

The Reentry Simulation: Marin County's Innovative Approach to Building Empathy for Clients and Ideas for Improvements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every social services organization should endeavor to have a workforce that is informed by the client experience. Succeeding at this can deepen staff's attunement to what their clients are going through. This can strengthen employees' commitment to the organization's mission, and help to cultivate ideas around service improvements that could improve long-term outcomes for those clients.

Marin Health and Human Services (HHS) recently piloted an innovative method of helping social services practitioners to be more empathetic towards the struggles of one particular population. This method, called the reentry simulation, recreates for its participants the obstacles and frustrations that formerly incarcerated individuals face when trying to rejoin society and avoid

going back to prison. This simulation, in just its first two iterations, has generated newfound comprehension among its participants of the challenges of successful reentry. It has also led HHS to actionable ideas about how to better assist the formerly incarcerated with their reintegration into society.

This report will describe the structure of HHS's reentry simulation, and the emotional and programmatic insights shared by its participants. It will then argue why this simulation model is an efficacious training tool towards enhancing both staff engagement and quality of services. Lastly, it will offer recommended steps that the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) can take to adapt this simulation to the experiences of HSA's client population.

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Introduction

In the United States, most incarcerated individuals struggle to reintegrate into society upon their release from prison. Many ex-offenders leave prison on parole, which places conditions on their ability to remain free. Parolees must visit with their parole officer, attend rehabilitation appointments, and not commit crimes, among completing other requirements. All the while, they have to pay bills and attend to their basic needs like everyone else. Most of these individuals emerge from prison under personal and socioeconomic circumstances that make becoming self-sufficient incredibly difficult. Ultimately, eighty-two percent of people released from prison are arrested again within ten years. Forty-three percent of those released are arrested again within the first year.¹ Some Americans might be familiar with these statistics, but fewer are likely cognizant of the reasons why this happens.

Following a model first created in West Virginia,² Marin County developed a reentry simulation: a live, role-playing activity that seeks to impart a deeper awareness of these difficulties when reentering society. The simulation challenges its participants to accomplish tasks similar to those required of people exiting prison, while being saddled with barriers that this population often faces.

Over the past half year, Marin Health and Human Services (HHS) has run two simulations with diverse audiences of

government and nonprofit professionals. The participants experienced the obstacles, along with accompanying stress, that formerly incarcerated people face while trying to avoid returning to prison. The experience sparked insights among the participants about how institutions that are tasked with helping this target population might fall short of that goal. Some participants arrived at ideas about possible reforms to their organization's services that could reduce recidivism rates. Furthermore, the simulation offered a clear template for possible adaptations that can capture the experiences of other client populations.

The Reentry Simulation

Structure

The reentry simulation takes place in a spacious room with tables encircling a large space. Participants stand in the center of the room, each role-playing as a person who has recently been released from prison. The activity simulates one month in the life of this person with each week represented by 15 minutes. The participant's objective is to accomplish their required weekly tasks, and thereby avoid returning to jail or befalling other unwanted life outcomes.

Each character starts with different circumstances and tasks to fulfill as terms of their release. The characters possess different starting amounts of cash, assets, and forms of official identification (state identification, birth certificate, social security card), which most of the stations require prior to administering benefits. The crime that sent them to prison is described on their character profile, and dictates the weekly tasks they are required to fulfill. For example, those who committed drug-related offenses are subject to more frequent drug tests. Participants are assigned their

¹ Antenangeli, L. & Durose, M. R. (2021, September). Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 24 States in 2008: A 10-Year Follow-Up Period (2008–2018). Bureau of Justice Statistics. https://bjs.ojp.gov/BJS_PUB/rpr24s0810yfup0818/W eb%20content/508%20compliant%20PDFs

² United States Attorney's Office, Northern District of West Virginia (2023, May 11). Reentry Simulation. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndwv/reentry-simulation>

character at random, and some will have an easier time than others at succeeding.

The tables surrounding the participants each represent a service station that either administers a benefit, or facilitates a task that the participant is required to fulfill. Among these stations are places like a probation office, career center, grocery store, and drug testing lab. Accomplishing most of the required tasks requires payment, and several stations offer methods of earning cash. Simulation participants that are employed can report to a “work site” and earn a paycheck but they cannot attend to other tasks during the minutes they are at “work.” Some characters possess valuables that can be sold to a pawn shop, and everyone is allowed to donate plasma. Participants may also sign up for public assistance benefits, apply for high-interest loans, or receive charity from a “church.” To move between any two stations, participants must purchase transportation tickets.

The simulation’s facilitators track successful or unsuccessful completion of required tasks on a “life card,” which the participants carry with them throughout the activity. Failure to fulfill tasks, such as not attending one’s probation appointments or paying rent, results in “violations,” which leads to consequences such as landing back in jail or a homeless shelter. True to real life, participants also receive weekly “wild card” events, which can be sudden hardships that add another expense for that week, or strokes of good fortune that make accomplishing that week’s tasks easier.

Outcomes

Marin County’s first simulation included case workers, jail deputies, probation officers, and public defenders, among other professionals from County agencies and nonprofits. The second simulation was

attended by mostly crisis intervention officers from law enforcement jurisdictions as a component of their required training. Many of the participants had, to varying degrees in their profession, interacted with people in the justice system.

Chief among the obstacles was time. Every participant struggled to finish their assigned tasks within the 15 minutes allotted for each “week.” Not only did most characters have lengthy task lists, they often had to wait unpredictable lengths of time at service stations. The larger bottlenecks occurred at stations that required filling out applications, such as for identification cards or public assistance, mimicking the real-life experience of waiting at government offices. Most station transactions involved some combination of presenting identification, making a payment, and filling out paperwork which, in their anxious haste, participants would sometimes fumble to carry out. When time was up, stations closed even if someone was mid-transaction, and would not reward that participant with completion of the task. Participants also sometimes lost precious seconds from not knowing which station to visit to complete a task.

Another challenge the simulation spotlighted was the budget constraints that the formerly incarcerated perpetually face. Often, a participant’s weekly expenses exceeded their cash on hand. The luckier characters started out with low-paying jobs, or at least enough cash to stave off personal bankruptcy a bit longer. Those not fortunate to have a job spent time waiting at the career center, or obtained quick cash by one-time means. Meanwhile, with most characters financially operating on the margins, an unlucky wild card containing an added expense could totally unravel someone’s progress.

Simulating the burden of not having a car, participants sometimes became “stranded” at stations due to running out of transportation tickets. Those stranded could receive one free ticket from the vocational rehabilitation center, or beg someone to buy it for them. During the simulations, it was found that the percentage of participants that failed to complete their tasks resembled the nationwide percentage of parolees who ultimately recidivate.

Reactions and Insights

In the post-simulation discussions, many participants expressed dismay over their own inability to succeed in the simulation. They found the number of required tasks and financial obligations punishing given the time and resources allotted to them. One participant, feeling overwhelmed by their character’s barriers, felt discouraged from participating altogether and attempted to remain in “jail” for the entire simulation. They expressed that it was easier to remain in jail than do all the things required of being free and self-sufficient.

The simulation helped some people to better understand how individual actions can be heavily influenced by one’s circumstances, as well as bad luck. One participant that works in law enforcement admitted to stealing an identification card that she found on the ground, which enabled her to access services without going through the time-consuming process of applying for that card. Though the simulation is governed by rules, this was one of several instances where a participant was incentivized to “cheat” out of desperation.

Participants reflected on their varying quality of interactions with the simulation’s facilitators. Facilitators could be flexible or rigid, recreating the myriad personalities that can be encountered at service centers. Some

facilitators bent rules or provided gestures of charity to help the participants. Others were less compassionate and took hardline stances on bureaucratic procedures. The simulation organizers described how, when navigating this activity with no room for error, one person’s generosity or stubbornness could make or break a person’s success in that week. On a human level, a facilitator’s kind demeanor alone could deliver an emotional boost.

Participants also conveyed how, even with imaginary failures, the shame and decreased self-esteem felt real. Few participants had personally experienced the humiliation of being judged and condescended to for being formerly incarcerated, a drug user, or poor.

Service Improvements

After observing how participants without formal identification failed disproportionately in the simulation, HHS has since placed itself on a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) waitlist for a new program that will allow ID applications to be sent from jail, which will allow individuals to exit jail with an ID already in their possession. A different simulation participant, one that manages frontline staff, took from the experience that they wanted to institute soft skills training for their staff, after witnessing how even small efforts of additional accommodation by facilitators could have outsized impacts on the participants’ success.

Other services takeaways that were conveyed through the simulations:

- Demonstrated how co-located services helps clients to accomplish more in less time
- Demonstrated how free transportation vouchers are a

tremendous assistance to clients.

- Reinforced the importance of offering career services, illustrated by how participants that attained jobs were more successful.
- Revealed the helpfulness of personal budgeting assistance services, especially to a population that can't afford even minor financial setbacks.
- Demonstrated the support that caseworkers and social workers can provide simply by helping clients to prioritize their weekly tasks, or explaining where they need to go and how to accomplish their errands.

Bringing the Simulation to San Francisco

The Simulation as a Training and Engagement Tool

The reentry simulation demonstrates that this exercise can build empathy for a group of people by recreating simplified but relatable challenges that that group encounters. How could San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) staff benefit from re-enacting the routines of an HSA client?

- **Enhance sensitivity to clients.** When new HSA staff are on-boarded, they're trained to carry out the technical functions of their job, with adherence to policies and procedures as a guiding principle. There are instances where an employee can perform their duties as dictated by guidelines, while leaving the client feeling negatively about the experience. A client simulation can potentially complement HSA's conventional training with this

client-centered perspective by opening staff's eyes to what is happening on the receiving end of the service window.

- **Lead to improved client engagement.** HSA seeks to maximize client engagement. This goal is somewhat predicated on building trust among clients. An employee that has an increased capacity to empathize with a client's sentiments could more likely unlock that trust, or better cultivate a relationship, than someone with no ability to comprehend that person's misgivings about HSA.
- **Motivate the workforce.** A workforce that is cognizant of what is at stake for HSA's clients might better understand why their work is important. The fact that someone works at HSA does not automatically mean that they have ever waited in line to renew their benefits, or endured the perpetual stress of living on a shoestring budget. Efforts like this simulation can make the consequences of poor-quality service more real to staff, and possibly heighten their engagement with their work.
- **Maximize the pool of ideas.** As shown by Marin County's simulations, the experience can breed insights into what is helpful to clients, and those insights can lead to ideas for improved services. Every HSA employee should have the opportunity to be inspired to contribute suggestions on how to improve HSA's services. There is no inherent restriction of this simulation on who may participate.

These outcomes are hypothetical, though the reflections from Marin County's simulation participants vouch for their possibility. Further arguments in favor of running the simulation are that it entails a feasible time commitment and carries a negligible price tag. HHS' two simulations were each completed within two hours, including the time for discussion. The most time-consuming facet is designing the simulation and producing the simulation materials, which at HHS was done by two employees outside of their existing duties. As far as financial cost, HSA would need only expend funds for basic office supplies (paper, laminating, printing), and possibly a venue to host the simulation, if not using an HSA-owned space.

While HHS' simulations focused on the formerly incarcerated, there are meaningful similarities between the circumstances of parolees and other HSA clients. Many HSA clients enroll in more than one public assistance program, each of which are often guided by incongruous bureaucratic procedures, and sometimes located at different addresses. They must balance their HSA-related obligations with personal commitments, and are vulnerable to major setbacks brought about by unexpected costs and fines. They are also likely to have encountered societal stigma for being poor, and possibly other reasons. Many of the stations and personas utilized in the reentry simulation could easily carry over. Some new features that HSA could introduce are:

- **Simulate the benefits cliff.** Participants could experience the discouraging setback of losing eligibility for public assistance benefits due to increased earnings or assets, resulting in a net loss to their income.
- **Have instructions containing some words in a foreign language.** HSA does offer robust translation services, but the unnerving experience of navigating a system in a language one is not fully comfortable with could be illuminating.

Adapting the reentry simulation to HSA clients would be both feasible and rewarding. HHS itself is already adapting the simulation to the unhoused population.

Lastly, it should be emphasized that this simulation does not presume to make a person fully relatable to someone who has actually lived through that situation. It merely imparts a small story of trauma that the participants can begin to feel for themselves, in the hopes of transforming their hearts and minds about somebody different from them.

Recommendations to HSA on Implementation

- **Seek participation from all HSA staff.** As stated earlier, all HSA employees can stand to benefit from the simulation. Whether the employee is client-facing or designing services at a conceptual level, their work quality can only be enhanced by a client-informed lens.
- **Design the simulation to be client and staff-informed.** Organizers should conduct listening sessions with current HSA clients to understand the commonly shared challenges they encounter when navigating HSA's services and weaving these tasks with errands in their personal lives. Interviewed clients should receive financial compensation for their participation. HSA must also ensure that the

simulated services' enrollment tasks resemble County practices. Organizers can interview eligibility workers and supervisors for this information, as these staff stay up to date with these procedures in their work.

- **Assemble the simulation materials and prepare a venue.** The simulation will require a sizable quantity of printed, laminated “life cards”, station name tags, mock application forms, and tokens. The production of these materials should be one-time, so that everything can be continuously reused. The simulation's venue should be able to accommodate up to 60 people, and have ample room for participants to move about the space.
- **Conduct a post-simulation discussion.** This discussion should occur immediately after the simulation ends, in order to freshly capture the participants' emotions and reactions. Participants should reflect on what was challenging, where they got stuck, and share realizations they might have gleaned about the client experience. This discussion can become a potential launching point for ideas around service improvements.
- **Measure outcomes.** Being a training tool for improving both quality of services and staff engagement, HSA can follow its impact through metrics that the agency is already tracking. Staff retention levels could offer clues into the state of employee engagement. As for quality of services, HSA can look for improved

rates of services take-up among an estimated eligible population.

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