

**REENTRY ADVISORY COUNCIL &
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT MINUTES
Thursday, March 8, 2012**

Advisory Council Members Present

Secretary James Le Blanc, DPSC
Mike Cazes, LA Sheriff's Association
Whalen Gibbs, DPS&C Designee
Sue Austin, DHH Designee
James Landry, LABI
Alvin Bargas, ABC
Louis Reine, AFL-CIO
Joseph Audoin, LBCTC Designee
Kim Matherne, LDFS

**Advisory Council Members
Not present**

Senator Elbert Guillory, Chairman
Jimmy Sawtell, LCTC
Rev. Donald Miller, LCA
Curt Eysink, LWC
Steve E. Pylant, State Representative

Others Present

Rita Thomas, Office of Reentry
Gretchen McCarstle, Office of Reentry
Tammy Jetson, Office of Reentry
Dr. Peter Scharf, Tulane University
Mr. David Creesy, Tulane University
Alexandra Priebe, Tulane University

Item #1: Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:43 a.m. at DPS&C Headquarters in Baton Rouge by Council Co-Chair Sheriff Cazes.

Item #2: Approval of Minutes

Sheriff Cazes moved to approve the minutes from the meeting of December 8, 2011 Council meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Reine and passed with a unanimous vote.

Item #3: Opening Remarks

Assistant Secretary Gibbs shared that Secretary Le Blanc was in another meeting and would join the group soon. He asked to reserve time for Secretary Le Blanc's comments when he arrived. He also added that Senator Guillory was in route.

Item #4: Election of Co-Chair

According to statute, a Co-Chair of the Council must be elected each year. Mr. Reine nominated Sheriff Cazes to serve as Co-Chair for an additional term. The motion was seconded by Mr. Ardoin and Sheriff Cazes accepted the nomination. There were no other nominations made and Sheriff Cazes was unanimously approved by the Council as Co-chairman.

Item #5: Proposed Goals

Assistant Secretary Gibbs discussed the goals that were developed based on previous discussions. The goals are intended to provide the council with a foundation and identify the primary areas of focus. He asked members to review them and provide input and suggestions to finalize the draft in some level of priority. He added that the visitors with the Board today from Tulane are working on developing a strategic plan for reentry as part of the Second Chance Act Grant that was recently awarded to Corrections. A defined set of goals for this Council will help Tulane assist us in reaching our strategic plan goal.

Questions, Answers and Comments:

Mr. Reine expressed concern that the proposed budget cuts would have a negative impact on the Department's ability to provide reentry services to offenders and asked specifically about changes in obtaining offenders' state identification cards and Transportation Worker Identification Card (TWIC). He also inquired about plans of action and how offenders would be impacted if they are moved to local level facilities. Assistant Secretary Gibbs acknowledged that the impact of budget cuts on reentry is of concern, but that the budget dedicated to reentry services or rehabilitative programs is small in comparison. He added that the Department is working hard to ensure that services are provided in some fashion and is doing everything possible to set the stage for continued services. Examples of such efforts include initiatives such as offender tutors and local level support of reentry programs such as the 100 Hour Pre-Release curriculum.

Assistant Secretary Gibbs also briefed the group on the impact of the Department's partnerships with Sheriffs to provide regional reentry programs. He shared that since 2009, we have been able to open two regional reentry programs (one in Northwest Louisiana and one in the Southeast). He added that the Louisiana Transitional Center for Women offers similar services to the state's female population housed on the local level. Assistant Secretary Gibbs provided the group with an overview of how these programs work and the population they are designed to reach. He also noted that the Department plans to open additional reentry programs based on availability of funding and that the next region of focus will be the Capital area. It was noted that offenders would be transferred to the Reentry Program within their region of release prior to release to complete the program and establish community/family ties.

The group discussed how offenders are assigned to the various regions based on available bed space and how the Department is focusing on aligning reentry programs based on offenders parish of release. Assistant Secretary Gibbs noted that the majority of offenders come from a select number of parishes and that more than 95% of them will return to the same areas upon release. He stated that the Department's goal is to ensure that as offenders are nearing release (approximately six to twelve months) they are transferred back into the region where they would be returning. He added that TWP eligibility date is also considered so that appropriate offenders have the opportunity to participate in these programs.

Mr. Reine noted the need for reentry programs for offenders in the TWPs. Assistant Secretary Gibbs added that the goal is to have offenders go through the rehabilitation programs prior to their eligibility for these programs. However, he noted that there are also some TWPs which are beginning to offer a limited catalog of reentry programs, such as substance abuse treatment.

Mr. Reine indicated that it would be most advantageous if offenders going to TWPs were sent to locations within their parish of release, to encourage continued employment upon release. Assistant Secretary Gibbs agreed, noting that the Department is working with that goal in mind, but that it is limited by the number and availability of jobs in some areas.

Mr. Landry reminded the group that there had been previous discussions about how to use TWP jobs to get them out of that environment where they were from. He reminded that one of the goals was to get them out of the environment that initially got them into trouble and that this may need to be balanced with the goal of finding them a job in their same environment. It was noted that while getting an offender out their environment does assist in some cases, if the offender's only support is in that area, they are limited on their ability to move and start over while maintaining family ties to those important to them. Assistant Secretary Gibbs noted that it is a fine balance between ensuring community and family support and helping offenders learn to make smart choices that help them avoid the bad elements of their environment. No single plan with work for every offender in this case. It is part of the Department's mission to ensure they are released with better cognitive behavioral thinking that will help them make the proper choices.

Mr. Reine asked if offenders in a TWP are connected to faith-based organizations in the community. Assistant Secretary Gibbs advised that this is a component of the programs throughout the state. He acknowledged that those who get involved in faith-based structural programs while incarcerated usually continue post release and have truly made that leap to change their life and follow through on that intention.

Assistant Secretary Gibbs explained the use and application of certified treatment programs credits which are offered to offenders who participated in program opportunities.

Assistant Secretary Gibbs reported on the efforts being made to ensure offender release with two forms of valid identification. He noted that last year the Department issued approximately 3700 state ID cards produced at the Office of Offender Reentry.

Mr. Landry discussed the importance of considering an offender's remaining length of sentence and skills set when assigning them to a TWP. While the job market drives this to some degree, the Department's goal is to ensure that offenders are given opportunity to put their skills training to work both while incarcerated and through TWP programs. Assistant Secretary Gibbs added that program opportunities are also managed around an offender's projected release eligibility dates to ensure that once he learns a skill, he will be close enough to release to get hands on experience. Sheriff Cazes added that the TWP job market is bad currently, just as the local job market is feeling the effects of the economy.

Mr. Reine discussed the limitations that exist for offenders convicted of a felony, noting that some jobs are off the table such as state or local government jobs or jobs that requires some form licensure (i.e. barber). He suggested the group work on compiling a list of these types of jobs and determine what can be done to make changes where appropriate. Assistant Secretary Gibbs noted that it is actually a myth that you can't be a barber if you are a convicted felon. He informed a convicted felon can get a license with approval of the Barbering Board. That change was made several years ago when the Department set up barbering programs and sought the Board's support for the program and the ability for offenders to be licensed. He added that the Statute does not specifically prohibit them from most occupations; the language is such that if you are not of good moral character you may be prohibited. The good moral character clause is what some of the employers use as a reason not to hire. It was noted that employers may not specify the felony conviction as the reason for not hiring.

Assistant Secretary Gibbs noted that in his experience most employers don't care about the conviction if an offender comes to them with skills and a licensed trade, they are looking for individuals that have a good attitude and are willing to work. He added that the bigger problem is that offenders can't keep the jobs. Part of the huge success of our TWPs is that we drop them off to work, they are drug free and they will work all the overtime that you can give them. It's when they are out and on their own that they test to start slipping, using excuses for not going to work or not having an appropriate attitude for the job. Traditionally, our TWP employers don't mind keeping them once they complete the TWP phase if they are good workers. Ms. Matherne compared this to welfare clients, noting that the one's that want to succeed and be successful reach out for work experience programs while they are receiving their benefits and eventually they get employed. It's the ones who don't put forth the effort who end up not moving off the rolls of the welfare system. Assistant Secretary Gibbs reiterated that this is a portion of what reentry initiatives are about and while we can't force change, we can provide them with opportunities that most of them have not had before.

Mr. Bargas spoke to the importance of working with employers and business/faith based leaders to develop mentorship programs; programs that could teach them about work habits and the importance of showing up to work. Assistant Secretary Gibbs advised that he would pass this idea along. Mr. Reine also asked that this group consider offering a meeting of business leaders and employers to encourage this concept and educate them about tax credit opportunities.

The group was reminded that employers are provided a tax credit opportunity for hiring an offender that was incarcerated, while in TWP. Assistant Secretary Gibbs added that some employers that are connected with the Workforce Commission actually have a person assigned to the responsibility of leading these employers to their work opportunity tax credit. He added that we continue to educate employers as much as possible about the credit because some of them are unaware that you have to apply for the credit within the first thirty or sixty days of the offender starting employment.

Secretary Le Blanc's Remarks

Secretary Le Blanc expressed his appreciation to everyone for what they do on a daily basis. He went on to bring everyone up-to-date on the current budget status and summarized the possible consolidation of two state prisons at larger prison locations. For example, the Department has 500 substance abuse treatment beds at FWCC that will be moved as a program to DWCC. He also stated Dabadie has 330 offenders that would be moved to Avoyelles and double bunked with very little difficulty. He added that offenders would be transported from Avoyelles to Pineville everyday to work as a way to ensure the continued support of the National Guard base there.

Secretary Le Blanc expressed his hope that the Reentry Advisory Council can continue their course in spite of the current budget situations. He shared that his vision for the Council is that this group will play a major part in the Department. He shared that based on what he's heard thus far, this group is setting up to make a positive impact.

He discussed the importance of continuing to move forward with a focus on reentry as a way to reduce recidivism. He added that in addition to looking at raw recidivism, we need to spend time understanding who is coming back and why. He shared that indications are that educational/vocational opportunities have a significant impact on reducing an offender's likelihood of returning. He shared that he hoped the work being done by Tulane will help support what works and what doesn't in impacting recidivism positively.

Secretary Le Blanc discussed the impact of parole revocations on incarceration rates and the importance of looking harder at why so many offenders return from supervision. He shared that he recently met with leaders in New Orleans and Baton Rouge to discuss crime in those areas and the relationship between that and DPS&C incarceration.

He shared that of the 81 murder victims reported in The Advocate recently for the Baton Rouge area, 46% of them had as case file of some type with DPS&C. He added that 100% of those arrested has a case file with the Department already. He noted that working together with law enforcement agencies can make a difference.

He shared that following a recent meeting with Probation and Parole regarding Orleans Parish District Office, there is a plan being developed to re-create the supervision model for that area. If it works in New Orleans, we will replicate it statewide. The goal is to spend more time with those who present a higher risk of returning and less time on those with lower risk. Studies show that an offender can be over-supervised and that risk evaluations are key to determining what is appropriate.

Secretary Le Blanc discussed the increase of organized gang activity in Louisiana and its impact on crime.

He reviewed the reentry program concept in detail, explaining the Department's vision for reentry programs in 9 regions of the state.

Lastly, Secretary Le Blanc provided a brief summary of the work of the Sentencing Commission.

Questions, answers and comments:

Mr. Reine inquired about the Department's position on privatization or selling of the prison(s) and how those businesses use that model to generate profits and how this impacts reentry efforts. Secretary Le Blanc noted that privatizing prison beds in Louisiana works differently than in most states. He added that state contracted facilities are obligated to meet DPS&C regulations and therefore are also required to provide reentry services.

Mr. Reine asked if there were accountability systems for the sheriffs. Secretary Le Blanc explained the Basic Jail Guidelines process, noting that local facilities housing state offenders are required to follow these guidelines and that we audit these facilities regularly. He also noted that TWPs are also monitored annually to ensure they follow the Standard Operating Procedures devised by the Department. He added that while not all TWPs are equal, they are being reviewed and recommendations are made to improve programs on a regular basis. Secretary Le Blanc noted that one of the biggest issues is getting our TWPS more geographically oriented to the areas where offenders are returning, i.e. Orleans. We want to place offenders working as best we can in those communities where they will establish a home and take care of their families.

The group discussed in detail what constitutes a good program, the importance of reviewing TWP success rates, and efforts to duplicate best practices.

Dr. Schaft shared his appreciation for the Department working closely with the city of New Orleans. He shared that Orleans had 199 murders last year and 25 in January of this year. He maintained there are complex barriers into reentry, education and expungements, but substance abuse treatment linked with mental health is one of the smartest things that we can do to produce results and that the Department's efforts in these areas are appreciated.

The group discussed legislation that will allow Probation and Parole to access pawn sales information and how that could be used.

Secretary Le Blanc expressed the farther reaching impact of reentry efforts include the family and children of those we are able to help. In other words, we are breaking the culture and it's not just that one person, it's his future, and his family's future. Secretary Le Blanc noted that with Reentry efforts and people like those around the table at this meeting, the Department will have an impact.

Mr. Landry recommended we look at how we could use those who don't return as mentors who could relate to the offender who is releasing. Assistant Secretary Gibbs stated that we have a couple of organizations like "Voice of the Ex-Offender" (VOTE) which is headed by ex-offender Norris Henderson, who spent 25 years in prison. The Department of Corrections has utilized this group and other responsible ex-offenders to provide mentoring to some of the offenders on probation or parole. Mr. Gibbs stated that it helps when you have a successful offender to come back in and speak other offenders about their challenges and overcoming those challenges as they become successful contributing members of society. Secretary Le Blanc added that efforts are being made to allow this to happen, such as allowing offenders to return to speak to other offenders as part of pre-release. Mr. Landry and Mr. Reine also noted that this could help if it began upon the offender's intake as well.

Secretary Le Blanc shared with the Council that the Department is working to implement a new database to replace the current Mapper/Cajun system. The system will be uniform between Probation and Parole and our prisons and enhance our ability to share information. Secretary Le Blanc said the Department would start getting the kind of data that it needs to evaluate what works and what doesn't. The new database would automatically allow us to do data monitoring that we are unable to do in Cajun. He further indicated the database could also be used to give the Council the information it needs for these meetings.

Dr. Scharf commented that we need accountability and data collection and that there is a need for standardized reporting of recidivism; integration with information management system; program performance measures; improving reentry program based upon data findings; and making the business case for reentry based on return on investment (ROI).

Assistant Secretary Gibbs talked about House Bill #295 and stated the Council mentioned it at the last meeting. Representatives Wesley Bishop and Patricia Smith have introduced an amendment to the current law that stated a felon conviction preclude a person convicted of working certain occupations. He stated the key was that unless the crime is tied to the job that the offender is trying to obtain, the offender shall not be prohibited from working in that occupation. Assistant Secretary Gibbs feels that it's a good step in the right direction but he did not know how enforceable the law would be if it actually amended and passed. Assistant Secretary Gibbs suggested the Council decided its position on House Bill 295. Mr. Reine made a motion that the council support House Bill 295. Sheriff Cazes seconded the motion. All were in favor and the motion passed.

Assistant Secretary Gibbs talked about Senate Bill 490 which involves the expansion of the Reentry Court. He stated that since 2010 there is a Reentry Court that begins in collaboration with Orleans Parish Criminal Court. He indicated that about 88 offenders have participated in the program thus far. Assistant Secretary Gibbs explained that when an offender is sentenced in Orleans Parish to Reentry Court, they go from Orleans Parish Jail to Angola where they are involved in the Workforce Development trades as well as other reentry programs. Once an offender completes program, they return to Orleans Court and the judge can place them on probation. The Department has had about eight offenders to actually complete the program as of January 2012 and out of the eight, only one has returned by violating his conditions. Assistant Secretary Gibbs informed that the Department is looking to expand this program to the 19th Judicial District, East Baton Rouge and the 22nd Judicial District, St. Tammany Parish. He stated that one of the unique aspects of this program is that the instructors are offenders who have graduated from the Baptist Theological Seminary Angola Campus and have acquired certified skills and trades which are utilized to help teach and mentor offenders in the program. We currently have about 120 beds with only about 66 of them which are actually filled and by expansion to the 19th JDC and 22nd JDC; it would mean having more offenders in the program.

Louis Reine referred to Page 2 of the bill which states that the Department wants to coordinate conjunction with the Workforce Investment Council. Mr. Reine suggested that the Department coordinate with the Workforce Commission because they had more staff to help with the data.

Assistant Secretary Gibbs asked if there were any other discussion in regards to Senate Bill 490. There were none.

Louis Reine made a motion to support Senate Bill 490 with the recommended amendment. Sheriff Cazes seconded the motion. All agreed and the motion passed.

Item #6: Second Chance Act Deliverables

Dr. Scharf shared work is being done in hopes that we will receive an additional \$750,000 grant to help in the area of Reentry. He and his team are the tech writers and the New Orleans Metro Council and the Department of Corrections are the applicants.

David Cressy commented that they have met with officials, prior offenders, and former correctional officers to gather information for the grant. The focus of the grant would be on how to help communities develop and implement comprehensive and collaborative strategies that address the challenges posed by offender reentry and recidivism reduction. He also discussed how to extend sub-committees to include experts related to Housing, Mental Health, Family Support, Education, Substance Abuse and Vocations.

Mr. Reine made a motion to ask the Chairman to create sub-committees for housing, mental health, family support, education, substance abuse and vocation or under titles he thought was appropriate and to look after each body that exist and have expertise in those areas to serve on sub-committees or any other sub-committee that the chairman may deem necessary in the future. Sheriff Cazes seconded the motion. All were in favor and the motion passed.

Secretary Le Blanc added that we have a lot of people coming out of our system that have no idea that they could apply for Medicare, Medicaid or Social Security and did not know how to apply. He stated the Department was working to assist them in applying for government assistance upon released and that adding this to the efforts of the grants should be considered.

Item #7: Designee Form

Assistant Secretary Gibbs asked that the designee form enclosed be completed by the council members when sending someone to fill in for designated council member.

Item #8: Transaction of such other business as may properly come before the Council

Assistant Secretary Gibbs presented everyone with the schedule for the upcoming meetings. He indicated that the meeting scheduled for June 7th has been rescheduled to June 28th due to schedule conflicts as to ensure a quorum to hold the meeting.

Item #9: Adjournment

At 12:10 p.m. Sheriff Cazes moved that the meeting be adjourned which was seconded by Alvin Bargas.

Reentry Advisory Council Goals

The Reentry Advisory Council based on goals as stipulated in legislation has begun the process of developing a plan to achieve stated goals which includes but is not limited to the following:

To develop a reentry strategic plan that describes the jurisdiction's long-term reentry strategy, including a measurable annual 5-year performance outcome...

To identify research and evidence-based practices, policies, and programs that advances the Reentry Council's mission around prisoner reentry and community safety.

To identify State policy opportunities and barriers to improve outcomes for the Reentry population.

To promote State statutory, policy, and practice changes that focus on reducing crime and improving the well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals, their families and communities.

To identify and support initiatives in the areas of education, employment, health, housing, faith, behavioral health treatment, and family and community well-being that can contribute to successful outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals.

To leverage resources across agencies that supports this population in becoming productive citizens, and reducing recidivism and victimization and support restorative justice.

To coordinate messaging and communications about prisoner reentry and the Administration's response to it.

Identify methods to improve Collaboration and coordination of offender transition services, including cross agency training and information sharing that will help to improve outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals.

Conduct a review of existing policies and practices and make specific recommendations to the legislature for systematic improvement.

Commence offender reentry public education campaigns (i.e. radio, television, billboard, posters flyers).

REENTRY ADVISORY COUNCIL

Designee Form

Name of Council Member: _____

Name of Designee: _____

Social Security Number (for reimbursement purposes): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

I appoint the above person as my official designee. Only my official designee can represent me at Council meetings. If I need to change my designee appointment, I will notify the Council in writing.

Signature of Council Member

Name of Agency/Organization Represented

Date

Please return to: Tammy Jetson
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