Breaking the Cycle of Incarceration & Building Brighter Futures in Chicago.

Practical and Policy Responses targeted towards Individuals with Criminal Backgrounds.

City of Chicago, Mayor’s Office
The Reality of Re-entry
Drug, Property & Violent Crime Arrests for Chicago Region

Per 100,000 people

- Property
- Violent
- Drug

Number of People Entering & Exiting Prisons in IL, 1986-2005

Admissions

Exits

0 5,000 10,000 15,000 20,000 25,000 30,000 35,000 40,000 45,000

Prisoner Origins in Illinois, 2005

- **Downstate**: 35%
  - 15,724
- **Chicago Region**: 65%
  - 29,195
City of Chicago’s Response

- Develop and support a variety of program initiatives for individuals with criminal backgrounds, namely:
  - Workforce development programming targeted to those with criminal backgrounds;
  - Creation of city contracting opportunities to organizations whose core mission is the employment of individuals with criminal backgrounds; and
  - Creation of an advisory council on reentry affairs – Mayoral Policy Caucus on Prisoner Reentry.
City of Chicago’s Response

- **Mayoral Policy Caucus**
  - Convened in May 2004, Their charge was to recommend reforms and innovations to facilitate successful reentry into society for Chicagoans recently released from prison or jail.
  - Serving in an advisory capacity, the Caucus included leaders from government, business, civic associations, community and faith organizations, foundations, universities, social service agencies, advocacy groups as well as formerly incarcerated individuals and their relatives.
  - In an attempt to more systematically assess the needs of this growing population, the Caucus focused on four specific priority areas: Employment, Health, Family and Community Safety.
Highlights from the Final Report of the Mayoral Policy Caucus on Prisoner Reentry
Employment

Develop community-based employment centers that provide comprehensive and long-term support. (Implemented 2/07)

Community-based education and employment agencies are the key to helping formerly incarcerated individuals rebuild their skills and connect with employers. These agencies should utilize a comprehensive approach for long-term, successful reentry outcomes.

Adopt fair employment standards for individuals with criminal backgrounds. (Implemented 2/07)

Many employers obtain individuals’ criminal histories and may inappropriately use these histories during the interview process. The City should adopt internal guidelines for its own personnel policies regarding background checks and establish a “balancing test” in its hiring process. It should also advocate for other public and private employers to do the same. This ensures that qualified men and women, even those with a criminal background, are given fair and equitable opportunities to obtain gainful employment.
Health

Increase community-based services for treatment and support. (Underdevelopment)

Access to and the availability of in-prison and community-based treatment programs for substance abuse and mental health should be expanded. Community-based treatment is cost-effective and critical in facilitating continuity of care. Community- and faith-based organizations also provide a framework for structured peer support groups and mentoring programs for returning prisoners.

Expand diversion programs as alternatives to incarceration.

Community-based treatment forms the foundation for diversion programs as alternatives to incarceration. In recent years, Chicago has experienced the growth of drug and mental health courts and the police department’s crisis intervention teams. Such diversion programs provide an important option to curtail the “revolving door” admissions of the prison system.
Family

Expand family-focused case management and family support groups.

Family-focused case management, including family support groups, provides both returning prisoners and their families with ongoing support and essential linkages to a range of community-based services. Agencies working with formerly incarcerated individuals should broaden their focus and services to include the family as their client.

Support mentoring and social service programs for children of incarcerated parents.

Children often are deeply affected by a parent’s incarceration. The impact manifests itself in both child development issues and the intergenerational cycles of crime. Mentoring and other social service programs for children of incarcerated parents provide ongoing support and positive role models and help to keep children “on the right track.”
Community Safety

Conduct an awareness and outreach campaign. (Underdevelopment)

One of the greatest challenges is public perception, knowledge and engagement in the reentry process. A widespread awareness and outreach campaign, including dialogues, film documentary screenings, media resources and art exhibitions, would go far in moving Chicago’s neighborhoods, and the City as a whole, in this positive direction.

Establish avenues for former prisoners to obtain information about reentry resources. (Implementation underway 2/07)

Community-based “reentry resource centers” could be a returning prisoner’s first point of entry and continual point of access for a variety of reentry support services. Designed as a hub for referrals, these centers would provide guidance and information for former prisoners about employment, treatment, health care, housing and other related services.
City of Chicago’s Response

- **City of Chicago Hiring Guidelines**
  - The Chicago Department of Human Resources promulgated new guidelines for reviewing criminal convictions—a direct recommendation of the Mayoral Policy Caucus on Reentry.
  - This ensures that individuals who have been convicted of criminal activity are placed into and/or occupy City positions that are suitable and appropriate for the individual and do not place undue risk upon the City.
  - The City has also removed the question about criminal history from its employment applications and defers the criminal background check until later in the hiring process.
City of Chicago Hiring Guidelines

The following parameters are taken into consideration as part of the case-by-case review.

- Nature of specific offense(s) for which the candidate was convicted;
- Nature of sentencing;
- Number of convictions;
- Length of time that has passed since the conviction(s);
- Relationship between the criminal act(s) for which the candidate was convicted and the nature of the work for which the individual is being considered;
- Age of the candidate at the time of the conviction;
- Evidence of rehabilitation (i.e. whether candidate has completed a treatment or counseling program or received a certification of relief from disabilities or good conduct);
- Extent to which the individual has been open, honest and cooperative with the City in examining his or her background;
- Any other information relevant to the candidate’s suitability.
Next Steps.

- **Transitional housing**
  In Chicago, approximately 1,200 formerly incarcerated individuals are discharged from state prisons to homeless shelters each year because they have no other place to go at the time of their release.

- **Better connections to the County corrections and probation systems**
  City initiatives have thus far connected exclusively to the state’s corrections and parole systems, our next goal is to establish connections to the county systems as well.
Lessons Learned...

- Understand your landscape
- Listen/include your key stakeholders
- Put some real skin in the game/Lead by example
- Be flexible to the new needs/issues as they develop, and they will
A full copy of the Mayoral Policy Caucus Report can be downloaded at:

www.cityofchicago.org

And click on the link entitled

Ex-Offender Re-entry
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