

Strengthening and Supporting Local Reentry Services in North Carolina

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Executive Summary

Promoting successful reentry for the more than 20,000 people who leave prison and jails each year has been a priority in North Carolina for the past decade and has deepened in recent years. In June 2020, the North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships contracted with an external consultant, Three Flights Consulting, to conduct a landscape scan of local reentry stakeholders and services, in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) and the North Carolina State Reentry Council Collaborative (SRCC). The project reflects the NC Reentry Action Plan and the mission and work of the SRCC. The goal of the project was to identify one or more reentry experts in each of the state's 100 counties, explore persistent gaps or unmet needs in local reentry support systems, and investigate innovative or promising strategies to address common challenges. To conduct the scan, the Three Flights team reviewed publicly available documents and websites and conducted interviews with more than 30 reentry stakeholders to understand how reentry services were coordinated in their communities, what challenges they encountered, and creative strategies they had found or developed to address them.¹ This document summarizes findings of the scan and highlights promising strategies to strengthen reentry supports and services or coordination among them.

Key Takeaways

1. Local reentry stakeholders need strategies to:

- **[Address persistent service gaps](#)** including resources to provide for immediate needs (e.g. clothing, identification, etc.); access to safe, secure, and stable housing (particularly for people who had been convicted of a sex offense); connection to a living wage job or career; reliable transportation to and from work, services, and other obligations; gender-responsive services and support; and comprehensive supports for families of people returning from incarceration.
- **[Build coordinated reentry referral systems](#)** including more consistent and intentional pre-discharge planning, improved education for case managers and supervision officers, and more consistent in-reach efforts to make connections and build relationships to sustain the transition from prison back to the community.
- **[Educate community members and cultivate reentry champions](#)** and more opportunities to bring together a broad-based coalition, build support for collaboration, and develop a shared vision for reentry.
- **[Secure sustainable funding](#)** to support centralized case management and development of the “connective tissue” required to develop a coordinated reentry *system*.

¹ See the next section for additional detail on how these reentry stakeholders were selected.

- [Promote ongoing coordination and collaboration among reentry partners](#) including strategies to improve communication and promote a “client-centered group consciousness” that minimizes competition.
2. **Local communities across North Carolina are innovating and developing effective strategies to overcome barriers** to service provision, coordination, and coalition building around reentry services. Local strategies highlighted throughout the brief include:
- [A one-stop reentry shop](#);
 - [A mobile DMV office to improve access to identification](#);
 - [Entrepreneurial approaches to second-chance employment](#);
 - [Gender-responsive and family-centered programming](#);
 - [Facility in reach models](#);
 - [Community engagement through reentry simulations](#); and
 - [A community-driven fundraising model](#) to promote diverse and sustainable funding.

State-Level Strategies to Strengthen and Support Local Reentry Service Systems

Although the primary focus of this project was on local needs and strategies, interviewees offered several state-level strategies that could strengthen and support local reentry service systems. These included:

Recommendations for State Agencies (Departments of Public Safety, Commerce, and Justice):

- Provide additional opportunities for local stakeholders to meet and share ideas, ensuring that the list of invitees and speakers is diverse and inclusive;
- Strengthen efforts to leverage existing capacity and assets among state agency reentry efforts;
- Improve oversight and accountability of existing Local Reentry Councils to ensure that Intermediary Agencies are meeting obligations to partners and allocating resources equitably;

Recommendations for State Legislators:

- Provide funding to support development and implementation of a statewide, centralized referral and tracking system;
- Authorize funding to support development and launch of additional LRCs; and
- Prioritize legislative solutions to reduce [barriers](#) and promote success for all returning citizens (see detailed recommendations in the SRCC 2018 Final Report and Recommendations).

Project Overview: A Landscape Scan of Local Reentry Stakeholders and Services

In 2020, more than 21,000 people exited North Carolina prisons and returned to communities across the state.² Each person's experience is unique as they navigate this major life transition. Many experience significant challenges as they work to reunite with family and friends, secure stable and affordable housing, find gainful employment, and connect with community resources. Ensuring that each person has adequate support and access to services is critical. It not only helps to ensure a path to success for that individual; it also builds safer, healthier, and more productive communities.³

Promoting successful reentry has been a priority in North Carolina for the past decade and has deepened under the leadership of Governor Roy Cooper.⁴ In his first year in office, Governor Cooper directed the Secretary of the Department of Public Safety to develop a Reentry Action Plan for the state.⁵ In less than a year, the state developed a plan and established the legislatively mandated SRCC. The SRCC guides implementation of the reentry action plan, coordinating across state and local reentry councils (LRCs), identifying gaps in resources, and reducing barriers to success.⁶ As of March 2021, 19 counties across the state had established local councils to link formerly incarcerated people and their families with community-based supports and services.⁷ North Carolina's Reentry Action Plan also articulated the need to expand and formalize relationships with faith-based and community-based reentry service providers.

While the SRCC, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety Reentry Programs and Services team, the North Carolina Department of Commerce Reentry Initiatives and partners have made good progress in strengthening reentry services, stakeholders across the state still have limited information about what reentry looks like across North Carolina, particularly in the counties that have not yet established LRCs. In many counties, it is not clear who or what organization – if any - is providing reentry services and what each local community needs to better support people returning from incarceration. Connecting with reentry experts across the state and understanding the ecosystem of reentry in each community - particularly the resources available and persistent gaps in services or coordination - will help the state improve information sharing and develop more tailored strategies for providing technical assistance to

² North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Office of Research and Planning, Custom Offender Reports, All prison exits 12-1-2019 thru 11-30-2020. <https://webapps.doc.state.nc.us/apps/asqExt/ASQ>

³ North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Division of Adult Correction and Juvenile Justice. February 2018. North Carolina's Reentry Action Plan.

<https://files.nc.gov/ncdps/documents/files/NC%20Reentry%20Action%20Plan%20Final%20Feb%202018.pdf>;
https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/recidivism_and_reentry/;
<https://www.ebpsociety.org/images/articles/Increasing%20Public%20Safety%20Through%20Successful%20Offender%20Reentry%20Evidence-Based%20and%20Emerging%20Practices%20in%20Corrections.pdf>

⁴ <https://governor.nc.gov/news/governor-cooper-launch-new-state-effort-encourage-ex-inmates-become-productive-citizens>

⁵ North Carolina Reentry Action Plan

⁶ North Carolina Department of Public Safety. State Reentry Council Collaborative. <https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/adult-correction/reentry-programs-and-services/state-reentry-council-collaborative>

⁷ Information provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety

localities and making smarter investments. In short, there is a need to understand three things in order to advance this work:

- 1) Who is providing reentry services in each of North Carolina's 100 counties?
- 2) What do local reentry experts need to strengthen their efforts, better coordinate existing supports and services, and promote success for people returning to communities from incarceration?
- 3) What strategies are stakeholders implementing to support improved and better coordinated local reentry service systems?

North Carolina's Local Reentry Councils

North Carolina Local Reentry Councils (LRCs) are organized networks of individuals and organizations who provide and coordinate local services and supports to promote successful community reintegration of formerly incarcerated and justice-involved people. As of March 2021, there were 19 counties with LRCs across the state. All LRCs must have:

- An Intermediary Agency (IA): an organization with state and/or local recognition with the ability to provide administrative and fiscal support, oversight, coordination and implementation of LRC components.
- A local Executive Committee: delegated stakeholders who govern the LRC.
- An Advisory Committee: delegated stakeholders who assist in identifying and addressing gaps and available resources in the local community.
- Local Reentry Council Staff: dedicated staff that assist with the day-to-day operations of the LRC.
- Local service providers and subgroups, stakeholders and members of the LRC that provide and connect individuals to relevant services such as drug and alcohol support, housing, employment, transportation, etc. to assist with addressing reentry barriers.

LRCs are charged with sharing information, building consensus, broadening service availability, and advocating for returning citizens. Through this established structure, North Carolina engages local government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community stakeholders in planning and implementation of the model.

In June 2020, the North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships contracted with an external consultant, Three Flights Consulting, to conduct a landscape scan of local reentry stakeholders and services, in

partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) and the North Carolina SRCC. The goal of the project was to identify one or more reentry experts in each of the state's 100 counties, explore persistent gaps or unmet needs in local reentry support systems, and investigate innovative or promising strategies to address common challenges. To conduct the scan, the Three Flights team reviewed publicly available documents and websites and conducted interviews with more than 30 reentry stakeholders to understand how reentry services were coordinated in their communities, what challenges they encountered, and creative strategies they had found or developed to address them.⁸ This document summarizes findings of the scan and highlights promising strategies to strengthen reentry supports and services or coordination among them.

Who Is Providing Reentry Services in Each of North Carolina's 100 Counties?

A primary goal of the project was to identify at least one person or organization focused on reentry in each North Carolina county and develop a database that could be used to improve information sharing among local and state reentry stakeholders. The Three Flights team used several strategies to develop the [North Carolina Reentry Stakeholder Database](#).⁹ The database pulls together more than 500 contacts across 93 counties.¹⁰ The resource was originally developed from a list of people who registered for the 2019 Reentry Summit cohosted by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, the North Carolina Department of Justice, and Governor Cooper's office. To supplement that list, Three Flights conducted a series of interviews with stakeholders at both the state and local levels. Interviewees were asked to recommend additional contacts and to provide their input on what was most needed to support local reentry on the ground. Three Flights also conducted targeted outreach with the goal of identifying at least one reentry contact in every county in the state. The team emailed stakeholders in close proximity to counties without contacts to fill in gaps.

Three Flights interviewed people from all major regions of the state and purposely included people who engaged in reentry from different perspectives (e.g. state agency representatives, service providers, community development organizations, etc.). Interviewees were recruited by email and interviews were conducted one-on-one by telephone and followed a semi-structured interview protocol designed for the project. Early interviews began with members of the SRCC local implementation team and recommendations from project partners. Three Flights aimed to connect with existing or emerging LRC representatives, service providers, and initiatives in different regions of the state that covered multiple counties or had innovative strategies for supporting local reentry efforts. Later interviews were planned strategically to both build deeper knowledge but also fill in coverage gaps and ensure that the team was able to identify contacts in as many counties as possible. Ultimately the team interviewed 33 people including seven state-level agency representatives, 25 local reentry experts, and one representative

⁸ See the next section for additional detail on how these reentry stakeholders were selected.

⁹ The North Carolina Reentry Stakeholder Database is publicly available at <https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/adult-correction/prisons/transition-services/county-reentry-resource-information>

¹⁰ Despite the research teams targeted efforts, contacts were not identified in the following counties: Anson, Camden, Chatham, Graham, Henderson, Madison, and Sampson.

from the philanthropic sector. The local reentry experts included service providers, representatives from government agencies, grassroots reentry organizations, faith-based reentry initiatives, community development organizations, community college programs, and LRC executive committee members.

What Do Local Reentry Experts Need and What Strategies are Local Communities Implementing to Develop and Support Coordinated Reentry Systems?

While each community is unique, conversations with stakeholders across the state revealed common needs to strengthen reentry services and supports at the local level. Discussion also confirmed that communities across North Carolina are innovating and developing effective strategies to overcome barriers to service provision, coordination, and coalition building around reentry services. The sections below describe five common local needs - (1) address persistent service gaps, (2) build coordinated referral systems, (3) educate community members and cultivate reentry champions, (4) secure sustainable funding to support a reentry system, and (5) promote ongoing coordination and collaboration among partners - and highlight creative solutions local reentry experts are implementing to address them.

Note that it would be impossible to catalog all of the great and innovative work being done across the state. This report highlights just a few creative strategies Three Flights identified through interviews and research. The examples included were selected because they were developed locally in partnership with community stakeholders, met a local need identified through interviews, and could be replicated in other jurisdictions. Given the scope of the project, the authors did not rigorously evaluate the programs and inclusion should not be considered an endorsement of any individual initiative.

In addition, many of the initiatives below offer a wide range of services that are not fully captured in the description, each of which focuses on a specifically illustrative, innovative, or unique approach (see Appendix A for a quick reference list of initiatives referenced in the guide and links to more comprehensive information).

LOCAL NEED (1): Address persistent service gaps

Interviewees noted a number of persistent service gaps for people returning from incarceration. These included resources to provide for immediate needs (e.g. clothing, identification, etc.); access to safe, secure, and stable housing (particularly for people who had been convicted of a sex offense); connection to a living wage job or career; reliable transportation to and from work, services, and other obligations; gender-responsive services and support; and comprehensive supports for families of people returning from incarceration.

Immediate Needs and Identification

Interviewees noted that their community lacked resources to provide for basic needs when people are released. One interviewee noted that some people returning from a long prison sentence are “like refugees in a foreign country.” They need assistance scheduling appointments, completing referral



forms, obtaining clothing, and learning how to use a cell phone. In communities without an organized reentry support system, it can be difficult to find an individual or organization that is able to provide necessary support. In addition, people may be released from prison with just their prison identification card and have a difficult time obtaining a driver's license or state identification card. While the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles used to operate mobile units that could help people start that process before release, funding and staffing shortages have limited their ability to continue to provide services at prison and reentry facilities.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: One Stop Reentry Shop

One strategy that localities are using to centralize supports for people just coming out of prison or jail is to set up a “one stop shop” for reentry. Buncombe County is a great example. The City of Asheville is a comparatively resource-rich locality with a thriving tourism industry. The community has reentry support but, up until a few years ago, each organization was operating independently. While some agencies made occasional cross-referrals, there was not an organized, collaborative approach to reentry service provision. Investment from DPS to form an LRC changed things in the community, providing funding to support dedicated staff to coordinate a reentry system and dedicated resources to help meet people's immediate needs (e.g. money for food, clothing, bus passes, etc.). Around the same time, the County Commissioners for Buncombe County set up a **Justice Resource Center**¹¹ downtown in the courthouse complex. Given the strong partnership among key stakeholders, the Buncombe County LRC was embedded in the Justice Resource Center, which made it easy to access to a wide range of core resources. People returning to Buncombe County can meet with their probation officer, sign up for food stamps, and explore education and employment resources all in one place. In the absence of funding from DPS, counties might consider pulling together a meeting of primary reentry stakeholders to brainstorm strategies for combining resource information - creating a “one stop document” - to help orient people returning to communities.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Improving Access to Identification

- The North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles (NCDMV) has been leading the field for years with the development and launch of **Mobile DMV Units**.¹² NCDMV originally launched five RV-style mobile units but recently modernized the service, creating mobile offices fully equipped to offer the same services as a brick and mortar facility that can be transported by modified SUVs and set up almost anywhere. As of December 2020, NCDMV was operating 26 mobile locations, improving access for people in more rural areas of the state. For a period of time NCDMV was partnering with DPS to bring mobile units to prisons and reentry facilities, allowing people to walk out with valid identification in hand or at least start the process and learn what steps they needed to take to restore their driver's license once released. Unfortunately, funding and staffing shortages have limited the ability to continue

¹¹ <https://www.buncombecounty.org/governing/depts/justice-services/programs-services/justice-resource-center.aspx>

¹² <https://www.ncdot.gov/dmv/offices-services/customer-service/Pages/mobile-offices.aspx>

this service which multiple interviewees reported was a critical opportunity for people leaving prison and reentry facilities.

- A unique collaboration among local government, the District Attorney’s office, and community partners including the North Carolina Justice Center, Legal Aid of North Carolina, and the North Carolina Central and Duke University law schools launched the **Durham Expunction and Restoration (DEAR) program**.¹³ The program offers pro bono legal services to expunge convictions from people’s records and restore suspended or revoked drivers’ licenses. Between 2018 and 2020, DEAR has succeeded in waiving about \$2.7 million in fines and fees that had prevented more than 11,000 residents from being able to drive.¹⁴ The concept has gained momentum in North Carolina and is supported in other areas of the state through NC Fair Chance.¹⁵

Housing

Interviewees noted that limited housing options pose a serious challenge. NCDPS currently runs only nine transitional housing facilities across the state and eligibility criteria for other short-term options typically require that the person be either a resident or convicted in the county. Emergency or transitional housing also limit how long a person can stay, often to 30 days, which many find is not enough time to secure a permanent solution. Affordable, longer-term housing is also limited in many parts of the state including both rural areas where options are limited and in more urban areas where the demand outpaces supply and wait lists for public housing are long (as many as five years in some communities). Interviewees noted that housing challenges are particularly difficult for people convicted of sex offenses who are excluded from most if not all public housing options.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Innovative Housing

- **Exodus Homes**¹⁶ is a faith-based, United Way nonprofit agency founded in 1998. Exodus Homes operates seven housing sites throughout Catawba County that offer both transitional and long-term housing options for people returning from incarceration and/or treatment. At full capacity, the agency can house 72 people. In addition to housing, Exodus Homes supports a holistic approach to recovery and reentry offering vocational training and employment opportunities and transportation to and from work through the Exodus Works program; life skills groups including financial literacy, adult basic education, and parenting; and opportunities for recreation, building leisure skills, and support cultivating individual talents and interests. Residents are free to stay in the program for an extended period and, in fact, at least one year is recommended.

¹³ <https://www.deardurham.org/>

¹⁴ <https://indyweek.com/news/durham/drivers-eligible-license-restoration/>

¹⁵ <https://ncfairchance.org/>

¹⁶ <https://www.exodushomes.org/>

Employment

Interviewees reported challenges connecting people reentering communities with long-term employment. Many noted that people struggle to find work given their criminal record and those who do find a job often secure minimum wage positions that cannot sustainably support an individual or family. Another issue respondents flagged was the disconnect between training available in prisons and the ability to secure necessary licensure and employment for those trades in their local communities post-release. Interviewees noted a need for both better training programs for people returning from incarceration and more education for employers about the tax benefits and other protections available to those who hire people with a criminal record.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Innovative Approaches to Second Chance Employment

- In 2018, City Startup Lab (CSL) launched the **ReEntry Entrepreneurship Program (REEP)**¹⁷ in the city of Charlotte to explore entrepreneurship as a viable path to stable employment for people returning from incarceration. The program was built on CSL's success supporting employability specifically for young men of color. REEP is a hybrid accelerator/incubator that provides instruction, training, mentoring, and coaching to build entrepreneurial and employment skills and promote pathways to self-sufficiency and wealth creation. It is also based in principles of restorative justice, aiming to develop entrepreneurial capacity, build trust within the community, and grow social capital. CSL is engaged in a continuous quality improvement process with the REEP program and has leveraged lessons learned from the pilot year into a model – Learn/Earn/Build¹⁸ - that they are currently testing.

RESOURCES: Educating Employers About Hiring Justice-Involved People

- The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has developed a series of resources for employers seeking to hire justice-involved people. Their **Getting Talent Back to Work**¹⁹ initiative produced a **free digital toolkit**²⁰ that guides employers through a five-step process to “recruit, welcome, and develop individuals with a criminal background.” SHRM points out that one in three working adults has been involved in the justice system and excluding them limits the eligible talent pool. They also provide resources to educate employers about the benefits of second chance hiring like the **Work Opportunity Tax Credit**.²¹
- The North Carolina-based **Center for Community Transitions**²² also provides a helpful list of resources for interested employers on their **Second Chance Employers** page.²³ [Learn more about the center's family-centered services below.](https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/second-chance-employers/)

¹⁷ <https://www.citystartuplabs.com/reep/>

¹⁸ <https://www.citystartuplabs.com/the-learn-earn-build-model/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gettingtalentbacktowork.org/>

²⁰ <https://www.gettingtalentbacktowork.org/learn-more/>

²¹ <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/work-opportunity-tax-credit>

²² <https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/>

²³ <https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/second-chance-employers/>

Transportation

Transportation is an issue for many people returning from incarceration, particularly in more rural areas where there is not public transportation or car sharing services (e.g. Uber or Lyft) to provide transportation to and from appointments, required probation or post-release supervision meetings, and job interviews. One interviewee noted that manufacturing and industry jobs were not accessible by public transportation and that it was not uncommon for a person to have to take a bus and then walk more than a mile to a plant to get to work. Another flagged that informal service providers may not meet requirements for expense reimbursement through state or local grants which makes it difficult to set up a rideshare system. Multiple interviewees flagged concerns that most strategies to address transportation barriers were short-term (e.g. bus passes, gas cards, etc.) and few services existed to support people working toward car ownership or more permanent solutions.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Promoting Vehicle Ownership

While many strategies to address transportation barriers are short-term, the **McDowell LRC** leveraged community resources to support car ownership for people returning from incarceration. The transportation team is one of seven action teams within the LRC and a member happened to own an auto shop. The LRC established a vehicle donation program and the auto shop does any necessary repairs pro bono. Vehicles are given to clients in need of transportation free of charge. [Learn more about McDowell LRC's strategies to build a diverse portfolio of sustainable funding below.](#)

Gender-Responsive Supports and Services for Women

Interviewees noted a gender gap in available reentry services for women. Like the rest of the country, women are the fastest growing group of incarcerated people in North Carolina.²⁴ Despite this increase, there is a lack of reentry programs tailored to support their needs. Interviewees reported that one main disparity in available services for women is the lack of facilities that house and accommodate women reentering the community. Similarly, we found that women often face significant barriers to obtaining employment, housing, and social services.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Resources Tailored to Meet Returning Women's Needs

Interfaith Prison Ministry for Women (IPMW)²⁵ of Wake County uses a unique integration of evidence-based practices within the area of prison ministry to provide long-term solutions to support women pre- and post-release. IPMW offers chaplaincy programs focused on spiritual and religious needs, transition education that promotes evidenced-based life and job skills, and emotional literacy training in facilities. Additionally, IPMW provides comprehensive reentry support, working with women to secure post-release necessities such as jobs, housing, transportation, health and human services, and reunification with children.

²⁴ https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html

²⁵ <http://www.ipmforwomen.org/>

Comprehensive Support for Families

Another gap in services, shared by interviewees across the state, is the lack of comprehensive support for both returning parents and their families. Often reentry services focus on either the parent returning or the child. Interviews indicated that there is a need for supports for families of individuals returning from prison that prepare children and other family members to receive them.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Services that Provide Family-Centered Support

- **Michael's Angels**²⁶ of Pitt/Edgecombe counties provides, among other services, trainings that address different aspects of social engagement. Courses focus on family planning, reconnection with loved ones, and parenting 101. Michael's Angels also provides resources to successfully reunite returning individuals with their families and break the cycle of incarceration.
- **Center for Community Transitions (CCT)**²⁷ located in Charlotte-Mecklenburg has provided comprehensive, family-centered support services for people returning from incarceration for more than four decades. CCT offers tailored programs including Life Works! employment readiness and career training program and **Families Doing Time**²⁸ which serves families with incarcerated loved ones. CCT also has various programs that aim to provide emotional support and practical information for families. Programs range from empowerment for children with incarcerated parents, individual and family problem solving, parent coaching, family reunification planning, adult support groups, and referrals to relevant agencies. The organization also runs a 30-bed residential program - the **Center for Women**²⁹ - where incarcerated women can spend the final months of their prison term and receive intensive reentry supports. CCT also provides services that increase social supports, build strong families through providing access to resources, and reduce isolation and stress to increase overall family stability. [Learn more about the center's second chance employer resource page above.](#)

Other service gaps noted included medical insurance coverage for people when they leave prison, limited substance use and mental health providers (particularly treatment options for synthetic drug use), culturally responsive services for LGBTQ people, and increased opportunities for prison in-reach to support more comprehensive pre-release planning. Several interviewees also noted that supervision fines and fees were often a barrier to success, especially in cases where that is the only barrier to obtaining a driver's license.

²⁶ https://michaelsangelsnc.com/reentry-services/?fbclid=IwAR2Ysiy7EvNsTY1pynQhx8ov2swQJ-rfepulRyiA0_LnDeN8cQco5-ON5M#home

²⁷ <https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/programs/families-doing-time/>

²⁸ <https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/programs/families-doing-time/>

²⁹ <https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/programs/center-for-women/>

LOCAL NEED (2): Build coordinated referral systems

Many interviewees noted that their communities did not have a coordinated referral system and were concerned that people were not connecting with available supports and services once they left prison or jail. In short, there was a disconnect between staff and providers inside and outside of facilities.

Interviewees flagged a need for consistent, intentional, strategic, pre-discharge planning that results in an individualized, actionable plan for each person. Some interviewees also noted that case managers and supervision officers need additional education on the resources available in surrounding communities and/or a centralized resource to reference in crafting release plans. Correctional case managers do their best to create strong release plans but do not have the resources or capacity to follow up with clients once they are released. Though it is permitted in minimum custody facilities,³⁰ communities lack organized and consistent prison in-reach efforts for coordinators or providers to connect with people inside the facility, build relationships, and work together to develop plans for their release. This is critical to ensuring a warm handoff and a familiar face for people to turn to when they return to their local communities.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Strengthening Referral Systems through Facility In-Reach

Facility in-reach is a core component of **Project Reentry**,³¹ an initiative founded and developed by Piedmont Triad Regional Council, currently offered in partnership with Goodwill Industries of Northwest North Carolina. Project Reentry operates 10 correctional facilities and offers programming on a full-time or part-time basis in 16 counties. Participation in the program is voluntary and Project Reentry's pre-release services are delivered through a structured, group-based curriculum. The curriculum focuses on practical topics for reentry including how to obtain social services, sign up for community college courses, connect with employers, and strategies to support family reunification and bolster parenting skills. This pre-release in-reach allows team members to develop relationships, build trust, and provide a friendly face to "welcome" people when they return to their local community. Post-release services are tailored to each individual and can include individualized case management, counseling and treatment referrals, employment and vocational training, and family reunification support. There is no time-limit for program engagement. In short, the in-reach component allows Project Reentry to use a transitional approach that meets people where they are. [Learn more about how Project Reentry's in-reach supports stakeholder education below.](#)

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Strengthening Referral Systems through Weekly Orientation Sessions

Leading Into New Communities (LINC)³² has been supporting people returning from incarceration in New Hanover County for more than twenty years. The nonprofit is the intermediary agency for the New Hanover Local Reentry Council and advances a "strengths-

³⁰ Though in-reach is permitted in minimum custody facilities, NCDPS has temporary limited or closed facilities in response to COVID-19 to protect those residing and working there and limit the spread of infection.

³¹ <https://www.ptrc.org/services/criminal-justice/project-re-entry>

³² <https://lincnc.org/>

based, solution-focused practice” approach to meet the comprehensive needs of clients. LINC maintains a 45-bed transitional living campus and offers intensive case management, life skills development, and employment opportunities through two social enterprises – an urban farm and a lawn care business. LINC has long been a go-to agency for people returning to Wilmington and surrounding areas and their creative approach to recruitment and referrals has generated impressive results. LINC staff noted that people returning to the community sometimes fell through the cracks because the system was not responsive to their immediate needs. In response, the organization set up a regular, biweekly orientation that offered a welcoming environment and a low-stakes way to stop in and see what they had to offer. That transition cut “no-shows” from about 75 percent of referrals down to 25 percent. This model is used by other organizations across the state to make sure they are not losing anyone in the critical early days post-release.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Strengthening Referral Systems by Connecting with Nontraditional Partners

The **Formerly Incarcerated Transition (FIT)**³³ program is a partnership between the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, county departments of public health, federally-qualified healthcare centers, community-based reentry organizations, and LRCs. The program connects people with chronic diseases, mental illness, and substance use disorders to health care services and reentry supports in the community following incarceration. FIT was born out of one doctor’s recognition of the disconnect between the medical community and reentry. The program is led by community health workers with lived experience with incarceration who serve as case managers for reentry. Given the high rates of chronic disease and mental illness in prisons and jails, medical discharge planning and a reliable connection to health services is a critical reentry concern. In addition to FIT, the partnership has developed a scaled back model, FIT Connect, to respond to increased need in the COVID-19 era. Though it is not able to provide comprehensive planning and supports, FIT Connect focuses on connecting people with a medical care provider post-release. Leveraging nontraditional partners in reentry services and supports like the medical system is one key strategy for strengthening systems of community-based reentry supports and services.

LOCAL NEED (3): Educate community members and cultivate reentry champions

While some communities had successfully cultivated broad-based support for reentry, that was not universal. Several stakeholders reported a need for effective strategies or training on how to educate community members (e.g. law enforcement, county executives, etc.) on the community safety benefits of investing in reentry. As one interviewee noted, “I know how to fundraise to build a new community center or cancer center but I’m struggling to get people to invest in this population.” Several

³³ <https://www.med.unc.edu/fammed/service-to-the-community/clinical-care/formerly-incarcerated-transition-program/>

interviewees reported a need for more inclusive events to bring people together, build support for collaboration, and work together to develop a shared vision for what reentry could look like if stakeholders worked together to collectively address individuals' needs. A few also flagged the importance of bringing stakeholders outside the justice and reentry service systems to the table, particularly business and industry representatives who play a critical role in supporting communities and can be strong partners in supporting positive reentry outcomes.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Engaging Community Leaders Through Reentry Simulations

One innovative approach to community education is a “reentry simulation” wherein stakeholders complete a role-play exercise to gain first-hand experience of the challenges people face when returning from incarceration. Several counties across the state including Buncombe, Durham, Guilford, Mecklenburg, and Orange have hosted these events.³⁴ For example, one simulation in Mecklenburg County was called “30 Days Out.” It was set up in a large room with different tables representing activities or agencies someone might engage with when they leave prison (e.g., probation office, church, bank, employer, hospital, halfway house, court, etc.), each staffed by LRC members. Upon arrival, each person received a biography of a fictional person to role-play which included a list of unique requirements the person needs to complete in the first 30 days after release (e.g. check in with their probation officer, attend substance use counseling, go to work, acquire valid identification, etc.). Each person also received different “assets.” For example, some people start with \$0 while others had \$25 or \$50. Similarly, one biography might include 20 bus passes but another could include zero. Participants quickly experience how difficult reentry can be. Interviewees reported that these events can be quite effective, particularly with county and court leaders including district attorneys, judges, law enforcement officers, and city council members.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Educating Community Members Through Creative, Multi-Purpose Events

Another strategy that several localities have used is to host community-wide events that raise awareness of the challenges and importance of reentry. For example, in 2018, **Forsyth County Reentry Council**³⁵ hosted a community expo that has become an annual event. Attendees enjoy food and fellowship, connect with community resources, and learn about employment opportunities for justice-involved people. About 100 people attended the inaugural event and that quintupled to 500 attendees the second year.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Cultivating Champions Through Prison In-Reach

- **Project Reentry's** in-reach strategy noted above in the discussion on strategies to build coordinated referral systems is also building support by breaking down barriers between

³⁴ <https://www.mecknc.gov/news/Pages/December-16,-2019.aspx>

³⁵ <https://www.ptrc.org/services/forsyth-county-reentry-council>

prisons and community. Their in-reach strategy includes bringing in guest speakers from the community to share insights and information for participants in the program. They find that connecting with people inside the prison is an important educational experience for community members. While some are hesitant to engage at first, there is now a waiting list of people who want to participate in prison in-reach.

- **Mecklenburg County** also found prison in-reach to be a successful approach. The Mecklenburg LRC has hosted resource fairs in prisons that bring in community-based service agency representatives and provide opportunities for them to connect one on one with people who will be returning to Mecklenburg County when they leave prison.

LOCAL NEED (4): Secure Sustainable Funding

Interviewees noted that sustainable funding for centralized case management was the primary asset of an LRC in counties that had them and the most significant barrier to developing a reentry *system* in counties without one. Communities without a sustainable funding model struggled – and often failed – to stand up a system of coordinated reentry services. As one interviewee shared, some communities “lack the connective tissue” for a true reentry support system. Even in communities where key partners were at the table and supportive (e.g. law enforcement, courts, service providers, etc.), they were often not able or willing to invest in an individual or organization to lead reentry efforts. Local, grassroots providers are often self-funded and spend thousands – often tens of thousands – of dollars to support people returning to the community from incarceration but that is not sustainable long-term. Several interviewees noted a need for seed funding to build infrastructure for a reentry system as well as capacity building and support for local nonprofits to move away from a government-funded, top-down model.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Supporting Sustainable Funding Through Social Enterprise

As noted above, service providers and LRCs often support their clients and their own work in part through social enterprise. One example is **NEW Grounds Coffee**,³⁶ a nonprofit in the eastern part of the state that was created by the North Carolina Community Action Agency (NCCAA) and roasts and delivers fair trade coffee by mail. NEW Grounds’ motto is “A Fresh Cup for a Fresh Start” and all proceeds support NCCAA’s reentry program.

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Developing a Diverse Funding Portfolio

To ensure sustainable funding over the long term, some reentry providers and partners have built a diverse portfolio of funding sources. Several interviewees noted that they had braided together funding over time to support services and/or service coordination efforts including county, state, and federal grant funding, state crime commission dollars, and money from private foundations and individual donors. The **McDowell County LRC** is a great example. McDowell County is strategically building a collaborative community model of coordinated reentry services that pulls together funding from multiple sources in an effort to “create

³⁶ <https://www.newgroundscoffeeforgood.com/>

community capacity, engage community partners, and provide justice-involved people opportunity.” The initiative was established without state funding and operated for three years before the initial state investment to support a formal LRC. McDowell County continues to build on that model, acknowledging that state resources may not always be available to support reentry. The organization invests as much in fundraising as they do in service provision and has an entire department focused solely on identifying and pursuing new funding sources. McDowell LRC currently has nine funding streams including corporate, faith-based, and individual giving, state and county funding, philanthropic grants, federal funding, and two subsidiary companies. [Learn more about McDowell LRC’s program to promote vehicle ownership above.](#)

LOCAL STRATEGIES: Integrating Reentry System Coordination in Local Agencies

While the North Carolina LRC model is structured around a shared framework, flexibility to support local implementation is a hallmark of the approach and LRCs are structured in different ways as a result. Several LRCs, including Mecklenburg, have embedded the intermediary agency in a local government agency. While the Mecklenburg LRC was launched with a grant from the state, all positions were moved into a local county government agency over a three year period. Today, the county supports the entire reentry program which allows Mecklenburg LRC to direct any state funds to support pilots for new and innovative ideas. **Scotland County LRC** is another example – while the LRC is currently fully state funded, the intermediary agency is the county Department of Social Services (DSS). DSS provides crucial oversight capacity and a one-stop-shop for a range of services. The agency also has the capacity to accept donations or grant monies to support development of a more diverse funding portfolio.

LOCAL NEED (5): Promote ongoing coordination and collaboration among reentry partners

Developing and maintaining ongoing collaboration and coordination among various organizations can be a challenge. As one interviewee shared, there is a need to figure out how to “develop a client-centered group consciousness.” Some interviewees reported that maintaining focus on reentry was difficult. For example, one county had key stakeholders onboard and a large turnout for initial coordination meetings but struggled to maintain engagement three or four months down the road. In more rural communities, partners are often stretched thin and do not have sufficient staff to attend monthly meetings, network with other providers, etc. Other interviewees noted a need for better communication and potentially more formal memoranda of understanding between agencies to ensure that people are working effectively in partnership. Interviewees also noted that some communities had duplication of services and competition for funding hindered effective partnerships and plans to work collaboratively to address peoples’ needs. Several flagged that a centralized referral and case management system would be a huge asset to any reentry system. Finally, several interviewees reported a need for greater accountability for LRC IAs - the fiscal agents for state investments - to ensure that they follow through on obligations and disperse funds equitably among system partners.

LOCAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In contrast to other topics, specific innovative solutions to coordination and collaboration challenges were not identified. However, interviewees offered ideas for consideration including:

- Provide regular opportunities for fellowship and relationship building;
- Ensure that grassroots and faith-based organizations have a seat at the table and an opportunity to share their experiences and expertise;
- Provide opportunities for community partners to communicate needs and showcase their ideas and successes;
- Consider multi-function events like fairs or summits, particularly in more rural areas where partners have limited time to engage in networking and partnership development;
- Consider regional council meetings that provide opportunities for people in surrounding communities without LRCs an opportunity to come together as a collective;
- Conduct needs assessments with key stakeholders including people returning from incarceration, facility case managers, and reentry service providers to identify challenges and opportunities for collaborative action;
- Ensure the IA is equipped to handle financing and reimbursement for partners; and
- Increase accountability and oversight of IAs to ensure that they are meeting obligations and supporting the full collaborative equitably.

State-Level Strategies to Strengthen and Support Local Reentry Service Systems

Although the primary focus of this project was on local needs and strategies, interviewees offered several state-level strategies that could strengthen and support local reentry service systems. These included:

Recommendations for State Agencies (Departments of Public Safety, Commerce, and Justice):

- Provide additional opportunities for local stakeholders to meet and share ideas, ensuring that the list of invitees and speakers is diverse and inclusive;
- Strengthen efforts to leverage existing capacity and assets among state agency reentry efforts;
- Improve oversight and accountability of existing LRCs to ensure that IAs are meeting obligations to partners and allocating resources equitably;

Recommendations for State Legislators:

- Provide funding to support development and implementation of a statewide, centralized referral and tracking system;



- Authorize funding to support development and launch of additional LRCs; and
- Prioritize legislative solutions to reduce barriers and promote success for all returning citizens (see detailed recommendations in the SRCC 2018 Final Report and Recommendations)³⁷

Reentry in the COVID-19 Era

Three Flights also asked interviewees whether and how COVID-19 had impacted people returning from incarceration and the service providers and other stakeholders who support them. Not surprisingly, participants reported that COVID-19 had significantly impacted reentry ecosystems across the state. Interviewees identified a few *positive* impacts of the pandemic including:

- Increased opportunities for release or expedited release for people who were incarcerated;
- Additional investment in services and supports to meet the needs of the increased number of people leaving prisons; and
- Innovation around technological solutions that could improve programming access in facilities and break down barriers well beyond the pandemic (for example, at least one county is piloting virtual pre-release meetings that could be scaled up if successful and one community organization reported that they had hosted virtual meetings with people who had returned from prison to learn more about their specific needs).

Overall, however, interviewees reported more *challenges* during the COVID-19 pandemic which has delayed plans and created additional challenges for both people leaving prisons and the stakeholders working to support them. One interviewee reported that COVID-19 had derailed their efforts to create a coordinated system and “set them back several years.” Several specific challenges were reported including that the COVID-19 pandemic had:

- Limited ability to conduct prison in-reach and connect with people behind bars and even ended it completely for periods of time when staff and residents tested positive for COVID-19 in specific facilities;
- Resulted in a decline in referrals to services despite increased numbers of people leaving facilities as people left prison but then stayed home to avoid infection;
- Severely limited housing options given social distancing requirements in congregate care settings and forced some people into hotels who would have been housed in more suitable shelter settings pre-COVID-19;
- Limited people’s ability to access healthcare as community health centers provided care solely through tele-health options for a period of time; and

³⁷ https://files.nc.gov/ncdps/documents/files/Final-SRCC-Report_0.pdf

- Forced cancellation of regular reentry coordination meetings and community education events as well as planned efforts to launch a new series of collaborative meetings.



Conclusion

With thousands of people returning to local communities from incarceration each year, ensuring their success will remain a critical priority for North Carolina. As one interviewee so aptly stated, “being intentional about reentry is not nice, it’s necessary.” It is not easy work and resources are limited but as is so often the case, local communities are leading the way with innovative solutions to common challenges. This project captures the creativity and innovation of reentry efforts at the local level necessitated by those challenges. Local organizations are stretching dollars and thinking outside the box to ensure that people have a roof over their head, food in their belly, and access to the services and supports they need not just to survive, but to thrive. They are working together, leveraging individual assets, and recruiting strong allies to build systems that support reintegration and keep communities safe. Centering these experiences, learnings, and recommendations will shed light on strategies that work, illuminate persistent challenges that need additional focus, and ultimately strengthen and support the reentry collective in the state.



Appendix A. Initiative Descriptions and Links

The table below includes each initiative referenced as a local solution in the report, a brief description, and the initiative website. *Please note, brief descriptions are copied verbatim from initiative websites.*

Initiative	Brief Description	Website
Center for Community Transitions (Charlotte-Mecklenburg County)	The Center for Community Transitions is a Charlotte, NC-based nonprofit organization founded in 1974 to help strengthen the community and reduce recidivism by providing people with criminal records and their families tools and resources to rebuild their lives. Our work centers on helping clients identify healthy and productive ways of living and successful reentry through employment and transition services, financial stability, alternatives to incarceration, restoring and supporting family bonds and advocacy.	https://centerforcommunitytransitions.org/
Durham Expunction and Restoration Program	We remove barriers to employment and housing by providing free legal services to Durham residents who cannot afford attorneys to expunge charges and convictions from their criminal records and restore suspended or revoked drivers' licenses. At the heart of DEAR is an unprecedented level of partnership and collaboration between the City of Durham, Durham District Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, Durham Court System, community organizations, and members of the DEAR Advisory Board. Unique to the DEAR program, our local law schools participate in an organized network of community legal clinics.	https://www.deardurham.org/
Exodus Homes (Catawba County)	Exodus Homes is a faith-based United Way agency, offering transitional to long term supportive housing for homeless recovering people returning to our community from treatment programs and prison. Exodus Homes has a comprehensive array of services to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of our residents. Exodus Homes currently has 63 beds with 8 program locations. We have four major programs: Supervised Independent Living; Prison Ministry and Post Incarceration Aftercare; Family Preservation and Family Reunification; and Exodus Works Vocational Training Program	https://www.exodushomes.org/

<p>Interfaith Prison Ministry for Women (Wake County)</p>	<p>For 40 years, IPMW has helped thousands of women realize their own dignity and worth. We have watched proudly as that realization becomes a base from which to heal from past traumas, succeed in the work force, and mend their families and relationships through IPMW’s programming, staff and volunteer support, and networks. Through chaplaincy programs and services, women have an opportunity to meet their spiritual and religious needs and receive trauma-informed training and care as well as opportunities for leadership and creative expression. Transition education provides evidence-based life skills, job skills, emotional literacy training inside the prison walls and outside in the community while women are still incarcerated and readying themselves for release. Through reentry support, women work to secure their post-release needs, including employment, housing, transportation, mental health and addiction recovery, health and human services, and reunification with children, in partnership with faith-based groups, other nonprofit service providers and area businesses.</p>	<p>http://www.ipmforwomen.org/</p>
<p>Justice Resource Center (Buncombe County)</p>	<p>We are a multi-agency model serving people in the criminal justice system with diversion options, connecting them to community services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment, transportation, career, public assistance, education, and legal. The goal is to provide a comprehensive model where individuals receive a foundation that will lead them to a productive, self-sufficient, healthy life.</p>	<p>https://www.buncombecounty.org/governance/depts/justice-services/programs-services/justice-resource-center.aspx</p>
<p>Mobile NCDMV Locations</p>	<p>The first of its kind in the nation, the N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles' mobile office takes driver license services to customers in more than 25 small towns and remote areas across North Carolina. Each mobile office contains all the components of a brick-and-mortar NCDMV office, but it is transported in a specially outfitted SUV and can be assembled almost anywhere. The more compact, cost-efficient mobile office replaces NCDMV's five larger, aging RV-style mobile units, which were costly to operate and difficult to maintain.</p>	<p>https://www.ncdot.gov/dmv/offices-services/customer-service/Pages/mobile-offices.aspx</p>

ReEntry Entrepreneurship Program by City StartupLabs (Charlotte- Mecklenburg County)	City Startup Labs is now offering returning citizens in Charlotte the opportunity to develop and exercise their entrepreneurial capabilities with a new initiative through its Center of Excellence — the ReEntry Entrepreneurship Program or REEP. This program is designed to guide the participants through the process of researching, planning and launching impactful and scalable enterprises. The Center of Excellence process also equips participants with an entrepreneurial mindset, attitude, and aptitude for success.	<a href="https://www.citystart
uplabs.com/reep/">https://www.citystart uplabs.com/reep/
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