



Feature article for Oregon Department of Corrections

Topic: Marion County Reentry Initiative

The mission of the Marion County Reentry Initiative is: rebuilding lives, promoting community safety and saving taxpayer money. In 2004, Marion County's Community Corrections leaders wanted more effective ways to "break the cycle of criminal behavior." Studies were beginning to show that housing and employment and mentoring and volunteers were needed elements for successful reentry, in addition to continued supervision and treatment. However there was little evidence to suggest that communities understood transition or its value.

In addition to Community Correction's recognition of the above issues, St. Vincent DePaul Society of Salem noticed among their large food bank client base a high percentage of people being served had criminal histories that prevented them from being self sufficient. Soon after talks began, strategies were discussed and a partnership was formed.

Today, MCRI has more than 20 partners: the Center for Family Success, treatment and housing providers, employers, churches, government agency staff, and more. There is a housing pilot project in the works where residents, some at a high risk of re-offending, will transition into a supervised, supportive environment upon release from DOC. In this new setting, intensive programming will save the "returnee" money while learning necessary skills to stay out of the system.

As support to this evolving system, it is our vision to have our transitional probation officers contact each person scheduled to be released back to our community 180 days prior to release, in order to better understand their unique needs and issues. Right now this occurs 90 days (or less) prior to release, and not all returnees are personally contacted. With added contact and time, MCRI can provide the support services and accountability that everyone desires and needs.

Marion County Community Corrections, along with St. Vincent De Paul Society, has held numerous community meetings to build understanding about the concepts of correctional services and the value of proper "assessments" of individuals being released. This includes assessing for risk, motivation to change, support systems needed (jobs, housing, peer support, treatment) and reducing victimization. Through this process, Community Corrections becomes a true community asset, not only in terms of providing better public safety but also in crime prevention and community restoration.

Currently Marion County receives approximately 800 people from DOC each year. We have determined that almost 48% of those individuals have no immediate housing. The unemployment figures are equally distressing. MCRI, while still early in experience, is currently working with a small number of these former offenders (and their families) who have shown a desire to change. As MCRI increases its capacity for larger numbers through additional community support and partnerships, we hope to reduce recidivism and increase support to our formerly incarcerated population.

Without the support and partnership of our community, non profits, and other community leaders, community corrections will only be able to affect a very small percentage of change with this group. Because of the combined support and efforts of MCRI our offenders returning to this community will begin to have a better chance at transition and a return to a productive role in our society. MCRI wants to promote individual success for those coming out of incarceration but also community engagement and support to break the cycle of criminality.