

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Matters of Faith . . . and Prison

Each year the federal government spends more than twice as much on welfare and Social Security than the total sum annually collected by all churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Yet social ills continue to loom large.

One of the major social ills our inner cities face is the problem of recidivism, that is, the repetition of crime and the re-incarceration of those released from prison after they served time for an earlier crime.

Both the costs and the numbers are high. The average annual cost of detaining an individual is \$27,000-45,000. Although 600,000 adult ex-prisoners and 150,000 juvenile offenders are released from incarceration each year, more than 60 percent return to prison within three years of their release. One consequence is that tax revenues from wages these repeat offenders could have earned is lost. And with stiffer drug penalties and other get-tough-on-crime legislation on the books since the 1980s, many jails are overflowing. In short, the problem of recidivism represents a national crisis.

There is at least one bright spot on the horizon, however. In the last several years, creative public servants have developed a project called *Ready4Work*—an ex-prisoners, community and faith initiative.

Working in partnership with Public/Private Ventures, an action-based policy research organization, employees of the U.S. Departments of Labor and Justice together with the Annie E. Casey Foundation brought together representatives from four critical social sectors—business, community, criminal justice agencies, and religious communities—to confront the threat posed by recidivism.

Ready4Work is a three-year initiative that is helping released prisoners prepare for living-wage jobs. It draws on the strengths of local faith-based and community-based groups that are assisting former prisoners in finding jobs and developing new habits for a law-abiding lifestyle.

Focus groups of business leaders were convened at the outset of the project, and they indicated that employers would be willing to hire ex-prisoners if they knew two things. First, employers would want basic information about the person's criminal and work history, in case of a possible lawsuit in which the employer might be held liable. And second, employers would want contact with someone connected to the ex-prisoner—a mentor, case manager, or reliable family member—in case the returnee experienced a problem on the job.

Faith-based organizations fill just this role, offering case management, job-training classes, and personal help to assist ex-prisoners in applying for jobs that accord with their work skills, interests, and personalities.

The *Ready4Work* pilot program is currently operating in 18 sites throughout the country, with a budget of \$28 million over three years. The initiative is serving more than 1400 ex-prisoners and plans to serve more than 5500 by August 2006.

Carefully selected nonprofit organizations, representing a range of faith groups, now face the difficult yet noble task of enabling ex-prisoners to become productive. During the first 12 months of an ex-prisoner's return to society, *Ready4Work* staff members provide regular encouragement, monitor individual behavior, and work to restore hope.

As longtime readers of this commentary will recognize, this initiative embodies the kind of justice and fairness for which the Center for Public Justice has been working for more than 25 years. Government, when offering a public service, should enlist rather than exclude a diversity of service providers, including faith-based providers, in the delivery of those services. It's a matter of principled pluralism.

—Josh Good, Program Officer
Public/Private Ventures

The Center for Public Justice

P.O. Box 48368 * Washington, DC 20002 * 410-571-6300 * Fax 410-571-6365 * www.cpjustice.org *
capcomm@cpjustice.org

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