

# Reentering Society: An Innovative Approach to Working with Low-Level Offenders in the Community

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The California prison system has been in desperate need of reform for many years, as evidenced by problems with extremely inadequate prison health care services and severe overcrowding. A step toward that reform has come in the form of Assembly Bill (AB) 109 – Public Safety Realignment. Due to the current budget crisis in California, as well as a court order requiring the lowering of the overall population in the state’s 33 prisons, Public Safety Realignment is paving the way for new cost savings and innovative ways of dealing with convicted offenders across the state. The responsibility for these new initiatives is increasingly being given to counties and local jurisdictions, along with a realignment of

funding streams for program implementation. The legislation does not intend for prison sentences to be simply replaced by jail sentences, but instead requires the use of evidence-based correctional sanctions and interventions to reduce the need for the high rate of incarceration in California.

San Mateo County’s answer to the AB 109 legislation is the Service Connect program, which provides comprehensive support services to incarcerated men and women reentering the local community. Marin County has a similar program that may be enhanced by consideration of adopting additional services that are currently in place in San Mateo County.

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*“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”*

—Nelson Mandela

## Background

The California prison system has seen a 750% increase in its prison population since the mid-1970s as a result of three decades of political decision making, including the shift to inflexible sentencing as well as mandatory minimums and three-strikes laws (Senate Committee on Public Safety, 2010). This has now caused a dire situation of overcrowding and poor physical and mental health care services in prisons across the state. According to a report on corrections in California, criminologist Dr. Joan Petersilia wrote, “The state’s approach to corrections is enormously expensive and ineffective. Although California spent more than \$7 billion on its correction system in 2005, it produced one of the highest return-to-prison rates in the nation—66% of released inmates return to California prisons within three years (“Understanding California Corrections,” 2006).

In August 2009, a panel of federal court judges ordered California to reduce its overall prison population from 156,000 to 110,000 inmates, or 137.5% of the system’s design capacity within two years; in May 2011, that decision was upheld by the United States Supreme Court (*Brown v. Plata*, 2011). In response to the court order, California Governor Edmund Brown signed Assembly Bills (AB) 109 and

117 in April of 2011. These Public Safety Realignment bills, among others, provided historic legislation to both decrease the prison population and to help California close the revolving door of low-level inmates cycling in and out of the overcrowded prisons. By fundamentally altering sentencing laws, expanding local responsibility for custody, and requiring the use of evidence-based correctional practices, the 2011 realignment reverses more than 30 years of increased reliance on incarceration in state prisons.

Public Safety Realignment, which went into effect on October 1, 2011, realigns three major groups of offenders to counties: those on Post Release Community Supervision (PRCS) who formerly would have been on state parole; those who are convicted of non-serious (1192.7(c) PC), non-violent (667.5(c) PC) and non-registerable (PC 290) sex offenses with no serious, violent, or registerable sex offense priors and who are sentenced locally; and state parole violators who must serve their revocation time in county jail rather than state prison (AB 109, 2011). The hope is that as prison populations decrease, the prisons will become less violent and easier to manage, and therefore operating costs will go down. This legislative shift is putting more focus on providing programs and supports at the local level to try and reduce the overall recidivism rates.

## San Mateo County Service Connect Program

In response to the AB 109 legislation, San Mateo County created the Service Connect program, a partnership between San Mateo County Human Services Agency, San Mateo County Health System (including Behavioral Health and Recovery Services), the Probation Department, and the Sheriff's Office. Service Connect incorporates a multidisciplinary approach, and because the program is housed in the same building as probation and the courts, this facilitates a strong working relationship between the collaborating partners. Since its inception, Service Connect has assisted over 350 inmates in re-entering the community through AB 109, in the form of three main phases of reentry support:

- **Initial Engagement:** In-custody visits from program staff to begin building relationships, to provide encouragement, and to put together a reentry plan.
- **Release:** Emergency supports are put into place to sustain individuals in the community.
- **Moving Forward:** Ongoing emotional and tangible support, family reunification, and case management services to help prevent a return to custody.

Services often begin when an inmate who has been sentenced under AB 109 is nearing release, which prompts a jail visit by Service Connect staff. Pre-release visits help to build trust and rapport, allowing for formation of an organized plan prior to release, and instilling hope that there is something tangible awaiting the individual when they return to the community. Initial emergency support services are offered at release to provide for basic needs including food, shelter, clothing, and transportation; a reentry resource guide is also provided. Comprehensive assessments are done to identify substance abuse and mental health treatment needs, and referrals are made to appropriate support services. Service Connect also facilitates a screening process for benefits eligibility (such as Medi-Cal and CalFresh), as well as referrals for employment services in which

individuals can start working and earning income immediately. To address emotional needs, Service Connect staff offer a Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) program delivered in a classroom setting. This is a widely used and respected cognitive behavioral approach that serves to raise the conscious moral decision-making strategy of an individual, and is especially effective in working with ex-offenders. In a review of MRT outcome research, virtually all studies indicated that MRT treatment led to significantly lower recidivism rates for up to 10 years after treatment and release into the community (Little, 2000).

One creative approach that the Service Connect program has is family reunification and re-engagement support, which helps individuals re-connect with their families. This includes assistance with locating lost or estranged family members, making referrals to family court, navigating the child welfare system, providing counseling around family issues, and holding family-centered events such as a holiday gift outreach. Positive family engagement can be a very important part of an individual's success in the community.

Another creative Service Connect approach is a peer support group component called Iron Sharpens Iron. There are two facilitated groups per week for individuals to come together to process their re-entry experiences, build self-esteem, and share resources. Although there seems to be a lack of literature showing the effectiveness of peer support group outcomes specifically related to released offenders, research studies of other common self-help groups have found important benefits of participation (Kyrouz et al., 2002).

## Marin County Public Safety Realignment Program

The AB 109 program in Marin County has many similarities to the Service Connect program, although on a much smaller scale. Marin County is fortunate to have the lowest incarceration rate in the State of California (Public Safety Realignment Plan, 2011), which results in fewer inmates returning

to the community compared to other counties. Since the implementation of AB 109, Marin has only had approximately 45 inmates released into the community through realignment, which allows for ongoing individualized service provision. Services are started prior to release, emergency supports are offered at release, and ongoing support services are provided to sustain individuals in the community. Assessments are done using the Global Appraisal and Index of Needs tool to identify areas of concern, including substance use, mental health, physical health, and risk behaviors. The Marin County model provides recovery coaches to offer one-on-one peer support and to provide a “warm hand off” to substance abuse and other support services, which are provided in conjunction with local nonprofits and other community partners. Referrals are provided for employment and training as well as ongoing case management. Individuals can also participate in the “Thinking for a Change” cognitive behavioral curriculum, which addresses underlying thoughts and feelings and teaches new ways of responding to situations.

Marin County is the 5th most expensive county in the United States (Huffington Post, 2013), which makes it very difficult for inmates reentering the community to find affordable housing and to secure an adequate quality of living. The inmates being released in Marin, as well as in many other Bay Area counties, face many challenges, including:

- A lack of immediate and long-term housing options
- Finding and keeping employment, or securing a sustainable income
- Navigating natural and professional support systems in the community
- Finding and keeping stability in order to prevent re-offense

The reality is that unless the underlying issues, including substance abuse, mental health, lack of gainful employment and lack of stable housing, are addressed, most offenders will end up back in jail. Realignment is attempting to address these issues to decrease recidivism across the state.

## Recommendations for Marin County

The Marin County AB 109 program currently has funds available for additional services and supports, so this would be an opportune time to look at creative ways to use these funds to support the goals of decreasing recidivism and increasing levels of individual self-sufficiency. Based on the innovative approaches in San Mateo County, as well as the known challenges of living in the Bay Area, the following are recommendations for expansion of services in the Marin AB 109 program:

1. Addition of a weekly peer support group to assist in the reentry process. As in San Mateo, this could be an effective way to help individuals share resources, discuss the reentry experience, and assist in building confidence and reducing stigma. The fiscal impact would be neutral if the existing recovery coaches were able to provide the group structure.
2. Implementation of activities focused on family reunification, to include conducting online searches for family members, providing family counseling and assistance in navigating the child welfare system, and organizing family-centered social events. Family location searches could be provided by current AB 109 staff, which would be cost neutral. Family counseling and assistance could be provided by current staff or student interns in conjunction with child welfare staff, which would also be cost neutral. There may be some expense for supplies associated with family social events, but given the low number of offenders, the overall cost should be minimal.
3. Incorporate county Aging and Adult Services into the AB 109 reentry process. Neither the program in San Mateo nor the program in Marin work very closely with their aging programs. Although most inmates coming out of jail in Marin County are not elderly, for the few that are, there may be more services and supports that could be offered upon release. Screening for services such as In-Home

Supportive Services, home delivered meals, and ongoing transportation resources could be provided. There may also be an opportunity to identify and reach out to elderly parents with adult children returning home after incarceration. This could reveal elders at risk, and may also prevent the need for Adult Protective Services involvement in the future. These additional services would be cost neutral as existing county staff could be utilized.

4. Consider additional solutions for transitional housing. This may include partnering with the Next Key Center in Marin to purchase designated transitional housing beds for clients, or possibly the purchase or lease of a property to house a small group of offenders. Of concern would be whether this would be more costly than the current system of paying for extended motel stays, whether the cost is sustainable over time, and whether there would be more risk of recidivism in grouping offenders together in the same living environment. This could potentially be an expensive endeavor, and may not be sustained by the AB 109 funding for the long term, but could be explored as an option.
5. Produce a reentry resource guide, which would provide quick access to helpful contacts and local services. In community forums throughout Marin County, a common recurring theme is that residents do not know how to access local support services. A resource guide containing information specifically of interest to ex-offenders would identify easy access points to services. Existing staff could compile a list of appropriate resources, and there would be a very minimal cost associated to produce the materials.

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