



## Workforce Development Board

### *Reentry Committee*

March 22, 2016 – 9:30 AM

- Present:** Amy Bellisano, Roseann Bucciarelli, Luis Fernandez, Barbara Koonz, Yvette Molina, Peter Ruffini, Donna Scalia, Carla Cefalo (for Kathy Shaw,) Jim Zullo
- Guests:** Robert Mason, Pearl Thompson
- Staff:** Kevin Kurdziel, Melinda Walton

Mr. Kurdziel explained that prisoner reentry has not been a predominant issue in Middlesex County. Freeholder Polos is also forming a committee on reentry but this one would not be in competition with t, but would hopefully eventually work together. This committee will focus on training and employment.

1. **Introductions.** Kevin Kurdziel welcomed everyone and each committee member introduced themselves.
2. **Purpose/Mission of Committee.**
  - a. Focus on training and employment for those leaving State and County prisons.
  - b. Committee members presented examples of times when better coordination and communication were needed:
    - i. DVR focuses on those with disabilities but they are not always given information on the services available. Substance abuse is considered a disability.
    - ii. Connecting the most challenging clients with employers is very difficult. More outreach is needed before release.
    - iii. Clients struggle with navigating the system for issues such as housing and with secondary obstacles such as health, mental health and substance abuse issues.
    - iv. Information must be given to the clients before their release to make them aware of their opportunities and resources.
    - v. Mr. Kurdziel summarizes saying that reentry should start when someone enters the system, not just before they exit. They need to be trained in both occupation and soft skills. A representative from Corrections would be good on this committee to address this issue of follow through and awareness of resources available.
    - vi. Also, we should consider the whole criminal justice system, not just those in the jails.
    - vii. Employers have to be educated so that they do not lump all ex-offenders together. With unemployment down to 3.8%, employers have to realize that soon they may have difficulty filling jobs and may need to start looking at ex-offenders as potential employees.
    - viii. Programs must be developed to help them land and retain jobs; teach them how to sell themselves.
    - ix. Jim Zullo brought up that employers have fears related to liability and we must dispel that myth. Involving the Chambers of Commerce might help us connect with employers.
    - x. Amy Bellisano explained that most large, national chains would not be able to take advantage of incentives to hire ex-offenders because of the difficulties involved in "paperwork." We would do best to work with regional and local employers who would be

helped by any incentive offered. Mr. Kurdziel mentioned that “Sansone Auto” is working with the committee being put together by Freeholder Polos. Mr. Kurdziel requested that if any members knew of employers who would be interested let him know so we could share our mission with them and explain what we are looking to do.

3. **Middlesex County Reentry Landscape.**

- a. Based on statistics, Middlesex County can expect to see 750 ex-offenders over the next few years who could be helped by improved programs
- b. Many Middlesex County residents are currently in jails in south Jersey, but will probably be returning here upon release.

4. **Current Available Services**

- a. Parole
- b. DVR
- c. Rutgers has a “Step” program that offers college classes within the facilities before release. It then refers some to the community colleges. We are trying to get someone from the program on this committee.
- d. Edna Mahan Correctional Center for Women has some training available for Office Manager, Animal Trainer, and Construction Career Awareness. Apprenticeships and how they are often overlooked when someone is released were discussed. Some ex-offenders need to find a job immediately, some can take some time to train for a career and some are able to do a combination. Employers need to be educated about this and be willing to work with clients. We have to work with employers to help relieve some of the other stresses the ex-offenders experience upon release and reentry such as any substance abuse, parole obligations, etc. There needs to be a way for them to find the time for this and/or make it easier for them to comply.
- e. There are legitimate employer concerns about liability and turnover. We need to be aware of the questions they may ask and have answers. Statistics should be obtained because it is felt they will be a positive selling point. We need to get statistics on how much more of a liability an ex-offender is than anyone else. Examples of employers who have had success with programs would help and working through the Chambers of Commerce would allay some fears. We should set up a meeting with the Chambers and try to hold an event with them offering information.

5. **Identifying Gaps in Services**

- a. It is not always a lack of services, but many times a lack of communication about the services. We have to make sure the criminal justice system knows about what is available.
- b. If someone is eligible for other programs, and ex-offender background would not prevent participation, they can receive training through our regular programs. Youth programs now go up to age 24. Some ex-offenders will be in that age group and we might be able to help through those programs since they would be eligible automatically if they had not finished high school or had gone through the criminal justice system.
- c. The lack of a good public transportation system in Middlesex County is a barrier to many.
- d. Many programs cannot be offered to males who did not register for Selective Service. We are able to make some exceptions if there were valid reasons they did not register. We also have WDP funds

which are not from federal sources but the state and have different restrictions. However, those funds are not always available to us.

- e. Ms. Molina brought up the topic of the undocumented and access to services.
- f. Mr. Kurdziel suggested holding some sort of reentry transition fair highlighting services available. A resource directory could be developed to give to inmates before they are released. Someone from Corrections could be involved with this.
- g. Ms. Bellisano said that clients are overwhelmed when they are released, and one person helping them navigate the system could help a lot.

#### 6. **Next Steps**

- a. Halfway House placements are not geographically considered, so jobs found frequently become temporary because a client eventually moves back to their own home area which is not always near where the halfway house and job are located. There are not many halfway houses in Middlesex County.
- b. “Sober Houses” could also be a resource. It is a safe environment and close to services. We could help with the training aspect at locations. It is private, so not for all, but is a very strict model that does work.
- c. A mental health component frequently goes along with addiction and that Meghan’s law needs to be taken into account.
- d. There is an event scheduled at the Fire Academy concerning incarceration. Mr. Kurdziel will email committee members the information. If anyone knows of any other reentry events, please email to him and he will get them out to the committee.
- e. Mr. Kurdziel reminded everyone that many times all ex-offenders are lumped together and we have to make sure each one is looked at individually.
- f. Ms. Molina wanted to know if the drug court will participate with this. Mr. Ruffini said he will contact someone.

#### 7. **Appointment of Committee Chair**

- a. The WDB by-laws require that the chair of all committees be a member of the Board. Three people on this committee are eligible. Mr. Kurdziel will work closely with whoever is chosen. A main function will be to report at the quarterly WDB meetings on committee activities. Amy Bellisano offered and a decision will be made by the April meeting.

#### 8. **Next Meeting Date**

- a. Initially, the committee will meet on the third Tuesday of each month at 9:30 at this location.
- b. Chambers of commerce, potential employers and events need to be contacted/planned soon.

#### 9. **Adjournment** at 10:35 AM.

Handouts: “Second Chances, Safer Counties, Workforce Development and Reentry”  
(Also emailed to committee members after the meeting.)

**The next meeting of the Executive Committee will be April 19, 2016 at 9:30 AM.**