

Community Conversation

Topic: *Reentry: Overcoming Challenges Upon Release*

Notes

Alliance for Higher Education in Prison

Date: 4/26/2022

Topic: *Reentry: Overcoming Challenges Upon Release*

Time: 4/26/2022, 12pmMT

Registrations: 173

In Attendance: 92

New Participants: 13

Facilitator: Steven Abundis

Panelists: Regina Diamond-Rodriguez, NJ-STEP

Orlando Mayorga, Office of the Lt. Governor (Illinois)

Danny Murillo, The Michelson 20MM Foundation

Platform Management: Lauren Reed

Notes: Valeria Dani

Planning: Steven Abundis , Mary Gould , Lauren Reed

Conversation Notes

Steven Abundis : As you enter the Zoom room, please share your name, pronouns, and affiliation in the chat. We will be starting shortly. Thank you for joining this community conversation. On behalf of the team, I want to thank you all for joining us today. This is the second part of a three-part series. We define “reentry” as the time one person is released, and two years after that. In today’s conversation, we will talk with three individuals who have professional experience in the reentry process. Here with us today, we have Regina Diamond-Rodriguez, NJ-STEP; Orlando Mayorga, Office of the Lt. Governor (Illinois); Danny Murillo, The Michelson 20MM Foundation. We are taking notes and they will be posted on our website.

Regina Diamond-Rodriguez, NJ-STEP: Hi everyone. In my work I facilitate reentry services for NJ-STEP students as they are released, or when they are about to be released. Reentry support is truly important to me, as a formerly incarcerated person – I know how this work is fundamental for the well-being of our students.

Orlando Mayorga, Office of the Lt. Governor (Illinois): The work we do is based on different goals. We want to improve conditions for formerly incarcerated individuals. I was incarcerated for twenty years, and I know how reentry is crucial in supporting our students.

Danny Murillo, The Michelson 20MM Foundation: I am here to talk about my work as a Justice Fellow – thank you for inviting me to this conversation. This is an opportunity to share and learn from all of you. I am not engaged with direct service work; however, my endeavors address the question of overcoming the hurdles of

reentry. I will include two links regarding my role as a Justice Fellow later, but in the meantime I want to talk about my own experience. My post-secondary education journey started before release. After I was released I enrolled in a community college, and a network of incredible people supported me in figuring out what to do next. At UC Berkeley I worked with Underground Scholars; all the work I have done is informing my role as a Justice Fellow.

SA: When thinking about the first months of reentry, what do you say to your students in order to prepare them?

RDR: I say to expect the unexpected. Not everybody has social support, but we try to create a community on campus. My other suggestion is to remain open-minded: if we are flexible, more opportunities tend to open themselves up. For example, I did not expect anxiety when I was released: this is why mental health resources are also important to take advantage of.

OM: Be prepared with the amount of choices you are going to have. Also, trauma plays an enormous role in making decisions: getting adjusted is very difficult after incarceration. I relied on people who have been there, and having that support, peer support, is fundamental. Another thing is technological literacy: cellphones, emails, online research.

SA: I have a follow-up for you, Danny. Is there a particular focus that a person working in reentry should concentrate on?

DM: As I said before, I do not work in direct reentry services. However, for programs on the inside, they need to be in conversation with the community colleges and universities that are working with formerly incarcerated individuals. They should create a bridge through an ongoing dialogue. Make this connection for students, and reach out to the students themselves when they come home.

SA: Tell us what is the major concern students voice during their first year after release (and how do you help them overcome those barriers).

OM: Not being able to relate with those who are close to you: when situations arise, we don't have a plan to navigate them.

RDR: The first and the most severe barrier is housing. Safe and affordable housing is a problem, and we try to support students, doing our best in partnering with community organizations. Housing should make you feel free; we partnered with the church – but unfortunately there are only five beds. The other partnership that we have is with our alumni. On-campus housing is really expensive, and we provide students with scholarships. Housing and education are the mitigating factors for a successful reentry.

DM: There are general and specific barriers based on people's identities. This is a factor we should take into careful consideration. Also, we need to account for the environment people are released in: peer-pressure is real, and we should create a nurturing environment.

OM: Being conscious about how they are going to be read in a room: there is a stigma around us, and I am aware of that.

SA: A question for everyone: what resources are available for special populations (sex offenders, immigrants, etc) that face different challenges than other?

RDR: They all have access to the same resources. Housing is a different barrier: their identity and crime become a challenge. We are still grappling with those barriers for these individuals. We have a peer-support group that meets weekly, and oftentimes this is a space where resources are shared.

OM: I do have to highlight that there is a reentry resource guide that was created for people who have been deported or are about to be deported. Those who committed sex crimes are highly stigmatized.

DM: As far as the sex conviction I am not sure there are specific resources. There is a lot of work to be done there, and it should involve an understanding of trauma. As for gang members and associates, I am very interested in supporting them in their pact to success. And you do not have to become an informant: people change because they want to change. I am working with a group in Guadalajara that is supporting people who were in a gang environment: they offer transitional services and we are trying to open up an educational pathway at the University of Guadalajara.

SA: Last question: if a program is looking to start a reentry program, what is the advice you would offer?

RDR: Get student input! It is important to be intentional about this. Also: create a community, a safe space. Additionally, it is important to use person-centered language.

Gregory Gaither: We are a community-based reentry services provider. Look at how universities and DOC have created a synergy with community-based organizations. What is the role of universities and DOC in this process? How are we involving grassroots organizations? Ultimately, communities are more impacted by incarceration than individuals.

Audience Member: I would like to say that my son, who is formerly incarcerated, is involved in prison abolition (I am involved in it as well), and he is building upon his strengths in a healthy way. It means a lot to me: thank you for your work.

Audience Member: Appreciation for my brother Orlando for his work and perspective. Thanks to all the panelists.

Audience Member: Gregory, what do you mean when you say that communities are more affected by incarceration?

Gregory and Danny: Communities are impacted because mass incarceration is something created from above.

SA: Thanks to our wonderful panelists, and to all of those who took the time to be part of this discussion.

Resources Shared

Danny Murillo Smart Justice Fellow's Profile:

<https://20mm.org/2021/07/15/danny-murillo-joins-michelson-20mm-foundation-as-a-smart-justice-fellow/>

Smart Justice Think Tank:

<https://20mm.org/2022/01/05/the-smart-justice-think-tank-a-coalition-of-higher-education-champions-and-directly-impacted-leaders/>

Education Justice New Path:

https://educationjustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A_New_Path_Interactive_10.18.2021.pdf

Reentry Guide Request:

<https://forms.illinois.edu/sec/1631272>

Chicago's Guaranteed Income:

<https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicagos-guaranteed-income-pilot-draws-much-interest/fb6e227e-0aa5-43b3-9a3d-2a27133fb560>

Woodlawn Re-Entry Project Chicago (WRPC) Contact Information:

773-301-0291 / ggaiter1@illinoisalumni.org

Orlando Mayorga Contact Information:

orlando.mayorga@illinois.gov

Lee Ragsdale kragsda2@illinois.edu (contact if you know someone who is facing deportation after release)