

Alaska Prisoner Reentry Task Force Update

The Alaska Prisoner Reentry Task Force focuses on reducing recidivism by identifying and supporting strategies and programs to help released offenders reintegrate into their communities. The task force was established in 2010 as a statewide sub-committee of the Criminal Justice Working Group. (The Criminal Justice Working Group is a collaborative group of state and federal agencies and the Alaska Mental Health Trust.) There are five task force work groups: Employment, Misdemeanors, Behavioral Health, Housing, and the newly formed Alaska Native work group. Their efforts are guided by the *Five-Year Prisoner Reentry Strategic Plan, 2011–2016* which was developed by the task force. (See *Alaska Justice Forum* 28(2–3), Summer/Fall 2011, for a plan summary.)

Task force members include representatives from the Alaska State Troopers, Department of Labor, Alaska Court System, Department of Corrections, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Division of Behavioral Health, Department of Corrections Chaplaincy Program, Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, Victims for Justice, Partners for Progress, Nine Star Education and Employment Services, Cook Inlet Tribal Corporation, United Way, Akeela House, the Alaska Native Justice Center, New Life Development, and an ex-offender. The co-chairs of the Task Force are Ron Taylor, Deputy Commissioner for Rehabilitation and Reentry of the Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) and Dianne Blumer, Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Labor and Work Force Development (DOL); until December 2013, Melissa Hermansen was the Project Coordinator.

Following are highlights of task force activity in 2013.

Regional Reentry Coalitions

The task force has been concentrating on establishing regional reentry coalitions. There are currently five (see map on page 4).

• **Anchorage Reentry Coalition:** The coalition has not met formally since May 2013, but a meeting was held November 19 with DOC Deputy Commissioner Taylor and a consultant, Dennis Schrantz of Envision Justice Solutions, to hear about the current evaluation of DOC offender reentry programs. The coalition is in the process of reorganizing.

• **Mat-Su Reentry Coalition:** The reentry coalition is a subcommittee of the Mat-Su Coalition on Housing and Homelessness. The Mat-Su Coalition on Housing and Homelessness, the Mat-Su

Health Foundation, and the Alaska Prisoner Reentry Task Force partnered to present a Mat-Su Community and Corrections Forum on October 24 in Wasilla. Over 80 attendees participated in the event. Cosponsors included the City of Wasilla, United Way of Mat-Su, and the Alaska Department of Corrections. Topics included assistance for reentering prisoners, how a community can increase successful prisoner reentry, and the impacts of the Goose Creek Correctional Center on the Mat-Su Borough. Some of these impacts include the increased number of released prisoners in the Mat-Su Borough, as well as growth in employment due to the correctional center and the need for housing and schools. Transportation is also an issue, and the coalition is developing a relationship with the Mat-Su bus system to provide transportation for visitors, staff, and released prisoners to and from the Goose Creek facility. The coalition meets monthly.

• **Fairbanks Reentry Coalition:** The reentry coalition is a subcommittee of the Fairbanks Housing and Homelessness Coalition. A recent presentation was made at the Rural Providers Conference in Fairbanks to engage the Native community. Its first identified goal is to work with DOC to collect regional data, and build strategies from the baseline data. Time is set aside for community presentations at each Fairbanks coalition meeting. This has proven to be successful in developing referrals and building release points for offenders returning to Fairbanks. As a result of these meetings, the DOL's One Stop Center is in the process of expanding its services at the Fairbanks Correctional Center to facilitate pre-release job readiness workshops and implement the Employment after Incarceration program at the One Stop Center. Two staff members at the Fairbanks Rescue Mission and case managers at the Northstar Center (a halfway house) have been trained to present Ready to Rent workshops. The coalition meets monthly.

• **Juneau Reentry Coalition:** In August 2013 the coalition was awarded a small project grant of \$10,000 from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority. There are seven active work groups for the following areas: peer support, education/employment, housing, behavioral health, pre/post release, family, and community education/public outreach. The focus for the community education/public outreach work group has been to support and provide direction to Nice Touch Films in developing a local reentry film, the design of a coalition logo and a website, and organizing educational

speaking events for coalition meetings and the community. In November, the coalition partnered with the Alaska Mental Health Board and the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse to host the training "How to Tell Your Story to a Policymaker" for people who have experienced incarceration. The coalition meets monthly.

• **Bristol Bay Reentry Coalition:** In October 2012, the Bristol Bay Native Association was awarded \$732,000 by the U.S. Department of Justice to develop and design a culture-based prisoner reentry program for citizens returning to the Bristol Bay region after incarceration. A Prisoner Reentry Meeting was held November 4–5 in Dillingham as part of Tribal Justice Week. The event was supported by the Bristol Bay Native Association, University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), U.S. Bureau of Justice Administration, and the National Reentry Resource Center. The purpose of the November meeting was to mobilize the coalition to oversee this culture-based reentry initiative. Topics included: integrating cultural traditions and practices into prisoner reentry, overview of the Alaska Native Justice Center's Adult Reentry Program, partnership and collaboration, and prioritizing coalition work groups and appointing members. A UAF tribal management course, "Tribal Court Development for Alaska Tribes," was offered immediately following the November event.

Work Groups

• **Affordable housing:** The goal of the Affordable Housing Work Group is to educate the public about the higher cost of incarceration compared to transitional housing for offenders. The group focuses on outreach to landlords and implementing Ready to Rent workshops. This 12-hour workshop is based on a nationwide model which teaches participants skills needed to be a good renter, including how to search for housing, manage finances, interact appropriately with landlords, and perform basic housekeeping. Individuals who successfully complete the program receive a certificate. DOC Probation officers and education coordinators are involved in this effort. Through funding from Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, 30 Department of Corrections staff have been trained to deliver this workshop. New Life Development and Partners for Progress also offer this workshop to clients who are receiving transitional housing assistance at their reentry centers in Anchorage.

Prisoner reentry (continued from page 5)

• **Educating employers about hiring ex-offenders:** The Employment Work Group assisted with a special presentation in October to the Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) on the improved social and public safety implications related to successful offender reentry. The goal is to deliver presentations statewide by identifying regional reentry coalition members who could present at their local rotaries and chambers of commerce. The work group is exploring Ban the Box, a nationwide campaign that calls for removing the conviction history question from employment applications, and is also reviewing strategies from the recently released U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance report, *Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies: Reducing Recidivism and Promoting Job Readiness* (<https://www.bja.gov/Publications/CSG-Reentry-and-Employment.pdf>).

• **Sentencing options for misdemeanants:** The Misdemeanants Work Group is examining a deferred sentencing model for specific state cases. Included in the discussion are representatives from the Department of Law, the Public Defender Agency, Municipality of Anchorage Prosecutor's Office, Department of Corrections Electronic Monitoring, and the Alaska Court System Therapeutic Courts. The 2011 recidivism study by the Alaska Judicial Council, *Criminal Recidivism in Alaska, 2008 and 2009* (<http://www.ajc.state.ak.us/reports/recid2011.pdf>), reported that the highest level of recidivism is found among misdemeanants 17–29 years of age. The

deferred sentencing program would focus on individuals in this group who are charged with property offenses. An assessment tool would be used to identify needs, including mental health/substance abuse treatment, education, and employment services. If the individual agrees to this intervention and completes the requirements within six months, the case would be dismissed. The major barrier to the implementation of this plan is the lack of low-cost or free services for this population. At this time, funds are prioritized for services for felons. The work group has collaborated with the Behavioral Health Work Group to explore requesting the use of alcohol tax funds to cover the costs of substance abuse assessment and treatment for misdemeanants at high risk of incurring a felony charge.

• **Behavioral Health:** In August the work group identified the need to update the behavioral health chapter (chapter 5) of the *Five-Year Prisoner Reentry Strategic Plan*. Co-chair DOC Deputy Commissioner Taylor indicated that the strategies and performance measures in the chapter would be updated prior to the completion of the current DOC needs assessment. A sub-group has been meeting to discuss using peer helpers to increase the number of offenders who are exposed to substance abuse programs in DOC facilities.

In addition to the specific activities noted above, other progress on the *Five-Year Plan* includes:

• **Fairbanks PACE Project:** The Fairbanks PACE (Probationer Accountability and Certain Enforcement) domestic violence program for repeat offender misdemeanants has been operating for over a year. This pilot

project has 18 offenders who have met the eligibility criteria and are in the program. A violation of the conditions of probation results in an immediate court appearance and the imposition of a jail sentence. The jail sentence is usually three days for a first violation; additional probation violations result in longer sentences. Based on program data, there appears to be a significant reduction in petitions to revoke probation for individuals in this program. The project also includes a survey of victims' perceptions of safety before, during, and after the offenders complete a batterers' intervention program. The UAA Justice Center is evaluating this project.

For information on the Alaska Prisoner Reentry Task Force and Alaska Department of Corrections Rehabilitation & Reentry, go to <http://www.correct.state.ak.us/rehabilitation-reentry>.

Legislative Events — SB 64 Hearings

Senate Bill 64 Omnibus Crime/Corrections Bill is a bipartisan effort to deal with the increasing costs of incarceration and the need for alternatives to prison. Hearings have been held in Wasilla and Fairbanks. The July 25, 2013 hearing in Wasilla is available at http://www.360north.org/gavel-archives/?event_id=2147483647_2013111006.

The November 4 hearing in Fairbanks can be viewed in two parts at http://www.360north.org/gavel-archives/?event_id=2147483647_2013111006 and at http://www.360north.org/gavel-archives/?event_id=2147483647_2013111010.

For further reading, see http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/a-z/o/offender_reentry.html.

In Memoriam

Dr. Nancy E. Schafer, Professor Emeritus at the Justice Center, died September 26, 2013 after an illness. Dr. Schafer was on the faculty of the Justice Center from 1983 until her retirement in 2002, twice serving as acting director of the Justice Center, once as interim co-director, and once as acting dean of the School of Justice. Before joining the University of Alaska Anchorage she served on the faculty of Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (1977–1983) and Trenton State College in Trenton, New Jersey (1974–1977). She received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1977.

Dr. Schafer's principal teaching and research areas were in corrections, criminology, and juvenile justice. She was a prolific author and coauthor of journal articles and research studies including "Exploring the Link between Visits and Parole Success: A Survey of Prison Visitors," "State Operated Jails: How and Why," "Delivering Justice in Rural Alaska," and "Community Jails in Alaska." Research projects for which she was principal investigator included an evaluation of the pretrial intervention program conducted by the Alaska Department of Law in the late 1980s, monitoring Alaska's compliance with the federal Juvenile

Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, a study of disproportionate representation of minority youth in Alaska's juvenile justice system, and the Community Jails Statewide Research Consortium, a research partnership with fifteen community jails in Alaska. Dr. Schafer's professional affiliations included the American Correctional Association, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, and the Midwestern Criminal Justice Association, of which she was past president. She served on numerous community committees, boards, and advisory boards including the Alaska Women's Resource Center, the Subcommittee on Disparate Minority Confinement of the Alaska Supreme Court's Committee on Fairness and Access, and the Alaska Juvenile Justice Work Group, as well as on a variety of UAA committees. Dr. Schafer's contributions to the Justice Center were invaluable, and the university is grateful for her service and commitment.

Research publications and papers by Dr. Schafer can be viewed at <http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/publications/authors/schafer/>.

Condolences may be sent to her family c/o the Justice Center, 3211 Providence Drive, LIB 213, Anchorage, AK 99508.