson & Trone, 2000). These preliminary findings demonstrate that prerelease programs that focus on issues such as education, job skills, community resources, drug abuse, housing, rules of community supervision, life skills, personal identification, and family reunification, are an integral part of preparing prisoners to return home.

Currently, only a small minority of the approximately 600,000 state prisoners being released each year undergo a multi-session, formalized prerelease program. Angiello (2005) reports that only ten percent of prisoners discharged in 1997 participated in any prerelease programs. Also, the majority of the state prison prerelease programs are voluntary, and according to Austin (2001), are available primarily in minimum-secure facilities. Other factors limiting participation in specific prerelease programs include: limited availability of programs, prisoners with serious mental health issues or gang membership, prisoners who are maxing out, and seriously violent prisoners (Corrections Compendium, 2004).

The fact that so many released prisoners receive no prerelease preparation supports the creation of a prerelease handbook to guide reentry. While such a handbook is only a small part of an ideal, comprehensive prerelease program, a user-friendly, informative book focused on basic reentry challenges could offer prisoners an additional form of support as they go about the task of reintegrating themselves into their communities.

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Role of Reentry Handbooks

Nationwide, the use of prisoner reentry handbooks is relatively new, with fewer than 25 known jurisdictions using them. Some of these localities, however, have been using them for years. In New York City, for example, *Connections: A Guide for Ex-inmates to Information in New York*

City (Likosky, 1984) has been published and continually updated since the early 1980s. A county or city specific resource handbook is a potentially valid supplement to other prerelease programming prisoners receive. In localities where such programming is minimal, a handbook may also serve as the primary guide for ex-offenders as they reenter their communities.

The need for strong discharge planning materials, including reentry handbooks, assumes even more importance with an increasingly large number of prisoners being discharged unconditionally without any community supervision. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “about 112,000 state prisoners were released unconditionally through an expiration of their sentence in 2000, up from 51,288 in 1990” (Hughes & Wilson, 2005). State prisoners being discharged for “maxing out” their sentence now represent approximately 20 percent of those who are released (Travis, 2005). This means that many ex-offenders miss one of the most important elements of community supervision, in receiving referrals to community resources and information to support their reintegration into society. For the unconditionally released population, a handbook may be their only resource.

In addition, for years health care providers have been developing and assessing written discharge planning materials, including handbooks, to help their patients minimize anxiety, adhere to their therapies, improve illness-related communication skills, and retain information (Moult, Frank & Brady, 2004: 166). The utility of these written materials in the medical field supports parallel uses in corrections. Prisoners who use a well-designed reentry handbook should have a more comprehensive understanding of what services can help them with their reentry before and after they return home.

Reentry handbooks are also a valuable resource for correctional staff and parole officers who assist prisoners with basic discharge planning and identification of resources. Prisons are often geographically distant from the areas where most prisoners will return (and may even be located in a different state). Because most of the staff’s work is inside the institutions, staff often do not have access to on-the-ground information about things like basic government services, community organizations, local housing authority rules, employers, and transportation options in particular communities. Further, they are limited in the amount of time they can spend researching that information for each inmate. It is not uncommon in the facilities for the ratio to be 300 inmates to one social worker. Neither prisoners nor staff know every need, challenge, or question a prisoner will have post-release, and typically this information is not readily available in one place. In order to mitigate the problems discharge planners face, county or city specific resource guides should be distributed as part of a comprehensive prerelease program.

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Handbook Design

There are presently no standards for the development of handbooks for guiding the reentry process (Mellow & Christian, 2005). To examine this issue, the authors spoke with several reentry experts, representatives of state corrections and parole departments, local practitioners, prisoners, and parolees. Several states also provided the authors with materials they use in their reentry efforts, including two that sent comprehensive training manuals. In addition, more than 15 reentry handbooks from around the nation were reviewed, which provided the authors with a better understanding of the various formats and content used when developing written prerelease materials.

This paper also incorporates qualitative data from an assessment by the first author of a non-random convenience sample of 40 ex-offenders who used *The Essex County Smart Book: A Resource Guide for Going Home* (hereinafter referred to as the *Smart Book*) prior to release (Fishman & Mellow, 2005). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 10 minutes each. Appendix A contains the survey used to assess the *Smart Book* prior to release and can be used by other jurisdictions to assess their own discharge planning materials.

The following recommendations can help correctional systems formulate reentry handbooks for

their prerelease population. These suggestions are based solely on the authors' content analysis of existing handbooks and an accumulation of opinions from corrections researchers, practitioners, and ex-offenders. It should be stressed that though this potentially new tool may provide valuable assistance in the reentry process, careful evaluation is essential at each stage of development and post-implementation.

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Recommendations for the Development of Reentry Handbooks

Provide an honest and hopeful introduction

Ex-offenders are embarking on a reentry process with the odds stacked against them: They have not acted independently for a long period of time, they have lost social connections, and they may face discrimination because of their past offenses. An accurate reminder of these challenges, balanced with an optimistic viewpoint, is necessary for developing realistic expectations and an appropriate level of preparedness. An example of this style of writing is found in the introduction of the Tucson, Arizona handbook, *Guidelines for Getting Out* (Tucson Planning Council, 2005, p.2)

The transition to life after prison is a big challenge, and this brochure is designed to help you through this exciting but often difficult time. If you take to heart the following suggestions we think these resources can help you to be successful with rebuilding.

Do your homework. Make as many arrangements for yourself as you can before you get out. Use this brochure to write to agencies for help.

Give yourself time to adjust. Don't try to accomplish everything right away. Take time alone or with family and close friends only. Be patient with yourself and know it might take you a while to reach your goals. You may feel depressed or overwhelmed. This is normal—just take some time to heal.

Ask for help. There is an answer to every question you have. All you need to do is ask. This does not make you weak, it makes you smart. Call the agencies in this pamphlet. If they can't help you, ask them who can. Keep asking until you get the right answer.

In addition to the points above, the introduction should serve as a call to the individual that his or her true intentions before and upon release will play a large part in whether or not he or she truly makes a turnaround.

Provide letters of support and sponsorship from other ex-offenders

An effective follow-up to an honest introduction could be several very brief, encouraging letters from successful ex-offenders that also serve to endorse the handbook. Developing an immediate sense of support and providing examples of others' successes could serve as motivational tools for carefully considering the handbook and the reentry process altogether. As one ex-offender noted, after using the *Smart Book*, "information is good, but tell us how to go about it, tell us what others experienced." In the reentry guide *Making it Happen & Staying Home* (Whitaker, 2005) positive statements by ex-prisoners are dispersed throughout:

There's people out here that are here to help you. All you gotta do is push past it and ask for it. When you're on that ride on the way home, just remember, you're not alone. It's gonna be difficult and hard. You might want to give up but it can be done. So just come on home. LINDA (p. 23).

Been in the game since I was twelve. By the time I was 22, I was through. I gave up the game because I had children and I didn't want them comin' into the jail to see me. I'm soft but I know where I come from. RAY (p. 5).

Prioritize crucial first steps, include a reference list for less immediate issues

The decision to prioritize issues for inclusion in a handbook is necessary to keep the resource brief, but likely to cause reasonable debate. The common issues and services that seem to be most relevant to initial release are obtaining identification, housing, clothing, food, employment, healthcare, and substance abuse treatment. In addition, only certain aspects of each area can be covered in order to prevent creating a massive manual. For instance, information on obtaining sufficient employment and healthcare is feasible, but trying to include an entire job manual or descriptions of health insurance options should be left for another resource. Others would argue that issues like voting rights, women's issues, religious community directories, and family reunification must also be included. A small section at the end of the handbook devoted to "Additional Areas" could provide some references for getting answers about each of these. A reentry handbook should focus on the immediate, crucial aspects of moving toward life stability within the first few months after release—true self-sufficiency and social reintegration should be handled through other routes.

Incorporate the handbook into a training curriculum with in-person support

The most effective way of preparing prisoners for reentry, according to many practitioners, is through in-person prerelease instructional programs. Introducing the handbook and its contents during prerelease classes could familiarize inmates and give them a chance to make arrangements before release to increase the likelihood of success. At the same time, going through the handbook and highlighting each section can reduce any misconceptions about its purpose. An ex-offender noted during the *Smart Book* assessment that some of the prisoners quickly rejected the handbook because they saw a list of basic services and thought it was targeted at the homeless. Having a handbook tied to a prerelease curriculum allows for familiarity to be developed and provides a convenient refresher of in-person training post-release.

Provide the handbook well ahead of release to help prepare a smoother transition

If a prisoner does not already have photo identification, a birth certificate, and a social security card upon release, the reentry process is likely to be even more difficult. This is because virtually all legitimate jobs and many housing options require identification documents. With the cooperation of the Department of Corrections, prisoners could receive an instructive handbook six to twelve months prior to release and begin the sometimes arduous process of obtaining these items. Fortunately, most identification requests can begin in prison by filling out applications and mailing them in. For example, those who used the *Smart Book* prior to release were able to begin the process of obtaining social security cards and birth certificates, wrote to the Department of Motor Vehicles for their abstracts, applied for their credit reports, and inquired about their veterans' status.

Since the average prerelease reentry program is six months long (Corrections Compendium, 2004), the handbook could be introduced at the beginning of the prerelease curriculum and referenced throughout its course. In addition, having the handbook in advance could allow prisoners to consider employment, housing, and other topics ahead of release, weighing the feasibility and benefits of their options. However, to maximize the use of the handbook prior to release, service providers willing to receive collect calls from prison need to be highlighted in the handbook. As one prisoner using the *Smart Book* prior to release said, "I couldn't contact no one, no money to make calls, and no free phone call numbers."

Include content that helps to address specific challenges

Sample text of job letters, resume layouts, calendars, and notes sections (among others) can make handbooks more engaging and effective in helping a prisoner plan for reentry. They can also assist individuals to present themselves to employers and housing administrators in a more favorable and professional way. Also, including specific forms for obtaining identification documents (photo id or driver's license, birth certificate, social security card) can accelerate the application process. If the forms cannot be provided, step-by-step instructions for obtaining them

should be. A reentry handbook from Tennessee includes the following letter requesting a job interview (Harris & Adams, 2001 p. 57)

Dear Mr. Abraham,

I am writing in response to your advertisement in the Knoxville News Sentinel last week for a Supervising Housekeeper.

As a supervising housekeeper, I have three years experience in all the aspects of commercial housekeeping. I worked as a supervising housekeeper for the Red Roof Inns in Chattanooga. I also received a certificate from the State of Tennessee in commercial cleaning and worked for the Tennessee Department of Corrections in a commercial cleaner's position for six years.

I feel your company, as a major motel chain, could benefit from my skills. I will look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Include maps of cities, transportation routes, and the locations of major service providers

Maps of geographic areas with different service providers marked can be an excellent source of information, especially for those with minimal reading skills. An excellent example of this type of resource is the *Baltimore City Street Outreach Information Card* (2004). Designed for the homeless population of the city, the map is small, simple, and provides locations for many services. A map like this could be integrated into a handbook as a foldout from the back cover.

Include informative, motivational text, being considerate of prevalent literacy levels

While many handbooks list services in areas of importance to ex-offenders, text with practical advice about each major issue is less common. In addition, much of the text produced for previous handbooks has been well above the literacy level of its audience (Mellow & Christian, 2005). Most prisoners cannot read above a sixth grade level (Haigler et al., 1994). Because of this, the complexity and length of text in a handbook must be compatible with the literacy levels of the population. Providing accessible text with practical advice in an encouraging tone could reinforce lessons encountered in inperson training, or help make up for the lack of a training program. A reentry handbook from Washington, DC is a good example of writing to the audience at the literacy level the majority can comprehend. The following are bullet points listed in their handbook on how to improve skills (Sullivan, 2002, p. 5).

- If you do not read or write well, enroll in a literacy class.
- If you lack a high school diploma or GED (*General Education Development*), get one.
- If you have enough time to take a basic skills course (*like writing or math*), do it. All of us get rusty in our basic skills when we do not use them for awhile.
- If you have time to take a vocational training class (*like computer repair, word processing, or graphic arts*), do it. It will greatly improve your chances of finding a well-paying job.

Develop area-specific handbooks

Though handbooks as proposed in this article should have additional features besides lists of service providers, they should still include some of the latter. Creating area-specific handbooks is advantageous because it reduces the number of service-providers listed, making the book less bulky and easier to navigate. In addition, a single map of services can be customized for each

major area rather than having a series of maps for the whole state in one handbook. This recommendation is also feasible due to the large majority of ex-offenders who reenter society in concentrated areas within most cities (Rose and Clear, 2003). It would also be important, however, to provide ways of obtaining handbooks for other areas should an ex-offender choose to relocate.

Include only service providers committed and accessible to the ex-prisoner population

The major reason for the excess length of some handbooks is the exhaustive list of service providers under many categories for an entire city. While this provides the maximum number of options, it can also include service providers that require fees or that are not familiar with or committed to the ex-offender population. It can be very frustrating when an ex-offender contacts a service provider, only to discover that the location is overloaded or cannot provide a service for some other reason. In addition, the larger the list of providers, the more difficult it is to update on a yearly basis. Some research should go into the service providers in each city's handbook in order to identify the groups that are most able and willing to assist those in the reentry process. These providers should make up the bulk of the listings found in each section of the handbook. The authors of the *Smart Book* contacted every provider to verify that they would be interested in working with ex-prisoners before putting their agency and programs in the handbook. In several cases, shelters, food pantries, and employment agencies asked not to be included in the handbook.

Be sensitive to language barriers

The issue of developing foreign language versions for certain jurisdictions is also important to consider. For example, 19 percent of the state and federal prison population is Hispanic (Harrison & Beck, 2005). Though not all Hispanics use Spanish as their language of choice, it is an issue that needs to be further explored at the local level in order to insure that all prisoners have written prerelease materials they can understand.

Include a clear description of the community supervision policies and regulations

Many states have a zero tolerance policy in effect for ex-prisoners under community supervision. That is, parole officers have no discretion in choosing whether to report violations. This can make it more difficult for ex-offenders to stay out of court, or possibly prison, for even the most minor breach of their requirements. The seriousness of this policy and the consequences it can lead to should be clearly stated in a handbook, stressing the importance of adhering to community supervision rules in every detail.

Consider overall sponsorship of the handbook

While corrections departments and community service providers will play large roles in developing localized handbooks, publishing their names as official sponsors may have negative effects. Ex-offenders may blame the Department of Corrections for their years of confinement, and service providers may be viewed as soft and out of touch with the culture of prisons. Because of this, care should be taken to ensure that any sponsors' names placed on the handbook are respected by the ex-offender population.

Plan for the long-term maintenance of the handbook

Updates to service provider lists and narrative content are likely to be needed on a regular basis. Add to this the fact that thousands of handbooks will need to be printed for ex-offenders each year, and the project takes on a substantial cost. Committing the appropriate resources for the long-term success of the handbook will be crucial in sustaining its impact. Fortunately, many correctional systems have their own printing presses and may be able to provide copies at a discounted rate. In addition, the budget for the program should be relatively easy to predict over future years with detailed statistics on prisoners to be released.

Keep the handbook small, portable, and discreet

Following this recommendation will make the handbook reasonable and attractive for ex-offenders to carry with them. If possible, the handbook should be transportable in a back pants pocket. Bright colors and obvious titles should be avoided. These small design features are likely to have important effects on usage of the handbook.

Consider the inclusion of cognitive skills summaries

One of the newer innovations in prisoner rehabilitation is the use of cognitive skills training. Helping prisoners learn new problem-solving skills, concern for others, social skills, and more can help them navigate every challenge of reentry, from job and housing hunting to family reunification. While these skills have traditionally been taught in intensive training courses, some or all may translate well into brief, readable summaries and interactive exercises. A section of a handbook dedicated to these topics could serve as an excellent refresher for content from active training programs, or as a simple, stand-alone introduction to important cognitive skills.

Evaluate reactions before and after publication of the handbook

Objective evaluation of the handbook to refine the first edition and subsequent revisions is the only way to gauge effectiveness. Focus groups and questionnaires can be used with prisoners, corrections staff, and reentry experts to help improve content. Follow-up surveys of ex-offenders who receive the handbook, including those who succeed in reentry and those who fail, can provide insights as to its effectiveness. More detailed job information, for example, was a recurring theme when prisoners were asked “How would you make the *Smart Book* better?” As one prisoner stated, “give us a list of employers that hire people with convictions.” Better housing information was also recommended, with less emphasis on shelters and more details on how to obtain affordable, long-term housing, even if one has a drug conviction on his or her record. As handbooks for ex-offenders are relatively new in their conception, objective measures will be crucial in establishing the validity of these efforts.

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Conclusion

Discharge planners and prisoners face many challenges within the reentry process. A convenient and accessible handbook with descriptions of these challenges, advice for addressing them, and links to the most helpful services could boost the success rate for many ex-offenders. Though not a comprehensive solution to reentry, prerelease handbooks have the potential to be a valuable tool to supplement, or, if no other alternatives are available, to substitute for a formal prerelease program.

We recommend that states and/or localities develop pocket-sized community transition handbooks, designed to provide prisoners returning to society with basic information and contacts to facilitate community reentry. A guide such as this would serve as an organized, succinct reference resource for individuals preparing for reentry, and to continue referencing after their release from prison. As a secondary benefit, it may also help correctional staff in assisting inmates with their pre-release planning.

[Essex County Smart Book Interview Questionnaire](#) [PDF]

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References

Appendix A

Essex County Smart Book Interview Questionnaire*

[This questionnaire will be read to the individual. Please take notes on a separate sheet of paper or in the margins if one runs out of space.]

| | | |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Name: | Date of Birth: _____/_____/19____ | Date of Interview _____/_____/2006 |
| State #: | Race: check one <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Latino <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | |
| Facility: | Gender: <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female | |
| Housing Unit: | Interviewer: | |

I'd like to ask you some questions about the Essex County Smart Book: A Resource Guide for Going Home.

| |
|---|
| 1. Who gave you the <i>Smart Book</i> ? |
| 2. Approximately how many days, weeks or months have you had the <i>Smart Book</i> ? _____ Days _____ Weeks _____ Months |
| 3. What were you told about the <i>Smart Book</i> when it was given to you? |
| 4. How much time have you spent reading the <i>Smart Book</i> ? |
| 5. Was the <i>Smart Book</i> easy to read? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Why? [explain in your own words] |
| 6. Which of the programs or agencies have you contacted since receiving the <i>Smart Book</i> ? [explain in your own words and specify pre and post release if on parole.] |
| 7. If the program, agency or information was not helpful, please explain why? |
| 8. Are there any programs, agencies and/or information that you read about in the <i>Smart Book</i> that you did not know about before you were given the <i>Smart Book</i> ? If so, can you list them? a. b. c. d. |
| 9. Did the <i>Smart Book</i> include all the information that you need to know? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No [explain] |
| 10. How would you make the <i>Smart Book</i> better? [explain in your own words] |
| 11. Have you ever participated in any other programs in Essex County that you have not yet mentioned? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes: which ones |

| |
|--|
| 12. Will the services listed in this <i>Smart Book</i> help you in the future? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Why or why not? |
| 13. Does this <i>Smart Book</i> help you understand the availability and location of services you wouldn't have had otherwise? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Explain: |
| 14. I would now like to ask you about specific services you have or plan to use in the near future. |
| a. Prisoner: Can you tell me where you plan to live once you are released? Did the <i>Smart Book</i> help you locate this place? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| b. Have you figured out if you need any identification documents? If so, can you tell me where you plan to go to obtain them? Did the <i>Smart Book</i> help you locate these identification services? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| c. Can you tell me any places where you plan to go to get your medical needs met? Did the <i>Smart Book</i> help you locate these medical services? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| d. Can you tell me any places where you plan to go for job assistance? Did the <i>Smart Book</i> help you locate these job assistance services? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 15. Can you name agencies or programs that you have used in your past? a. Was the agency/program helpful? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes (explain) <input type="checkbox"/> No (explain) b. Was the agency/program helpful? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes (explain) <input type="checkbox"/> No (explain) c. Was the agency/program helpful? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes (explain) <input type="checkbox"/> No (explain) |
| 16. In school, what was the last grade you completed: <input type="checkbox"/> 8th grade <input type="checkbox"/> 8th-11th grade <input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate <input type="checkbox"/> GED <input type="checkbox"/> Technical/vocational <input type="checkbox"/> Some college <input type="checkbox"/> College grad or more |
| 17. Is there anything you'd like me to tell the people who wrote the <i>Smart Book</i> ? |
| *Questions & survey adapted from Kirkland, G. (2001). <i>Client Interview Questionnaire</i> . Isaiah House, East Orange, NJ. |

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