

SAMPLE OP-ED

Guest columnist

Charting a path to a better life when the prison gates open

By Larry M. Fehr

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When I started working in the criminal-justice field 30 years ago, there were about 200,000 adults in state and federal prisons in this country. Today, there are more than 2.2 million. Adult incarceration rates have more than doubled in the past two decades. Not surprisingly, the costs of corrections have soared. In the past 20 years, the annual cost to taxpayers has increased from \$9 billion to more than \$60 billion.

Whether you believe that increased reliance upon incarceration is good or bad public policy, one thing is certain — 97 percent of those imprisoned eventually return to our communities. This year alone, an estimated 656,000 prisoners will be released to the community from prisons (not including jails or juvenile detention facilities).

Amid these figures is a troubling fact that hasn't changed in 20 years: Two-thirds of those released from prison will be rearrested within three years. While a 67 percent failure rate would not be tolerated in most areas of private or public enterprise, if we stop to think about how prisoners are typically released in our country, we should not be surprised.

The vast majority of offenders — more than 95 percent, according to some studies — are simply released from prison with a bus ticket, "gate money" (a small amount of cash), and the promise of supervision in the future.

The failure to provide strict, graduated supervision and meaningful services to former prisoners, especially during the critical six-month period after release when we know the likelihood of recidivism is highest, reflects a national system that, as Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., put it, needs to be "reinvented."

There is, however, some room for optimism. First, we have much better research on what works than we did 20 years ago. Second, there is strong public support for improving ex-offender re-entry services. Finally, there is growing bipartisan political interest in adopting more-effective policies around the escalating numbers of prisoners being released.

Research has caught up with common sense in evaluating successful methods for releasing offenders. Simply providing a bus ticket and just enough money to get high is an obvious recipe for disaster. Instead, at the end of an inmate's prison term and only if the individual meets eligibility criteria, there should be a period of graduated transition back to the community through a residential re-entry center that

emphasizes strict accountability, random drug testing, effective programming and employment.

This method has empirical support in the United States, Britain and Canada. We have a much better understanding of treatment programs that do work (such as targeting resources to higher-risk offenders, focusing on the factors that we know are related to criminal behavior, and effectively implementing treatment programs that address these risk factors); and those that don't (talking cures, scaring offenders straight, building self-esteem, drug education, etc.). Given the prevalence of addiction and mental illness among offenders, offering quality programs to change and/or manage these behaviors is essential.

Finally, research confirms what returnees themselves identify as their priorities: employment and family reunification, where appropriate.

At the national level, the issue of offender re-entry is quickly reaching a tipping point. A recent Newsweek article refers to it as "the dawn of a new movement." If so, it is a movement with considerable public support.

A recent national survey by Zogby International revealed that 79 percent of those polled are "concerned or fearful" about the annual release of nearly 700,000 prisoners. However, the survey found "striking support" for treatment services both in and after prison by an 8-to-1 margin (87 percent support). When asked about legislation to make federal funds available to communities for services in support of re-entry, 78 percent were in support. More than 90 percent felt that job training, drug treatment, family support and housing were all very important services that should be available to former prisoners.

For the first time in the nation's history, a bill focusing on improving offender re-entry, "The Second Chance Act," has received broad bipartisan support in Congress. More than 100 representatives in the House are co-sponsoring the bill, and in the Senate, a diverse coalition of Republican and Democratic leaders has voiced support. The measure, which merits passage, would improve re-entry opportunities for federal offenders, fund demonstration projects in the states, and help remove many unnecessary barriers to effective re-entry.

As President Bush noted in his 2004 State of the Union address: "America is the land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life."

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