



THE LAST 100 HOURS

Interviews with Former Inmates and Dept. of
Corrections Staff Regarding Louisiana's Pilot
100-Hour Pre-Release Curriculum

About


This work is part of the Urban Congress on African American Males in Baton Rouge's larger grassroots effort to address social systems impacting the lives of black men & boys.



Dr. Brianne Painia, Ph.D., Lead Author
brianne@metromorphosis.net

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A working committee of the grassroots organization Urban Congress on African American Males in Baton Rouge volunteered to provide an independent review of the Louisiana Dept. of Corrections' pilot 100-hr Pre-Release Program (a reentry preparation curriculum) by conducting a two-phase interview process with representatives of both inmate and staff populations at select correctional institutions. This work was part of the nonprofit group's larger focus on social systems impacting the lives of black men in Baton Rouge. Its findings and recommendations were submitted to the Louisiana Department of Corrections in September, 2019; their response is included with this report.

With the goal of general assessment and greater understanding of this important program by our members, we interviewed 6 administrators of the 100-hr Pre-Release Program at West Baton Parish jail and Elayn Hunt Correctional Facility in Phase One of our process. In Phase Two, we interviewed 11 formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs) who had some knowledge, insight and/or direct experience of the pilot program. After concluding our interviews and sharing their contents within our group, we have drafted the following suggestions for consideration as possible ways to enhance or improve Louisiana's foremost reentry initiative. 

OUR SUGGESTIONS

- Expand pre-release program (or components of the pre-release program) to satellite facilities state-wide, with standard eligibility requirements included.
- Annually review and update textual materials used in the pre-release program and/or establish a computer kiosk that provides this up-to-date information.
- Offer an easily navigated index of post-release (nonprofit, faith-based or public sector) services available to FIPs in local communities across the state.
- Assess and address participants' levels of engagement and willingness to succeed.
- Implement an evidence-based assessment tool that provides a more holistic evaluation of the needs of individuals pending release.
- Include skills training, possibly in partnership with BRCC and local industry.
- Increase high-level administrative personnel and outside leadership participation to communicate to inmates and instructors a strong institutional investment in the program.
- Promote greater coordination, physical and digital information sharing and professional development for reentry personnel across all correctional facilities statewide.
- Determine the percentage of FIPs released without vital documentation system-wide, and assure all prerelease program participants exit program with appropriate vital documentation.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2018, the “Goal 7: Decarceration” workgroup of The Urban Congress on African American Males in Baton Rouge conducted a series of informal focus groups with formerly incarcerated men in the Baton Rouge area. These individuals spoke about the need for more community support, better access to available resources, and age-appropriate mentorship while suggesting that we also speak to individuals on the other side of the reentry process—Department of Corrections Reentry Personnel. As expected, interviewing those connected to the services and processes of the 100-hr Pre-Release Program (the D.O.C.’s flagship course for preparing reentering citizens¹ for life after release) proved instrumental in shaping our understanding of the state of reentry in Louisiana.

We interviewed 6 staff members who were involved in various levels of the 100-hr Pre-Release Program, such as case management, administration, transition assistance, and security. We spoke with employees at both the West Baton Rouge Parish Detention Center and Elayn Hunt Correctional Center for comparison between a parish facility and a state facility. As our focus at the Urban Congress is on African American males, we chose facilities with male populations in order to learn more about the conditions which impact Black males’ reentry experience. We conducted individual interviews with each respondent except for one sitting in which we conducted a joint interview with two employees whose jobs were closely related. These interviews comprised Phase One of our research.

In order to gain a holistic perspective of the Pre-Release Program, we additionally spoke to 11 formerly incarcerated persons who were housed in Louisiana correctional facilities and returned to Louisiana communities. This round of data collection served as Phase Two of our 100-hr Pre-Release Program Assessment, in which we recorded the narratives and experiences of FIPs who completed some

¹Within the data there was not a singular reference used for those who were incarcerated and in the class. Inmates and offenders were the most common term used to refer to those entering the Pre-Release program. Unless using a direct quote from an interview, the terms “reentering citizen” or “FIPs” (formerly incarcerated persons) will be used throughout this document.

or all parts of the course or had first-hand insights into peoples' needs when returning to society after incarceration. Participants' accounts of the program add context to our inquiry by providing a more personal perspective and understanding of the reentry process in our state.

STUDY METHODS

We conducted all Phase One interviews during October and November of 2018, and all respondents received access to the interview guide questions prior to the interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by MetroMorphosis personnel. Interviews were conducted by two members of the MetroMorphosis team. Transcripts were then compared and analyzed in qualitative data analysis software for common themes and concepts. Respondents gave written consent to have their interviews recorded and were assured that there would be no personal or employment-related ramifications to their responses as their confidentiality was protected under Louisiana State University's Institutional Review Board. Interviews lasted on average between 30 minutes to an hour. All interviews were conducted at respondents' place of employment at their choosing.

There were 11 participants in Phase Two of the assessment. Interviews were taken either in-person (n=9) or over the phone (n=2). Six of 11 participants were interviewed via a focus group at an addiction rehabilitation center. Of the 11 participants, 6 participated in the official 100-hr Pre-Release Program, 4 participated in some form of pre-release preparation (work-release, independent and older versions of the 100-hr Program, etc.), and 1 had no participation in any form of pre-release programming. Two respondents contributed to the development of a release preparation group at their respective facilities. Respondents ranged in age from 24-73 at the time of the interview and in highest level of education from 9th grade to Bachelor's Degree. Eight of 11 respondents identified as African American with the remaining three identifying as Caucasian. Respondents were asked about their lives prior to incarceration, their familiarity with the 100-hr Pre-Release Program, their return to their community, and their definition of 'reentry'. For the purposes of this findings review, we will focus primarily on commentary about the Pre-Release Program and participants' return home.

The following sections combine details and themes drawn from both Phases of our interviews to attempt a more comprehensive view of the 100-hr Pre-Release Program—and reentry at large—as experienced by all participants.

INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Respondents were asked about their definitions of reentry broadly and their opinions on the successes and challenges of the Pre-Release Program. Overall, corrections staff gave positive comments about the work they do and the population they serve while giving honest feedback on the outcomes of their students. All agreed: The ultimate goal of their work is to help reentering citizens make a smooth transition into their communities and ensure they do not recidivate. The Pre-Release Program itself was held in high regard by all respondents (staff and FIPs alike) due to their belief that it is an invaluable stepping stone on the way to a successful life after incarceration for those who are willing to internalize the knowledge shared within the classroom. The major take-aways from respondents related to reentry as a *process*, the 100-hr Pre-Release program, and the community’s role in reentry are revealed below.

Reentry as Process & Mindset

Most respondents described reentry as a program meant to facilitate the transition from correctional facilities back into their respective communities. Though the programmatic aspects of reentry were discussed, respondents also spoke of reentry as a *process* or idea that must be adopted by reentering citizens, suggesting that individuals’ success is somewhat dependent upon their personal commitment. One case manager described reentry as a process that “bring[s] back the light” inside those in the Pre-release Program by giving them the tools to manage their emotions and their personal affairs. According to respondents, successful reentry meant that program participants had a change in mindset that would discourage them from returning to any type of correctional institution. Though acquisition of trade skills was mentioned as part of successful reentry, the need for a changed personal attitude was emphasized as the most integral factor to reentry. An administrator emphasized the importance of individual behavior and decision-making when stating, “I can give him a skill, something that he can always use—the rest of

it is basically up to him.” Unsuccessful reentry is defined by program participants’ unwillingness to adopt the life skills taught in the class and make changes that would improve their conditions once they leave their respective facilities.

“I can give him a skill, something that he can always use—the rest of it is basically up to him.”

100-hr Pre-Release Program

The 100-hr Pre-Release Program serves as a resource to reentering citizens to learn life skills such as problem solving, decision making, anger management and a host of other proficiencies necessary for success in one’s own community. Respondents shared their belief in the necessity of the program to successful reentry due to the exposure it gives students to mentorship from positive figures, living resources (e.g., personal identification cards, social security cards, etc.), and space to discuss personal issues, and reflect on their past wrongdoings. Many employees cited the successful reentering of former students as one of the motivating forces for their work with the Pre-Release Program. In line with prior statements about the mindsets of reentering citizens determining the success of their reentry, students who only participated in the 100-hr Pre-Release Program solely in exchange for time off their sentences (a phenomenon referred to as “good time”) were named as one negative aspect to the environment of the classroom. Several respondents mentioned that a participant’s partial or superficial adoption of the lessons as a key indicator of their likelihood to return to corrections.

Respondents overall had positive comments about their time spent in the 100-hr Pre-Release Program. Most respondents felt going through the program was beneficial and crucial to their ability to re-enter their communities. Access to education and mentorship were stated as benefits to participation in the 100-hr Pre-Release Program. Participants stressed the value learning soft skills (such as job readiness, banking, etc.) And advancing personal character development added positively to their reentry process and to their lives. The opportunity to acquire technical certifications, in facilities where these are offered, was cited as a benefit to participation in the program. The opportunity to receive time off their sentence

while acquiring their education was also cited as an incentive to be active in the program. Multiple respondents cited presence of volunteer mentors in their facility and access to people who care about them as integral to successfully navigating both their time incarcerated and their time spent reentering society. Participants stressed the importance of having someone who was formerly incarcerated to talk to and use as a resource as they rejoined their communities.

When asked about improvements to the program, respondents identified the need for participants to have a trade skill before they are released; the need for more mentors to visit classes and encourage students about life after incarceration; and the need for more employers willing to hire formerly incarcerated persons to visit classes. Though the latter needs were considered a priority for life after incarceration, mastery of a trade prior to exiting incarceration was the most referenced enhancement to the program amongst respondents. Many respondents believed the development of a trade skill should be required before leaving a correctional facility, if not prior to entering the 100-hr Pre-Release Program.

Increased presence and participation from upper administration in the Pre-Release/Reentry division of the Department of Corrections was mentioned as another way to improve the program. A minority of interviewees identified the positive impact that a facility warden or higher-level administrator in classes has on both the students and the daily workings of the program. Respondents believe that inmates' morale is raised when they are visited by upper administration along with the self-esteem received from instructors and other front-line workers with the Pre-Release classes. Regular presence in classes could also contribute to a better awareness of the daily workings of the program amongst administrators who may be less involved in the day-to-day operation of the program.

When asked about improvements that could be made to the 100-hr Pre-Release experience some FIPs identified disengaged staff, outdated materials and technology, and limited inmate access to the program as limitations to its success. Negative experiences with correctional facility staff or programming instructors was a recurring theme in interviews. One man who served 20 years' time believed instructors viewed the class as "just a job" and were not committed to the education of the students. These staff can

compromise the learning environment of students and miss on an opportunity to “shape” their lives for the better.

Outdated materials and technology were cited as an issue in the experience of another man, released 18 months ago, who believed updated technology would greatly improve the learning experience for returning citizens. This participant also saw a need for more intensive assessment of releasees’ needs in terms of mental health and access to resources to sustain life outside of the prison (transportation, housing, etc.) prior to release. Not all respondents experienced a reentry process due to the type of facilities they were housed at or the length of their sentence. These respondents commended the utility such a program might have had to their reentry and wished to have more support in their process rejoining the community. Expansion to more facilities was repeatedly identified as a priority to improve the reentry process in Louisiana as a whole.

Overall, participants of this study fully believed in the power of the 100-hr Pre-Release Program to prepare reentering citizens to live a thriving and fruitful life after their release. The ability of students to acquire necessary identification documents in order to secure employment and housing; along with the access to mentors who share similar backgrounds as themselves were repeatedly identified as key tools for successful reentry. A major improvement to the program and the reentry process, according to respondents, would be a mandate for reentering citizens to leave the program with a developed trade skill. Trade acquisition is believed to be the most important indicator of whether a student is able to seek gainful employment after incarceration.

The Community's Role in Reentry

Respondents noted the community's contribution to the reentry process. Many employees believe the community, in tandem to the Department of Corrections, were influential in lessening recidivism amongst formerly incarcerated individuals. The communities that citizens return to after incarceration can provide networks of support that include residents, businesses, and organizational leaders. Validation from community members and support from employers in these respective communities were deemed essential to welcoming reentering citizens home. Employees did not feel it was the sole responsibility of the Department of Corrections to ensure citizens successfully re-entered their home environments. They believed it was the community, in partnership with the work of D.O.C., that most impacted a former students' likeliness to recidivate.

Speaking perhaps to the need for wider expansion and replication of the 100-hr Pre-Release Program, the experience of incarcerated men in local jails and other facilities without access to the benefits of this approach suggest that gaps in service for pre-release training may compound already sub-optimal conditions for inmates at those facilities. Though most respondents engaged with some form of Pre-Release Programming, others found the facilities in which they were housed offered no Pre-Release Programming at all. With many respondents having multiple encounters of incarceration, many identified their stays in smaller facilities across the state as some of the toughest conditions they experienced while incarcerated. A focus group of respondents (6 respondents) with varying levels of contact with the 100-hr Pre-release shared experiences at sites they believed to not be regulated by the Department of Corrections. One 34-year old participant suggested "DOC doesn't know about half" of the things that occur at some facilities. Overcrowding and frequent movement between housing facilities was cited as a significant issue for these respondents. Their reported experiences in these "satellite" facilities ranged from inhumane treatment by facility staff (such as being tased in showers or physically abused) to not being allowed to maintain sufficient quality of life (lack of access to daily showers, food, and safety) and therefore feeling "like an animal." Treatment by staff was cited by multiple respondents as a negative

aspect of their time incarcerated. In this context, an expansion of Pre-Release programming into satellite facilities may signal to inmates a greater institutional investment in their lives and make their time inside somewhat more tolerable.

Returning Home

In line with current scholarship on the experiences of returning citizens, respondents identified acquisition of employment and housing as the greatest challenges they faced during their re-entry process. Participants felt they were fighting employers' and fellow community members' negative perceptions of the 'felon' status when seeking job opportunities and other support within their home locales. Six of eleven respondents (roughly 55%) connected the stigma of the label 'felon' with their difficulty securing gainful employment and housing. A 29-year old welder lamented that his chances of working in his field are "slim to none" due to challenges former felons experiences in acquiring a "TWIC card" (Transportation Worker Identification Card). A challenge less frequently identified but mentioned by multiple respondents (n=3) was the need for support in avoiding habits, places, and people that led to incarceration.

Although many respondents felt stigmatized because of their formerly incarcerated status, participants also acknowledged the ways they were able to join communities and continue mentor-mentee relationships developed during imprisonment. One 54-year old interviewee found "resources with open arms you know, [and] people willing to help and show me what's good" upon his release over a year ago. Four other respondents echoed these sentiments about being embraced by a community (religious, social justice, or volunteer-centered) and the importance of strong connections to that community generally.

CONCLUSION

We applaud the Louisiana Department of Corrections, policy makers and community service organizations who have worked to create the 100-hr Pre-release Program and have welcomed our efforts to provide some insight and context to its execution and improvement. We feel strongly that the aims of the program are the right ones and have great potential for bettering the lives of millions of Louisiana citizens currently touched by the criminal justice system. However, we acknowledge that work must continue on numerous fronts to improve both access to and efficacy of this and similar programs in correctional institutions across the state. Toward that end, and with the appreciated help of all whom we have interviewed and otherwise leaned upon for guidance and access, we submit the following recommendations:

- 1. Expand pre-release program (or components of the pre-release program) to satellite facilities state-wide, with standard eligibility requirements included.**
- 2. Annually review and update textual materials used in the pre-release program and/or establish a computer kiosk that provides this up-to-date information.**
- 3. Offer an easily navigated index of post-release (nonprofit, faith-based or public sector) services available to FIPs in local communities across the state.**
- 4. Assess and address participants' levels of engagement and willingness to succeed.**
- 5. Implement an evidence-based assessment tool that provides a more holistic evaluation of the needs of individuals pending release.**
- 6. Include skills training, possibly in partnership with BRCC and local industry.**
- 7. Increase high-level administrative personnel and outside leadership participation to communicate to inmates and instructors a strong institutional investment in the program.**
- 8. Promote greater coordination, physical and digital information sharing and professional development for reentry personnel across all correctional facilities statewide.**
- 9. Determine the percentage of FIPs released without vital documentation system-wide, and assure all prerelease program participants exit program with appropriate vital documentation.**