

Moving Forward

Written by Harris Newman

Imagine: You're 29 and you just finished your jail sentence. Upon release, you are told to go to a program that will help you 'reintegrate' and 'stay out of trouble'.

The program is in a building that could pass for a hospital. White walls, bright lights, funky smells, butterfly pictures on the walls. The people you meet don't look like you, don't talk like you, and share little, if any, of your upbringing and experiences. And they tell you things that you feel have nothing to do with *you*.

I wouldn't want to go, either.

Now, imagine you're released, but the circumstances are different. For this program, a car arrives. The man driving isn't a friend, but he's someone you know through your community. He's been in your shoes before – he talks like you and acts like you. Difference is, he's 10 years older, has a full-time job and has been clean since his release. He'll be driving you to your mentoring session, walking you through the door and introducing you to everyone. When I say 'everyone', I mean even more people that look like you.



The former is how things have been done too often with rehabilitation programs. The second situation is how things work at Volunteers of America Oregon's (VOAOR) ***Moving Forward*** program, and is a huge component of why it's so successful.

Approximately 2 years ago, the Oregon legislature passed HB 3194 creating the Justice Reinvestment Program (JRP), resulting in over \$38m in county grants being reinvested to decrease the use of State Department of Corrections facilities. Meaning, to keep people out of prison. Approximately \$11m was awarded to Multnomah County.

Several organizations in Multnomah County, including VOA Oregon, were already helping people gain skills and resources to avoid going back to prison through a joint effort known as the Reentry Enhancement Coordination (REC) program. The REC team offers housing, mentors, employment, family, and treatment services for people coming back to the community working hand and hand with parole and probation. In a 2011 evaluation, 74% of REC participants achieved employment within 90 days of release; 84% had independent housing 90 days after release from prison; and REC participants had a 43% reduction in recidivism (that means they didn't go back to prison!) Because of REC's success, it stood out as a program worth replicating and peaked the interested of

Multnomah County's JRP Policy Team who chose to reinvest the money into the same team of providers, including VOAOR, to replicate services, and thus, *Moving Forward* was born.

"We didn't reinvent the wheel because we got new money," said Kathy Sévos, Director of Transition and Reentry Services. "We got so good at it, the county gave us money to continue doing what we do best."

Moving Forward does things differently, and the irony is that they're doing nothing that's, well...different.

There's a link between substance use, behavioral/thinking patterns, and criminality. It's a cycle. And with cycles, you just need to find a good 'stopping place'. The programming with *Moving Forward* is deeply personal, unique for each client, and implemented early.

This is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and just one of the evidence-based practices *Moving Forward* has implemented with great success.



Another was mentioned earlier, which is having culturally-specific mentors. You'd think this was common practice, but it's not. They also provide gym memberships, take fishing trips, put on football parties, and coordinate other engagement activities that strengthen relationships between mentors and participants. All of this ensures the participant stays engaged in the program. A longer stay in the program means a lower risk to recommit a crime.

It seems simple, and obvious, but this personalized, trauma-informed approach is not always how programs operate. *Moving Forward* intended this from the start, and they have the expertise and resources to do it successfully.

As a whole, the Justice Reinvestment Program is projected to save Oregon an estimated \$53m in avoided prison costs this biennium, and it saved an estimated \$19m last biennium.

Up next for Kathy and her team is the Treatment Readiness Dorm, a 59-bed dormitory at Multnomah County Inverness Jail. This innovative partnership provides transition services and classes inside of the jail preparing people to engage in treatment when they release instead of heading off to a long prison term. It's another way Multnomah County and VOAOR are working to transform the criminal justice system through Oregon's Justice Reinvestment Program.

"What we need is a massive overhaul," Sévos concluded. "This system isn't working. Incarceration isn't the answer, and it affects our wallets and causes lasting trauma. Helping individuals and families break the cycle, now that's how we can help our community long-term."