



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NEW MEXICO'S TRANSITION FROM PRISON TO COMMUNITY INITIATIVE: A GAPS ANALYSIS

Summary

- The NMCD has begun implementing reentry reform efforts, including piloting the COM-PAS at the RDC, creating a written policy to implement the TAP, and continuing with Reentry Committee Meetings for inmates nearing release from prison.
- Despite these progressive efforts, there are gaps. These include:
 - The current risk needs assessment used to classify inmates focuses on security risk and risk management as opposed to recidivism risk and risk reduction.
 - Despite a policy directive, TAP directed case management has not been implemented.
 - Referral to programming is not based on inmates' criminogenic needs.
 - Reentry Committee Meetings are sometimes poorly attended and are not always effective for addressing inmates' needs.
 - Support for reentry and infrastructure must be strengthened to fully implement the initiative.
- NMCD needs to develop a comprehensive plan to implement TPCI in both the short and long term that builds on current efforts, addresses current gaps, relies on evidence based practices, and includes measurable outcomes.



New Mexico Statistical Analysis Center

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Prepared by : Kristine Denman, Lisa Broidy, Ashley Gonzales, Tomas Segovia, and Dale Willits

At the request of Governor Richardson, a Task Force was formed in March 2008 to examine potential prison reform efforts. In June 2008, Governor Richardson's Task Force on Prison Reform produced the first of two reports identifying the needs of the State's prisons and offering recommendations to improve reentry success among the State's prisoners. As a result of the recommendations, The New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD) created a Reentry and Prison Reform Division, tasked with carrying out reform efforts within the NMCD. Prison reform efforts in New Mexico are modeled after the national Transition from Prisons to Community Initiative (TPCI), which aims to improve reentry success among prisoners.

The TPCI model differs from other reentry models. The primary differences are the emphasis on risk reduction rather than risk management, collaboration within and across multiple agencies at many levels, and commitment of state government and leadership within the corrections agencies. It changes the view of offenders and the role of corrections departments to one that sees offenders as capable of change and departments as agents of that change. It requires evidence based

practices, comprehensive risk and needs assessment, delivery of programming matched to the offenders' needs, release planning and appropriate transition activities. All aspects require performance measurement. The ability to be flexible, changing when warranted, is necessary. It emphasizes reentry as a process that begins at intake. TPCI is not a program or collection of programs but a framework to encourage systematic reentry reform to reduce recidivism and increase community safety.

The primary goal of the current report is to highlight current progress and outline key gaps towards implementation of TPCI in the institutional setting. The analysis we present is not meant to be an indictment of the system, but rather a useful guide for where the system is currently and where it can improve as it moves towards full implementation of a comprehensive evidence-based reentry model. While we touch on issues related to community supervision, the primary focus in this report is on the prison system.

Methods

We began by outlining each component of the TPCI model. We used

the National TPC Reentry Handbook (Burke, 2008) and the Transition from Prison to Community Initiative (Parent and Barnett, 2002) as references for the TPCI model. We examined New Mexico's goals/objectives listed on the NMCD Reentry Bureau on the NMCD website (http://corrections.state.nm.us/reentry_reform/goals.html), and the two reports produced by Governor Richardson's Task Force on Prison Reform. Together, these from the ideal from which to compare current efforts occurring within NMCD.

We used several sources of data to understand current reentry efforts within NMCD. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals working within the Corrections Department. Participants included staff members from a number of different divisions (mental health, classification, education, addictions, etc.) and at various prisons (State run and private facilities, men's and women's prisons, and representing all security levels) and ranged from line staff to bureau chiefs and wardens in order to get a wide range of perspectives. In total, we conducted 24 interviews lasting anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours each.

In addition to analyzing the data from the individual interviews described above, we revisit the findings of a 2009 report assessing the Career Pathways (CP) Program. The primary goal of CP is to promote offender reentry success by providing educational and vocational services. The results of this report are useful as they speak to some of the current efforts and related gaps in reentry programming.

Finally, we conducted document analysis to verify and supplement the results found in the interviews. We included data from documents directly or indirectly related to reentry initiatives and efforts prepared by NMCD or other state agencies or representatives with a stake in the reentry process. Specifically, we collected

and analyzed relevant newsletters, available meeting minutes, written policies, PowerPoint presentations, annual reports, strategic plans and other planning documents.

Key Findings

Strengths

NMCD is making some progress towards TPCI implementation. We found that the NMCD has made some plans for reentry reform and has made steps towards implementing reentry reform efforts at every key decision making point. Although it is not yet being used for classification, classification officers do complete the COMPAS risk needs assessment tool with inmates at intake. While comprehensive case management does not occur, there are policies and procedures in place to make this happen (iTAP and TAP). Programs that address inmate needs exist, and some, like project SOAR, have reported success in reducing recidivism. Reentry planning procedures are in place, and Reentry Committee Meetings occur. Through this, the prisons and Probation and Parole Division have established collaborations.

NMCD has made an effort to increase support for family members by providing them with the Guide for Families and Friends of Justice Involved New Mexicans, increasing visitation through videoconferencing and programs, and taking steps towards including families in Reentry Committee Meetings. Some staff members have participated in training to learn Motivational Interviewing and other reentry related skills, such as Offender Employment Specialist training. NMCD has also developed partnerships with external agencies, and has developed memorandums of understanding and agreements with colleges, universities and community organizations. Departments are applying for and receiving grant funding to improve and develop reentry related programs

and to assist with evaluation of reentry activities. Staff reported a shift in perceptions of, and interactions with, inmates. Some staff report using more motivational interviewing skills, communicating with inmates in ways that encourage them to access programming and work towards changing their behavior.

Gaps

Despite positive efforts to implement reentry reform, we found significant gaps that, if addressed, would further facilitate progress towards the implementation of a comprehensive reentry model in New Mexico. In particular, assessment and case management are not currently aligned with either national guidelines or local goals. The current risk needs assessment being used to classify inmates is a risk management tool based on security risk and does not take into account risk of recidivism or, importantly, criminogenic needs. While there is a policy in place to implement a Transitional Accountability Plan (TAP), which should be used in conjunction with case management, this is not yet standard practice. The transfer of inmate case information is not seamless. Inmates are not matched to prison programming based on risks and criminogenic needs; rather, participation in programming largely begins as a result of “lump sum shopping,” or inmates trying to find programs that will provide them with credits for earlier release. Further, though structurally in place, Reentry Committee Meetings do not operate as comprehensively as they could; meetings are not always attended by representatives from all the key NMCD divisions and those who do attend may not be familiar with the inmate. NMCD reentry efforts could also benefit from an increased use of research for planning purposes, as well as more widespread support for reentry efforts at every staffing level to create a culture change from one that is primarily security minded to one that emphasizes behavior change and success.

In part, these gaps are due to gaps in the current infrastructure. In order to fully implement a comprehensive reentry plan, NMCD needs to embrace the rehabilitative framework on which reentry efforts build and commit the necessary resources to ensure that appropriate programming, partnerships and collaborations can succeed.

Discussion

In order to move reentry efforts forward, we believe the next step is to commit to a thorough planning process. This should include consideration of both the short term and the long term vision for the State. The NMCD should complete a system-wide needs assessment. The needs assessment should include an in-depth look at the inmate population currently and over time, current and future staffing responsibilities and needs, a detailed inventory of programs available, an examination of formal collaborations with agencies in the community, and other operations within the organization. Ultimately, this plan should identify measurable and time bound goals, and include a proposal for implementing appropriate changes in classification procedures, redistribution of staff, appropriate housing of prison populations, and any other organizational changes needed.

Second, in order to strengthen the culture change that must accompany reentry reform, it is imperative that the NMCD administration clearly and consistently promote the reentry reform message. This includes actively supporting and promoting key programmatic elements of the reentry model. Messages should be distributed in multiple ways (visual, spoken and written) and through many mediums (e-mail, bulletin boards, meetings, newsletters, etc.) to ensure that staff members receive the message (Flaherty-Zonis, 2007) and hear it repeatedly reinforced.

Other recommendations specific to each of the key areas that we reviewed are available in the full report.

The TPCI model is one that expects ongoing change: “Transition reform will always be a state of ‘becoming,’ not a state of being” (Parent and Barnett, 2002: 35). Thus,

while this report notes some key gaps, highlighting and ultimately addressing these gaps is an integral part of the implementation process. Full implementation of the initiative requires long term commitment with an eye toward the long term goal of safer communities.

References

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New Mexico Statistical Analysis Center
Institute for Social Research
One University of New Mexico
MSC02-1625
Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001

(505) 277-4257

Fax: (505-277-4215)

E-mail: nmsac@unm.edu

www.isrunm.net