



Piloting a Tool for Reentry

A Promising Approach to Engaging Family Members

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Executive Summary

Research shows that incarcerated people who maintain supportive relationships with family members have better outcomes—such as stable housing and employment—when they return to the community. Many corrections practitioners and policy makers intuitively understand the positive role families can play in the reentry process, but they often do not know how to help people in prison draw on these social supports.

Staff of the Vera Institute of Justice’s Family Justice Program developed the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT) to help correctional case managers encourage people to better access this untapped source of assistance. The RIT, a series of questions designed to prompt conversations with incarcerated individuals about their family members and other loved ones, can help incarcerated people identify positive support that can be integrated into their plans for the future, after release. The Reentry Is Relational project provided training and technical assistance to pilot the tool in Oklahoma and New Mexico.

As part of the pilot process, Vera program staff interviewed agency staff to learn about current practices. They also gathered information—through surveys and interviews—from incarcerated people and their families about the impact of incarceration on family relationships and the potential for the RIT to help men and women plan for their return to the community.

These inquiries revealed that after leaving prison, incarcerated men and women expect to rely most on their families, followed by their friends; that contact with loved ones by phone or letters remains fairly consistent, but the frequency of visits fluctuates; and that maintaining contact presents financial and other challenges to family members. Forty-two percent of the men and women surveyed said, however, that some of their relationships grew stronger during their incarceration, particularly relationships with parents.

The surveys and interviews showed the potential benefits of using family-focused practices in prison reentry planning. Initial findings from the pilot—as reflected both in interviews with incarcerated people and actions taken by the participating institutions—suggest that these benefits can be reinforced in probation and parole settings. The research also identifies further areas of inquiry that, given some additional investigation, promise to reveal other opportunities to make policies and procedures more family-focused, ultimately leading to better reentry outcomes.

FROM THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Families and social networks play important roles for loved ones involved in the criminal justice system. They may, for example, address drug use, help raise children, offer financial support, and encourage loved ones to find and keep jobs—or simply provide motivation to change. Although people who work in corrections, juvenile justice, probation, or parole usually understand this, they typically do not know how to tap families as a resource.

The Vera Institute of Justice’s Family Justice Program provides training, tools, and consultation to help correctional, probation, and parole agencies implement family-focused policies and practices. The Family Justice Program offers line staff safe and reliable ways to help incarcerated individuals maintain contact with supportive people in their lives and make constructive plans for their return to the community.

The successful implementation of a family-focused tool like the Relational Inquiry Tool described in this report profits from both guidance and inspiration. Vera’s job is to provide the guidance. But the best inspiration comes from those who have benefited from the tool—for example, from the incarcerated woman who told us, “Normally I’m not asked anything about what’s going on in my home life, what’s going on with me... I’m usually told. It was different to be asked.” Or this from a reentry coordinator: “One way the tool really impacted me was the humanization of the offender beyond what a stale file will do.... This tool could very well create a good framework for productive dialogue when trying to find resources and support for the offender.”

The more corrections, parole, and probation agencies can replicate the experiences and attitudes of these two individuals, the closer they will be to drawing on the unique, cost-effective, and underutilized resources that families provide.



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Family Justice Program Director

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Introduction

Approximately 735,000 people are released from prison in the United States every year.¹ Of these, an estimated 66 percent will be rearrested and more than 50 percent will be re-incarcerated within three years.²

Many factors, such as in-prison and community drug treatment, stable housing, and securing and maintaining employment, can contribute to better outcomes for people returning to the community after a period of incarceration.³ Research shows that family and other sources of social support—such as neighbors and godparents—are key to helping incarcerated people return to the community successfully.⁴

It is not surprising that families help improve reentry outcomes. Research has shown that families are the most frequent provider of housing; the most common source of financial support; offer assistance in securing a job; and frequently help out with child care.⁵ Family involvement has been shown to result in better employment outcomes and reductions in use of alcohol and other drugs.⁶ Families also play a significant role in keeping formerly incarcerated individuals from returning to criminal activity. Individuals who had more contact with their families while in prison and report positive family relationships overall are less likely to be arrested again or re-incarcerated.⁷

Despite abundant evidence tying positive social support during incarceration to improved reentry outcomes, many correctional case managers do not routinely discuss such support with the people on their caseload. This may be the result of large caseloads, the profession's traditional focus on people who might negatively influence an incarcerated individual, and concerns about maintaining boundaries between staff and those who are incarcerated.

To facilitate productive conversations about incarcerated individuals' positive social supports, the Vera Institute of Justice's Family Justice Program helps agencies implement the Relational Inquiry Tool (RIT) for use by corrections staff who provide incarcerated people with day-to-day case management and help in reentry planning. The RIT is a list of eight carefully crafted questions, supported by a training module, that was developed with support from the National Institute of Corrections and in partnership with state departments of corrections in Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and Oklahoma, and the non-profit Safer Foundation. As a complement to standard correctional risk and needs assessments, the RIT has been shown to be effective in helping incarcerated people reflect on their social supports and draw on the strengths of their families, leading to better release planning.⁸ (In addition, the Family Justice Program is partnering with the Ohio Department of Youth Services to implement a version of the RIT for use with juvenile populations.)

This report provides an overview of the Reentry Is Relational project, which implemented the RIT in two pilot jurisdictions. It also describes findings that emerged from surveys and interviews conducted as part of the pilot process and discusses the initiative's early outcomes.

Project Overview

Vera's Reentry Is Relational project operated from October 2008 to December 2010 and implemented the RIT at select prisons and community corrections offices in Oklahoma and New Mexico. Participating agency staff were trained to use a strength-based and family-focused approach in their work. This included hands-on practice with the RIT and instruction on complementary communication techniques. Prior to the training, work groups at each site identified policies and practices that could be more supportive of prisoners' relationships.⁹ Vera staff also gathered information from incarcerated people and their families at each site, to shed additional light on existing practices and the current and potential influence of supportive relationships.

Vera partnered with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections (ODOC) and the New Mexico Corrections Department (NMCD) because of their commitment to family-focused approaches and their top administrators' support for this type of work. It fell to each department, however, to select a prison and a probation and parole office to participate in the project.

Oklahoma has the highest rate of incarcerated women in the country, and the ODOC has a long-standing goal of reducing that rate "to at or below the national average."¹⁰ The Reentry Is Relational project worked with the state's largest women's prison outside of Oklahoma City, the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center, and with the Central District Probation and Parole Office in Oklahoma City.

In 2008, New Mexico's then-governor, Bill Richardson, assembled a task force on prison reform that called for strengthening partnerships between corrections and community corrections, involving families and social networks in reentry planning, and providing community-based services to people returning from prison and for their families. Through the Reentry Is Relational project, Vera helped the NMCD implement some of those recommendations at the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility (CNMCF), a men's prison in Los Lunas, and at an Albuquerque-area probation and parole office.

In both Oklahoma and New Mexico, Vera's goal was to improve reentry outcomes by enhancing case management practices and promoting collaboration between prison staff and probation and parole officers.

Gauging Policies and Attitudes

Before implementing the RIT, Vera staff gathered information about the types of family and community resources and support available to incarcerated men and women and the ways people draw on them. They also examined the degree to which the facilities' policies and practices helped or hindered individuals in maintaining contact with their loved ones.

THE RELATIONAL INQUIRY TOOL: SAMPLE QUESTIONS

The Relational Inquiry Tool uses questions like these to prompt corrections case managers and incarcerated individuals to have conversations that might not happen otherwise:

"In thinking about your family support when you get out of prison, what are you most excited about?"

"In thinking about your family support when you get out of prison, what do you think the greatest challenges will be?"

"How did you help your family and friends before you came to prison?"

Project staff met with work groups at both facilities to learn about relevant current practices. To understand the views and experiences of people who would be affected by the pilot, Vera staff interviewed a total of 98 incarcerated men and women from both facilities who expected to be released within six months. Seventy-eight of these people were interviewed before the RIT was implemented. The remaining 20 interviews occurred after the pilot was complete.

Vera staff also conducted a survey of incarcerated men at the CNMCF, in New Mexico, and women at Oklahoma’s Mabel Bassett Correctional Center (n = 267). This includes 122 men (21.3 percent) out of CNMCF’s minimum- and medium-security population of 574. At Mabel Bassett, 145 women (14.1 percent of the total population of 1,032) were surveyed.

It bears noting that the women had spent significantly more time in prison than the men had. For men, the average time spent in prison prior to completing the survey was 7.0 months. Among those in Level I the average was 6.9 months; among those in Level II it was 5.9 months. The women who completed surveys in Oklahoma had an average time served of 48.7 months. (In Oklahoma, the average sentence for women in minimum security is 9 years; women in medium security average 14-year sentences.)

Figure 1, below, provides detailed demographic information about the incarcerated men and women who completed this survey.

Finally, to gather input from family members, project staff distributed

Figure 1: Demographic Information of Survey Participants (n=267) and Facility Populations

	WOMEN			MEN		
	Mabel Bassett Minimum and Medium Security* (n = 1,032)	Vera’s Sample (n = 145)		CNMCF Level I and II: Minimum and Medium Security (n = 574)	Vera’s Sample (n=122)	
AGES						
18-23	17.6%	16	11%	4.2%	5	4.1%
24-29	19.4%	32	22.1%	14.3%	21	17.2%
30-34	17.6%	29	20%	17.8%	25	20.5%
35-39	12.4%	20	13.8%	13.1%	17	13.9%
40-44	11.2%	11	7.6%	12.7%	14	11.5%
45-49	10.5%	13	9.0%	18.6%	16	13.1%
50+	11.2%	19	13.1%	19.3%	20	16.4%
No answer		5	3.4%	0	4	3.3%
RACE/ETHNICITY						
African American	25.1%	20	14%	7.5%	5	4%
White	55.8%	70	50%	27.7%	35	29%
Latino/Hispanic	5.1%	11	8%	53.1%	65	53%
Native American	13.6%	34	24%	11.1%	13	11%
Other	0.4%	4	4%	0.5%	2	2%
No answer		6	4%	0	2	2%

* Note: Age breakdowns provided by Mabel Bassett Correctional Center were <= 20, 21 to 25, 26 to 30, 31 to 35, 36 to 40, 41 to 45, 46 to 50, 51 to 55, and >= 56.

another survey during weekend visitation at both facilities (n=60) and conducted phone interviews with supportive family members identified by the incarcerated men and women (n=23).

Of the 267 incarcerated people surveyed, 205 reported having children—113 (77.9 percent) women and 92 (75.4 percent) men. More than 320 of the participants' children were younger than age 18.

Major Findings

Four main findings emerged from the research portion of this project:

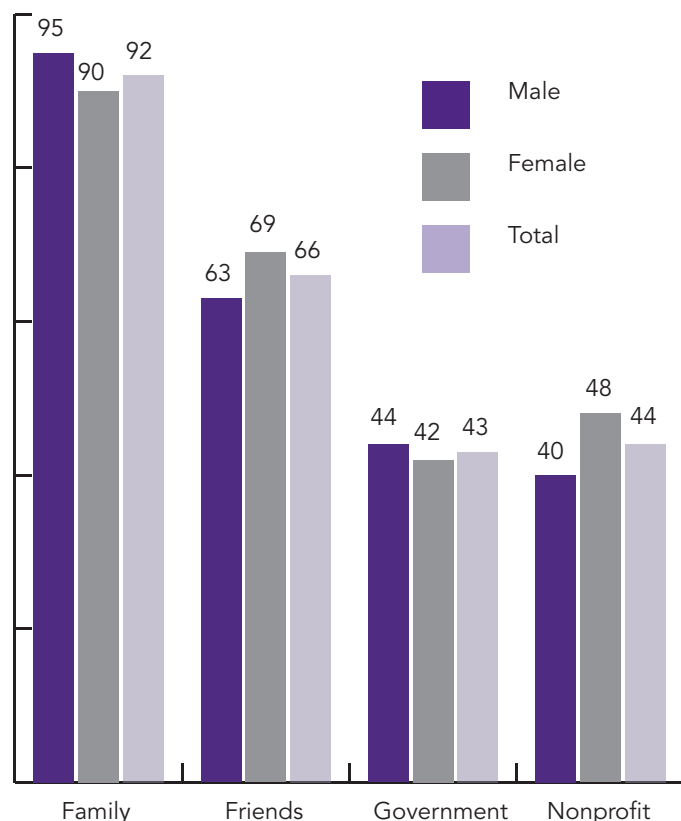
- > In anticipating their needs upon release, incarcerated men and women expected to rely on families, and then friends, as the most important sources of support.
- > Visitation rates fluctuated in frequency, but incarcerated individuals' contact with loved ones by telephone or letters was fairly consistent throughout a person's sentence.
- > Maintaining contact with an incarcerated loved one presented family members with considerable financial burdens and other challenges.
- > Forty-two percent of the incarcerated men and women reported that some of their relationships—particularly with their parents—grew stronger during their incarceration.

These findings are discussed below.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR INCARCERATED MEN AND WOMEN

As Figure 2, right, illustrates, nearly 92 percent of all incarcerated individuals surveyed expected to rely on their families for housing, child care, financial support, and/or finding employment after release from prison. This finding is consistent with other research about the ways family members provide support for their loved ones leaving prison.¹¹ Friends were cited as the second-most common source of support (66 percent of respondents).

Figure 2: Expected Sources of Support After Release from Prison (n = 267)¹²



In addition, incarcerated men and women described several other types of support they receive from their families and friends. These include:

- > depositing money in commissary accounts;
- > providing emotional support;
- > taking care of children and/or bringing children for visits;
- > providing guidance and advice as participants prepare for release;
- > motivating participants to do well; and
- > providing care for family members in poor health or in financial need.

CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND OTHER SUPPORTIVE PEOPLE DURING INCARCERATION

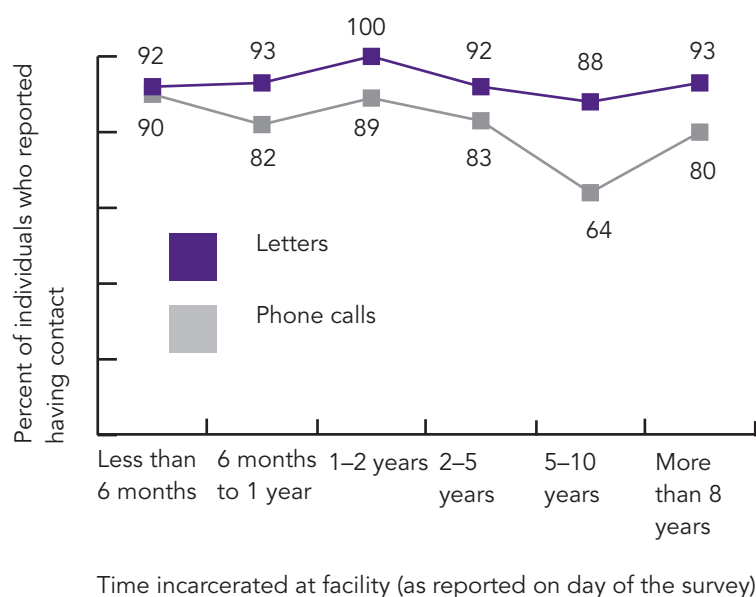
Incarcerated individuals listed visitation, letters, and telephone calls as the most common forms of support they receive from their family during incarceration. Visiting family members surveyed by Vera staff also indicated that they contacted the incarcerated person through visits, phone calls, and letters. Seventy-six percent of surveyed family members stated that they maintain weekly contact with the incarcerated person. There was, however, some variation in contact, as discussed below.

CONTACT BY TELEPHONE AND MAIL.

The survey of incarcerated men and women asked about the people with whom they have contact and how many they communicate with via telephone or letters. They were asked about contact with their parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family (such as aunts or cousins), significant others, children, and friends. Approximately 80 percent of incarcerated individuals reported that they maintain contact by phone or letter, regardless of their length of stay. Figure 3, left, shows that incarcerated people’s reported contact with loved ones by phone or letters remained fairly consistent throughout their sentence.

OBSTACLES TO VISITATION AND OTHER FORMS OF CONTACT. Incarcerated men and women alike indicated that it was impor-

Figure 3: Phone and Letter Contact with Family and Friends (n=267)

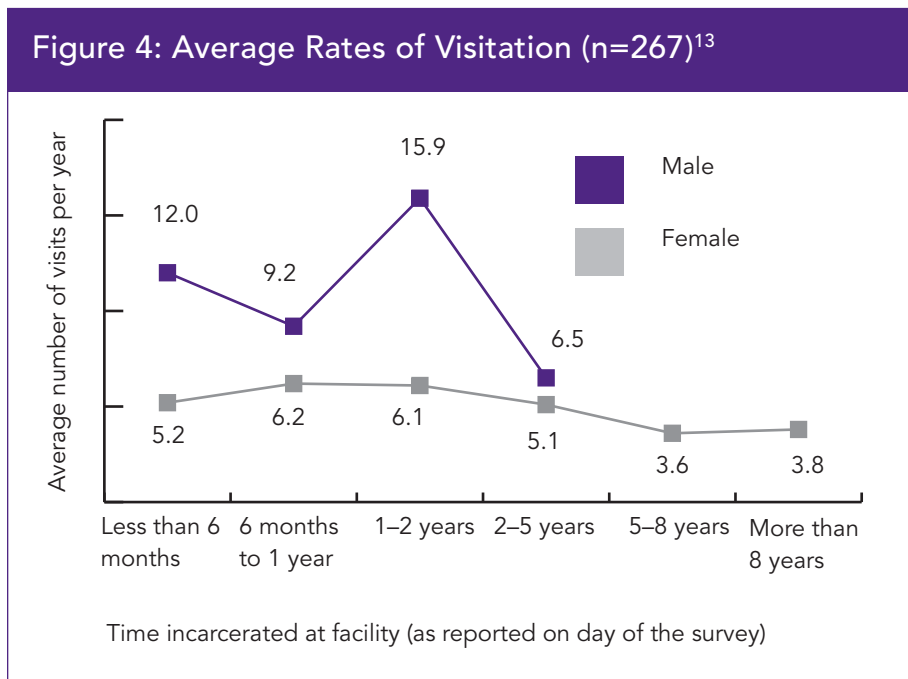


tant to them to see family members and expressed a desire for more contact. Their reported rates of visitation were less constant, however, than rates of contact by telephone or mail. Seventy-three (27 percent) of the incarcerated people surveyed indicated that they had not had any visits during their incarceration. Of these, 55 percent mentioned distance as the main reason. Among those who indicated that family members had visited them, 25 percent mentioned distance as the reason that they are not visited more often.

Incarcerated women reported different experiences with visits than incarcerated men did, as Figure 4, below, shows. Women received fewer visits during their first months in prison. This may be partly because of different visitation policies in the states where Vera worked. The New Mexico Corrections Department permits only relatives to visit while people are incarcerated at the Reception and Diagnostic Center (where they typically spend the first 30 days of their incarceration). Oklahoma does not permit visitation during the initial assessment period (also typically 30 days). In both states, non-relatives, including significant others, may submit a visitation application after a person moves to a longer-term prison.

Seventy-six percent of surveyed family members reported significant barriers to maintaining contact. Supportive family members Vera interviewed by telephone described similar challenges. Of these, the cost of calling cards, expensive collect calls, and access to transportation to and from the facility were the most commonly cited barriers. Other barriers mentioned include family responsibilities and work obligations. Many family members also indicated that prison rules and practices—including searches, long waits, and inconsistent interpretations of dress codes for visitors—can be unclear, unpleasant, too restrictive, and even keep people from visiting again.

It was also stated that incarceration of a loved one results in an emotional



and financial gap, as family members may not get to see the person and may lose a source of income. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that family members experience the incarceration of a loved one as a loss and often assume additional responsibilities to fulfill the role of the absent person.¹⁴

SOME RELATIONSHIPS STRENGTHENED DURING INCARCERATION

The surveys of incarcerated men and women showed that 42 percent reported growing closer to some of their loved ones while in prison. Relationships with parents were most likely to have improved during incarceration: 53 percent of respondents who reported growing closer to someone said they grew closer to their mother; 49 percent grew closer to their father. Romantic relationships and friendships appear to follow different patterns during incarceration: 45 percent of respondents said they grew apart from their significant others and 50 percent reported growing apart from their friends.

Additional Findings

In addition to the findings described above, the research uncovered other findings that, with more study, could have implications for corrections practice.

Vera found, for example, a direct relationship between the time spent in prison and the openness of communication between incarcerated individuals and staff. The longer people stay in prison, the more comfortable they report feeling about discussing their families and other personal information with facility staff.

The research also showed another notable difference when comparing the men and women who participated in the interviews and surveys, although the responses came from women in one state and men in another. Figure 5, below, shows that a greater percentage of women report that they expect to look for formal sources of support, such as government or community-based organizations, to meet their needs.

Figure 5: Expected Sources of Support for Incarcerated Women and Men After Release from Prison (n=267)

	Women (n=145)				Men (n=122)			
	Family	Friends	Government	Nonprofit	Family	Friends	Government	Nonprofit
Housing	78.8%	45.3%	21.2%	28.5%	87.50%	33.6%	13.0%	16.2%
Finding Job	69.7%	45.8%	26.0%	38.2%	81.50%	50.0%	17.8%	25.9%
Child Care	67.7%	36.9%	21.5%	22.1%	89.8%	34.5%	15.5%	12.9%
Financial Support	76.9%	45.6%	26.4%	23.3%	86.1%	38.2%	20.6%	15.7%
Transportation	82.3%	41.5%	13.1%	21.5%	87.5%	40.0%	14.7%	10.5%
Job Training Programs	60.7%	36.4%	29.7%	37.3%	62.8%	32.3%	45.7%	31.2%
Motivation	87.3%	61.9%	7.5%	26.1%	96.1%	57.4%	5.9%	23.5%

Although additional study of these findings would be useful, they suggest that practitioners may want to consider building rapport with incarcerated individuals earlier in their sentence. (Doing so could also create additional opportunities for using the RIT in jail settings, for example, or with people serving shorter prison sentences than were served by men and women in Vera’s samples.) Also, using the tool with men in Oklahoma for comparison might explain why women plan to seek help from nonprofit and government agencies more than men in the New Mexico sample do. If it holds true that women more often rely on people outside their social network for housing, practitioners may want to respond accordingly—by expanding transitional housing opportunities in counties where large numbers of women reside immediately after leaving prison.

Early Results from Implementation of the Relational Inquiry Tool

As a result of the Reentry Is Relational project, case managers in Oklahoma and classification officers in New Mexico (whose responsibilities are similar) now administer the RIT three to six months before a prisoner’s anticipated release. Responses from the 20 incarcerated people interviewed after completing the RIT suggested that inquiries about family support can lead incarcerated individuals to think more about their reentry plans, contact positive sources of support, and discuss negative influences in their lives.

Eleven out of 20 participants stated that completing the RIT with prison staff motivated them to reach out to positive sources of support. Some also mentioned that going through the RIT process made them reconsider their reentry plans and motivated them to look for support from people who would increase their chances of success after release.

Below are some sample responses from the follow-up interviews that suggest the RIT can help incarcerated men and women think more critically about their reentry plans:

- > “I know I can’t go and live with my sister now. That will not be good for me. So maybe I will go to Exodus House.”
- > “Before I didn’t care. I didn’t have a plan. Now I am making plans for the future. I realize that this is serious and I can’t go back to the stuff that got me in trouble.”
- > “It has furthered my vision of a successful reentry, knowing that I would have a safety net. I have someone that is there for me. I

want to have my own business and help other people.”

- > “My mother’s side of the family is more positive. My dad’s side of the family is always in trouble. I should reach out to my mother’s side of the family. I have always sold drugs—that’s the only life I know.... I want to get ahold of my mom, but I can’t. I am so afraid that she will reject me but I need to make it happen. I have pushed my family away and I can’t keep doing that.”

Developments in the Pilot States

In addition to implementing the Relational Inquiry Tool, the state corrections departments in New Mexico and Oklahoma have taken other steps toward adopting family-focused approaches in facilities, probation, and parole.

CHANGES IN NEW MEXICO

The Central New Mexico Correctional Facility has implemented a number of concrete changes that reflect a focus on family and social support. During an initial meeting about the RIT, work-group members identified the need for a guide for families of incarcerated people. The New Mexico Corrections Department subsequently published “A Guide for Families and Friends of Justice-Involved New Mexicans,” which is also featured on its website. The NMCD plans to distribute the guide in courthouses, jails, and elsewhere, so that families can learn about what to expect when their loved one becomes involved with the criminal justice system.

Work-group members also established a goal of incorporating families in reentry committee meetings, a process that takes place before individuals go before the parole board. At these meetings, various facility staff members make recommendations to people about services they may need after their release. By participating in those conversations, families can help plan for some services while contributing to a loved one’s post-release plan.

In 2010 NMCD received an AmeriCorps award to engage volunteers in a year of service with its Education Bureau. After completing training on departmental policies and the tools of the Family Justice Program, AmeriCorps members will supplement the case management and programming available in a number of the state’s prisons. The NMCD plans to have these volunteers use the RIT and other tools to help prisoners identify sources of social support.

CHANGES IN OKLAHOMA

Since 2008, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections has implemented the Relational Inquiry Tool at various levels within its system. Incarcerated women first encounter the RIT at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center. The tool is revisited twice more: at the community corrections centers and when women are under community supervision. Using the tool more than once provides people

the opportunity to assess any changes in their plans, medical needs, families, and potential housing, and other developments. Consistently emphasizing women's social supports also encourages them to stay in contact with their families.

To underscore the ODOC's emphasis on family and other social supports, work-group members developed a guidebook for visitors called "Guide for Families/Friends of Offenders." The ODOC has made improvements to the visiting area at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center to accommodate large group visits, and made the waiting room of the Central District Probation and Parole Office more welcoming to families.

Conclusion

The successful implementation of new tools and methods in corrections often requires support at the highest level of the organization, as well as from prison staff who are being asked to change how they work.¹⁵ The long-term sustainability of the Reentry Is Relational project, and others like it, depends on how closely aligned the change effort is with the department's and the facility's culture. By documenting current practices and opportunities to make procedures more family-focused, and demonstrating the receptivity of incarcerated people and their families to this approach, the Reentry Is Relational project has helped create conditions that can benefit staff and families.

It bears noting that this pilot was conducted in uncertain times. Both Oklahoma and New Mexico's future leadership was in question while the Relational Inquiry Tool was first being implemented, with gubernatorial races under way in both states. Also, substantial budget cuts had recently been made. In Oklahoma, for example, decreases in drug treatment and staffing (and, as a consequence, visitation) were taking effect as the RIT was becoming a regular part of practice at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center.

Difficult times, however, need not prevent an agency from using a family-focused approach. In fact, when leadership is in flux or resources become scarce, it is arguably even more important to help incarcerated individuals draw on family and friends. Such support—unlike new programs, facilities, or staffing—requires no additional spending, and family members can continue to play a role in a person's life long after corrections agencies are out of the picture.

Both of Vera's partners have made substantial progress toward meeting the main goal of the Reentry Is Relational project. Changes in policy and practice and responses to interviews indicate that the prison, parole, and probation staff involved in this initiative have adopted—and will continue to pursue—a more family-focused approach that can have positive effects on incarcerated people's lives after their release.

ENDNOTES

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- 8 Margaret diZerega and Carol Shapiro, "Asking About Family Can Enhance Reentry," *Corrections Today* (December 2007): 58-61.
- 9 The work groups included a cross-section of staff from the prison and parole office. Participants ranged from case managers to parole officers and worked in both operations and programs.
- 10 Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Division of Female Offender Operations (2009). *Fiscal Year 2009 Annual Report*.
- 11 Martinez and Christian, 2009.
- 12 This figure represents information gathered from the survey with incarcerated individuals at ODOC and NMCD. Survey respondents completed a table that included the question, "In thinking about when you get out of prison, who do you think will support you in the following areas: finding employment, securing housing, child care, financial support, transportation, finding job training, and motivating you to do well?"
- 13 Survey participants were asked how long they had been at the prison and how often someone visited them. Respondents checked a box that best described how often they received visits. Possible options to check were never, less than once a year, once a year, two to three times a year, once a month, twice a month, or every week. The number of respondents in the >10-year category was low, but all reported frequent visits.
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