



## U.S. Department of Justice

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### **Summary of Project H.O.P.E.** **(Helping Offenders Pursue Excellence)**

The following is a description of the prevention and reentry strategy I initiated called Project H.O.P.E. (Helping offenders pursue excellence). This initiative is not a court administered reentry program but rather is advanced through partnerships and collaborative efforts through my office. Out of a necessity to find resources that could be helpful to ex-offenders I designed a program that has the potential of impacting a multitude of state and federal ex-offenders. Set forth below I have outlined an executive summary of my activities followed by a more expansive narrative description of my reentry strategy and activities.

### **Project H.O.P.E. (Helping Offenders Pursue Excellence) Executive Summary**

#### **I. Phase 1**

- A. Assessment of community assets
  - 1. Met with community service providers
  - 2. Met with personnel from local community college
  - 3. Met with workforce development entities (both governmental and private)
  - 4. Identified businesses that had successfully hired ex-offenders to serve as examples
  - 5. Identified ex-offenders who had been successfully employed who could serve as role models

#### **II. Phase 2**

- A. Established a reentry council/network that meets monthly to discuss addressing the holistic needs of returning ex-offenders
  - 1. Recruited community partners from service providers to serve on re-entry counsel subcommittees that attempt to address a limited range of re-entry issues.
  - 2. Reentry subcommittees report findings/progress/newly discovered resources to the executive re-entry committee.
  - 3. Developed an Ex-Offender Support Resources Guide that lists all the addresses and phone numbers of the local agencies and entities that provide some aspect of reentry support. This document is updated twice a year.

#### **III. Phase 3**

- A. Met with the local chamber of commerce and its members to pitch reentry initiative
  - 1. I outlined the business and societal benefits of hiring ex-offenders
  - 2. Business owners that successfully hired ex-offenders shared their stories
  - 3. Ex-offenders who have been successfully employed shared their stories

- B. Partnered with local community college to host “Ex-Offender Employment Workshop” consisting of the following:
  - 1. mock job interviews; 2. resume writing/critiques; 3. soft skill training; 4. connected ex-offenders with community service providers
- C. Partnered with local community college to host “Ex-Offender Job Fair”
  - 1. Actively recruited employers to participate in job fair
  - 2. Worked with state and federal probation to get word out to ex-offender population about job fair
  - 3. Promoted event to local media

#### IV. Phase 4

- A. Established an anti-violence call-in program
  - 1. Met with local ATF management to secure their participation
  - 2. Met with local District Attorney to secure her support for the program
  - 3. Partnered with state probation to identify violent probationers to participate in the call-in program
  - 4. Meet monthly in a courtroom of the federal courthouse to conduct call-in program

#### V. Phase 5

- A. Encouraged churches to get more involved in the reentry effort
  - 1. Met with a prominent group of pastors in the city and encouraged them to engage in more prison in-reach and mentoring activities
  - 2. One church volunteered to take a central role and established the “Beautiful Gate Ministry” (discussed further below).

#### VI. Phase 6

- A. Attempting to address the entangling nature of the collateral consequences associated with incarceration such as augmented traffic ticket fines.
  - 1. Met with local bar and defense bar to encourage them to provide pro-bono services to ex-offenders who have augmented traffic fines due to incarceration
  - 2. I have met with the Alabama Administrative Office of Court to ask for their assistance in flagging any outstanding traffic tickets a person may have at the time of their incarceration and additionally notifying the appropriate court that the defendant will not be able to appear due to their incarceration
  - 3. I have sent letters to local municipal and county judges in the Southern District of Alabama asking them to delay adjudication of traffic tickets during the time of someone’s incarceration and withdraw any “hold” for a “failure to appear” that they might otherwise issue because someone fails to appear for a court date if they are already incarcerated.
  - 4. Secured the participation of Alabama Legal Services to assist and represent ex-offenders in these types of matters.
  - 5. Developed template motions for volunteer lawyers to file in instances where ex-offenders have outstanding traffic fines and fees as well as child support issues. On this latter issue we have directly engaged with the judges who handle these issues to make sure that we have their buy-in on the motions that will be filed.

## VII. Phase 7

- A. Encouraged State correctional entities, local municipalities and service provider partners to apply for re-entry grants so that reentry efforts in the Southern District of Alabama will continue past the time I might serve as the United States Attorney.

## VIII. Phase 8

I am always looking for new ways to maintain community awareness of the difficulties formerly incarcerated persons face. While there are many and varied ways to accomplish this I have listed two of the most effective tools that I have used: 1) the Re-entry Simulation, and; 2) The Pull of Gravity Documentary.

## **Project H.O.P.E. Narrative Summary**

### I. Phase 1

The first thing I set out to do was to educate myself on the community resources that existed in my community that could be used to support ex-offender reentry. I visited with local service providers in the community in order to discover what tangible services or benefits they could offer an ex-offender. To that end I was pleasantly surprised to find that so many resources already existed in the community that could directly meet the needs of ex-offenders. As an aside I also became aware that my participation and interest in this issue as the United States Attorney in establishing such a program opened the door to resources and cooperation among potential service providers that had not previously existed when those same resources were previously sought after by the U.S. Probation Office and the Federal Public Defender's Office.

I discovered that the local state work force development office (employment office) had federal funds available through the Department of Labor (DOL) to fund certain activities for a class of individuals described as "displaced workers," and that most ex-offenders met the criteria to be considered "displaced workers." As a "displaced worker" ex-offenders can establish Individual Training Accounts and receive \$2000-\$10,000 for vocational training. I also discovered that as part of another DOL program 50-90% of an employee's on-the-job training time could be reimbursed for up to 26 weeks. I also became aware that if a business hired an ex-offender within one year of their release from prison, they would be entitled to a \$1,200-\$9,600 tax credit. All of these specific resources are available nationally.

I also met with the president of the local community college and informed him about my reentry initiative and my desire to see ex-offenders enroll in the college's various vocation programs. My suggestion was met with great enthusiasm as he told me about the college's programs in aluminum welding, automotive body repair, plumbing, masonry, electrical, commercial food service, barbering, graphic design and carpentry.

Additionally, with the close out of the Weed & Seed program in Mobile I worked with the local administrator of the grant to use a portion of the remaining funds to purchase Fidelity

Bonding for ex-offenders. Fidelity Bonding is essentially an insurance policy that covers an employer in its employment of an ex-offender for the first six months that they are employed up to the reimbursement amount of \$5000. We also used part of the Weed & Seed close out money to produce and promote a public service announcement featuring myself, the local Sheriff and District Attorney, encouraging businesses to hire ex-offenders. <http://www.justice.gov/usao/als/misc/S4BF.mp4>

I also partnered with a pair of local non-profit entities called Light of the Village and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance Staffing respectively. I routinely refer ex-offenders to Light of the Village where they can get direct assistance in filling out job applications on-line, resume building, obtaining critical documents such as a birth certificate or social security card, or get free GED tutoring. 2<sup>nd</sup> Chance Staffing provides similar services but has a stronger emphasis on the job readiness and job placement of ex-offenders.

## II. Phase 2

The next phase of my reentry strategy was to establish a re-entry council comprised of service providers and stake holders that would meet on a monthly basis in my office in order to discuss reentry strategy, share newly discovered community resources and to discuss any progress they had made in meeting the ex-offender need they had been assigned to address. The reentry council has several different subcommittees that attempt to meet a limited range of ex-offender needs. Some of the subcommittees include: 1. prison in-reach; 2. employment; 3. housing and transportation, and; 4. education, just to name a few. The chairs of these subcommittees report their progress back to an executive reentry committee chaired by me on a monthly basis.

## III. Phase 3

Getting ex-offenders drug free and educated would be all for naught if they couldn't secure employment so I made an appointment to meet with the head of the local chamber of commerce and its members and encouraged them to hire ex-offenders. I asked a few business owners who had successfully hired ex-offenders, and a few successfully employed ex-offenders to join me in making a presentation to the local chamber of commerce and its members. I wanted to make sure that they were aware of the financial incentives and bottom line business benefits of hiring ex-offenders. I also wanted to provide them with a first-hand opportunity to see that ex-offenders could make good workers.

In order to prepare as many ex-offenders for employment as possible I host an annual "Ex-Offender Employment Workshop" in collaboration with the local junior college. At this workshop community volunteers and community service providers conduct mock interviews and resume critiques of the ex-offenders, offering them constructive criticism. Personnel from the work force development component of the local junior college conduct a soft skill lecture to program participants covering a range of topics including: having a professional sounding email address with which to correspond with employers; getting along in the workplace;

appropriate hair styles for the work place; the need to cover-up tattoos in some workplaces; the importance of getting to work on time, and; the importance of the proper dress for the workplace (i.e. No saggy pants!!).

In partnership with the local community college and participating businesses I host an annual "Ex-Offender Job Fair" where anywhere from 250-400 ex-offenders across the city come seeking employment. Statistics compiled by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts in Washington D.C., indicate that ex-offender employment is a critical factor in whether recently released federal inmates are successful. Of the 262,000 federal prisoners that were released from federal prison between calendar years 2002-2006, 50% of those who could not secure any employment during the time of their supervised release (generally two-to-five years) committed a new crime or violated the terms of their release and were sent back to prison. However, an astonishing 93% of those who were able to secure employment during the entirety of their supervised release were able to successfully reintegrate back into society and not return to prison.

#### IV. Phase 4

Phase 4 is based on the classic call-in program model where state probation offices help my office to identify their probationers who have a substantial violent criminal history and we "invite" them to federal court as a mandatory condition of their state probation. At these meetings the violent probationers are advised of what their federal guideline sentence would be if they were convicted of being a felon in possession of a firearm in federal court. They are also advised that they would substantially have to serve their sentences day-for-day in the federal system as compared to the state system where offenders are often paroled. Lastly, they are also advised that they would not be housed in a local jail but rather could be housed in a federal penitentiary located across the country where it would be very difficult for their family members to visit.

The response on an individual level to this program was overwhelmingly positive. Without fail most of the program "invitees" sought to shake my hand and the hand of the organizing AUSA at the conclusion of each such meeting.

#### V. Phase 5

In administering the above described reentry program I noticed that very few churches were involved in any type of prison in-reach ministry or reentry effort. I then met with one of the most prominent pastors in the city and asked for his support of my reentry initiative and his assistance in convening a meeting with a larger group of pastors in order to discuss reentry. The pastor was supportive and more than willing to assist me in convening a larger meeting, which ultimately was very successful.

On his own initiative the pastor I initially approached started the "Beautiful Gate Ministry" whereby volunteers from his church go into the local jails to meet with and mentor several of the inmates. If an inmate has no one to pick him or her up from jail when they are released or has no where to stay, the church arranges for someone to pick them up from jail and transport them home or to a temporary housing facility. They also visit with all those they have developed relationships with in the jail within 48 hours of their release in order to continue the mentoring relationship.

The church also provides free professional mental health counseling to ex-offenders, as well as to his or her family members if they need it.

A more formalized mentorship program administered through the “Beautiful Gate Ministry” was initiated in the fall of 2014 where volunteer mentors received training from Federal Bureau of Prisons personnel about how to be a mentor to an ex-offender. In 2015 we also partnered with another faith based ministry called Ransom House Ministries in order to provide more structure to the mentoring relationship. Ransom House Ministries uses a mentorship booklet called Jobs-For-Life in order to teach formerly incarcerated persons how to prepare themselves for reentering the job market step-by-step. This mentorship program is a six month commitment. The parties agree to meet face-to-face at least once a month and an additional two times per month by phone or text in order to build rapport and trouble shoot issues.

#### IV. Phase 6

When a defendant is incarcerated he often gets entangled in other negative law enforcement consequences that are in large part not due to a continuing intent to violate the law. The most common example is when a defendant is incarcerated for violating the law but at the time of his incarceration he has other outstanding traffic citations or tickets that are not essential to community safety to enforce. The outstanding traffic citation is not flagged by the incarcerating municipality or State when the defendant enters into custody and no corresponding notice is sent to the municipal court that the defendant has been incarcerated and will be unable to appear for the appointed court date to defend against the traffic citation or pay the fine associated with the same. Ultimately the defendant does not pay the fine for the traffic citation, appear in court to defend against it, or otherwise resolve the traffic citation. A state or municipal court judge then enters a “failure to appear” ruling against the defendant on the traffic citation and puts a “hold” on the defendant, making it so that the defendant cannot be released from prison even when he has served his time for the more serious criminal violation. The local municipality that “holds” the defendant has to pay the costs of housing the defendant even though they may not be the municipality that issued the traffic citation. The defendant then has to pay an augmented fine before being released and often also has to pay additional fees associated with his “failure to appear,” as well as having his license suspended for a year for his “failure to appear.” If a defendant is lucky enough to navigate and pay his way through all of these traps he is often stopped for some other minor traffic violation and arrested and taken into custody for driving on a suspended license. Of course, having a driver’s license is often essential to a defendant getting back and forth to work.

I have sent a letter to each local prosecuting office in the Southern District of Alabama, as well as to all the State courts in my jurisdiction in order to apprise them of the problem so that they can assist in finding a solution.

Because defendants may also have outstanding traffic citations that were not issued by the municipality in whose custody they currently sit, I also met with the state Administrative Office of Court in order to ask for their assistance in flagging outstanding traffic citations upon defendants’ entry into custody. They could then presumably contact any affected municipality and advise them that a particular defendant is incarcerated and will be unable to appear in court to defend against a traffic citation.

Lastly, I have already met with the local bar, the criminal defense bar and Alabama Legal Services to encourage them to provide pro-bono service to defendants who are entangled in negative tangential legal proceedings as a result of traffic citations and the like. Legal Services Alabama has developed template motions relating to child support that can be filed on behalf of an ex-offender by volunteer lawyers and Legal Services Alabama itself has committed to representing ex-offenders in child support matters. Similarly, the minority bar association in town, the Vernon Crawford Bar Association, has drafted template motions that can be filed by volunteer lawyers relating to outstanding traffic fines and fees.

## VII. Phase 7

I make sure that re-entry community partners are aware of any federal grants relating to re-entry and encourage to apply.

## VII. Phase 8

I have used the various tools to create and maintain community awareness regarding the need for community emphasis on reentry. The Reentry Simulation and The Pull of Gravity Documentary proved to be two of the best community awareness tools that I have used.

- A. Reentry Simulation - The Reentry Simulation Game is a tool that can be used in order to evoke empathy from public officials and key stakeholders for the circumstances facing ex-offenders reentering the community. As part of the game mock reentry stakeholders man tables around the room. For example, the mock reentry stakeholders include a probation office, a church, an employer, a bank, a blood plasma center, a pawn shop, a urinalysis testing center and a drug treatment center just to name a few. Participants in the game are given new identities and certain factual characteristics that apply to them. As part of the game participants have to meet with a certain number of reentry stakeholders every week, and if they fail to do so, their release is subject to being revoked. In order to go from stakeholder to stakeholder participants have to provide one of a limited number of travel passes that they are initially provided. Participants also have to exchange monopoly money in order to successfully transact any real life type of financial transaction. The Reentry Simulation is designed to be an exercise that will result in the complete frustration of the participant.

I was recently able to persuade the leadership of the Alabama State legislature that participation in the Reentry Simulation Game would be beneficial for all members of the Alabama legislature to go through as they pondered the need for criminal justice reform in the State as well as what reentry resources would need to be established. As a lead-up to that event we teamed up with the students from a local college's criminology and sociology departments in order to gain their assistance in administering the Reentry Simulation to our local Reentry Task Force, local public officials and local reentry stakeholders.

- B. "The Pull of Gravity" is a documentary film created with Office of Justice Programs monies that were obtained by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. The documentary film's producer is Mr. El Sawyer, who is also an

ex-offender. The documentary is gritty and contains some language that is inappropriate for children, but accurately captures peoples' real experiences as they try to return to the community after a term of incarceration.

Once the screening of the film concluded a panel of people, from employers to service providers, who are engaged in reentry efforts in our area took the stage in order to discuss their reentry efforts. Additionally, a broad range of community service providers also had tables in the Mobile Civic Center lobby where they informed the public on what services they provide. The public also used this opportunity to identify volunteer opportunities or directly connect with the free or reduced fee services available in our area.

The purpose of this event was to spark the reentry conversation here locally in hopes of addressing our crime problem at its root by identifying areas where community involvement can arrest systemic impediments to ex-offenders successfully reintegrating back into society. These impediments include ex-offenders' lack of knowledge about what free or reduced fee services that are available in the community to assist them, ex-offenders' educational and employment needs and a wary business community. These traditional impediments to successful reentry have led to a high recidivism rate where new victims are created because ex-offenders have forfeited any hope of successful reintegration. Given the high demand for skilled vocational laborers in the region, ex-offenders, if properly trained in both soft skills and vocational skills, can be a reliable labor pool for our robust maritime and airline industries while at the same time reducing our local crime rate and reducing prison costs for the State.