

Incarceration: Recidivism, Reentry, and Reunification

COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM SUMMARY

2020-2023

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History of the Program

The *Incarceration: Recidivism, Reentry, and Reunification (iR3)* program was strategically designed to foster collaboration among diverse organizations and individuals dedicated to reducing recidivism within Arkansas's corrections system. Over three years, the program successfully united members from 107 organizations, amassing over 1500 volunteer hours. The overarching goals were to streamline the reentry process, alleviate barriers for justice-affected individuals and families, and contribute to statewide improvements in the justice system.

iR3 by the Numbers

Focus Groups: 10

Hours in Focus Groups: 24

Large Convenings: 6

Facilitated Hours: >48

Hours at the Institute: >144

Working Group Meetings: >72

Planning and Staff Hours: > 1000

The effort began in the Fall of 2020 when Restore Hope AR approached the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute (Institute) with a series of persistent challenges in their work with people leaving the criminal justice system and reentering their communities. Whether it was challenges with proper paperwork, finding housing, securing work, or other hardships post-incarceration, Restore Hope was interested in learning how many of the issues they faced were shared by others in the reentry space.

The Institute worked with Restore Hope to identify the most pressing challenges they faced and then expanded on those in focus group meetings with different sectors of people involved in or affected by incarceration and reentry in Arkansas. From citizens who had been formerly incarcerated to leaders within the corrections system, non-profit organizations to legislators, and many perspectives in between, many shared pain points were discovered. There was enough common ground that the Institute and Restore Hope felt that continued exploration was warranted. This led to the first Incarceration: Recidivism, Reentry, and Reunification convening in June 2021.

That first meeting began a collaborative process involving over one hundred stakeholders across a three-year effort. This report recounts the significant pieces of that work, the impact made by the iR3 cohort, and the future of the effort beyond the historic grounds of the Institute. Most importantly, this report displays what is possible with the Rockefeller Ethic and the dedication of people willing to identify a challenge and step up to build solutions.

The Work

Identifying collaborative ground on issues as complex and potentially contentious as those surrounding incarceration was no easy task. Ensuring that the Rockefeller Ethic was properly applied meant first exploring the different perspectives and knowledge areas around incarceration and reentry in the state. This took place over many distinct stages, starting with focus groups to gather data around the issues, large convenings to narrow those issues to actionable focuses, and finally, smaller working groups dedicated to building and testing solutions.

FOCUS GROUPS

To lay the foundation for the iR3 program and discern the primary challenges within the criminal justice ecosystem in Arkansas, the Institute, with the assistance of program partner Restore Hope, conducted a series of 10 focus groups in the spring of 2021. These in-person and virtual sessions aimed to gather insights from diverse perspectives representing various sectors of the justice system. These focus groups encompassed representatives from 10 distinct sectors, each playing a pivotal role in the Arkansas justice system:

- Formerly Incarcerated Individuals
- Corrections System
- Members of the Arkansas State Legislature
- Criminal Justice Coordinating Committees
- Innovative Formal Programs
- Innovative Small-Scale Programs
- Workforce Groups
- Criminal Justice Non-Profits
- Mental Health and Recovery Groups
- Child Welfare and Family Impact Groups

Participants engaged in purposeful discussions during the focused sessions, responding to carefully crafted questions. These questions were designed to elicit comprehensive insights into the critical issues faced within their respective sectors and the broader criminal justice landscape.

The outcomes of these discussions were recorded and analyzed, identifying eight focus areas for the start of the iR3 program. These focus areas encapsulated the most pressing challenges and opportunities for improvement identified by the diverse range of participants.

INITIAL FOCUS AREAS

Behavioral and Mental Health Support

Support, mentoring, counseling, and treatment for behavioral and mental health challenges emerged as a leading focus. While a proven strategy to help lower recidivism, there is not wide implementation.

Existing Laws

Many laws and fines can stack on one another, compounding the financial burden on reentering citizens. Sometimes, the fees and penalties can be from different jurisdictions, unintended factors like driver's license reinstatement fees, or complicating factors like the overlap between parole requirements and finding employment.

Public Awareness/Community Support Pre-trial

The negative stigma around being formerly incarcerated is a significant barrier to acceptance within the community for those leaving incarceration. This expands to social interactions and challenges with finding a place to live or employment.

Program sustainability and scalability

Communication and shared strategies among those working in the reentry space are limited. With much work to do, there is often little time to organize with other groups or organizations doing similar work. This leads to siloed efforts without the benefit of shared stability and focus.

Judicial Measures and Education

Many recidivism and incarceration interventions can be effective in courthouse proceedings. However, for alternative sentencing or diversion models to be implemented, they must first make sense at the judicial level, which means sharing knowledge and data about the effectiveness of such programs.

Pre-incarceration Programs and Efforts

Many possible interventions can occur before a law has been broken. This area looks at strategies that address needs, such as adult education or family welfare interventions that can stymie behaviors or situations that could lead to incarceration before they occur.

Post-incarceration Programs and Efforts

For the programs designed to help people after incarceration, there were several pain points identified. Among those are a lack of shared communication, few professional development and training options, and a lack of consistent or standardized information transfer between prison and support programs.

Programming and Efforts During Incarceration

Programs that exist during incarceration exist but could have increased collaboration and standardization. Among the opportunities are workforce training, addiction recovery programs, and "get ready" programs before release.

LARGE CONVENINGS

With the overlapping focus areas identified from the focus group sessions, the next task was to bring together the different sectors of the focus groups into a larger convening. Having their various perspectives in a room together accomplished several significant goals, including highlighting their common ground. Helping diverse groups see how they can collaborate is always a part of the Institute's work, but it was especially important with the iR3 cohort due to the inherent distrust and potential resentments within the participants. Using data from the focus groups to showcase the challenges that the entire group agreed upon helped open that door, as well as facilitated exercises to center the group on the people in the room rather than their affiliations.

iR3 Large Convenings

June 16, 2021

September 16, 2021 (Hybrid)

March 3, 2022

October 18, 2022

March 28, 2023

The first test of the newly formed cohort was to narrow the eight focus areas into three working groups with specific goals. This exercise was done to ensure the best chance of success for the cohort itself, not as a ranking of which issues were the most important. Any focus areas identified, or the many issues within them, would have made impactful working groups. However, like many complex challenges, no one group can be expected to solve all the issues or pain points at once. With that understanding, the cohort considered their individual knowledge and resources and focused on three initial areas: Communication and Collaboration, Existing Laws and Policies, and Public Awareness.

Those initial working groups were populated by volunteer members, including chairs and co-chairs, who worked together between the larger meetings to research and develop possible strategies to improve their chosen area. Subsequent larger convenings from then on were opportunities to assess progress, identify any gaps in their process, and add additional intellectual resources to the working groups. Notably, in 2023, this proactive approach led to the establishment of a fourth working group specifically dedicated to exploring community diversion strategies, responding to the need for specialized focus in this area by the cohort at large.

WORKING GROUPS

The iR3 program operated through focused working groups to translate the identified focus areas into actionable strategies. These groups represented a cross-section of stakeholders committed to addressing specific challenges within the criminal justice system in Arkansas.

Communication and Collaboration

The Communication and Collaboration working group aimed to enhance the flow of information between reentry and reunification providers to increase access for justice-affected individuals and their families. They sought to do this by identifying the best practices for data generation, consolidation, and sharing, leveraging the platforms CourtConnect and HopeHub. This group also established a strategic partnership with Arkansas 211 by United Way to establish a centralized, comprehensive hub. This resource bank, informed by the collective expertise of participating organizations, now serves as a key point of access, connecting individuals to community-based support through various channels –phone, text, or their website. Through these efforts, the working group significantly improved the availability of essential resources for reentry and enhanced accessibility for those navigating the justice system.

Existing Laws and Policies

The Existing Laws and Policies group embarked on a multifaceted approach to address challenges within the justice system, with a focus on public policy recommendations designed to reduce the length of probation and parole, ensure those leaving prison have essential documents needed to reenter society and the workforce and advocate for diversion and alternative sentencing programs throughout the state to reduce incarceration and recidivism statewide.

This group successfully advocated for legislative changes, presenting and championing public policy recommendations that evolved into impactful laws. Notably, one of the most impactful achievements was the successful advocacy for and securing \$1 million in funding from the Arkansas Attorney General’s office. This funding, managed by program partner Restore Hope, will facilitate piloting a community diversion program in 10 counties beginning in 2024. This initiative represents a substantial step towards implementing practical solutions at a community level that will reshape the justice system in Arkansas for the better.

Community Diversion Playbook

The Community Diversion Playbook working group stemmed from the Existing Laws and Policies group to accomplish their goal of supporting community diversion and alternative sentencing programs in the state. Focused on the best practices for community diversion within district courts, their efforts aim to establish a robust framework to guide policies and procedures for the upcoming community diversion pilot program and any Arkansas district court interested in alternative sentencing. As an essential offshoot of the broader initiatives within the iR3 program, this group plays a pivotal role in shaping the practical implementation of community diversion practices. Their work is poised to impact the justice system directly and positively, emphasizing practical and community-oriented approaches within district courts. Their work will also be put into immediate practice via 10 pilot communities funded by a \$1 million allocation to Restore Hope from Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin's office. Those pilots will use the toolkit as guidance.

Public Awareness

The Public Awareness working group's goal was to address stigma and raise awareness in Arkansas surrounding individuals with felony convictions or a history of incarceration. The aim was to foster a more inclusive mindset within individuals, communities, organizations, and employers. In addition, the group aimed to encourage openness among legislatures and their constituents to policy changes regarding the justice-affected population.

This working group produced a comprehensive and multilayered marketing campaign with the initiation of the "Arkansans for Smart Justice" media platform. This platform, comprising a magazine and podcast, serves as a dynamic means to enhance public understanding and reduce the stigma of incarceration. The content is made widely accessible through multiple streaming platforms, effectively reaching diverse audiences.

These working groups drove tangible change in Arkansas's criminal justice landscape through their proactive initiatives. Their collaborative efforts underscored a commitment to addressing the pressing challenges facing justice-affected individuals and their families and fostering a more inclusive and effective justice system.

The Results

Impact and Achievements

The iR3 program harnessed the collective energy and expertise of the many organizations comprising Arkansas's justice system to facilitate collaboration, resource-sharing, and legislative action to reshape the system for the better.

- Successfully advocated for the allocation of \$1 million from Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin for a groundbreaking community diversion pilot program.
- The establishment of a comprehensive resource bank, drawing from the collective expertise of participating organizations.
- Initiation of the "Arkansans for Smart Justice" media platform to enhance public understanding and reduce stigma.
- Implementation of policy recommendations that have translated into positive changes in the legal landscape.
- Numerous new relationships, networks, and shared ideas that had no previous outlet or opportunity to happen.

Policy Outcomes

- [Senate Bill 513](#), now Act 1049, amended the law regarding suspending or revoking drivers' licenses. This amendment included provisions such as reinstating licenses without fees upon acquittal or dismissal of charges related to nonpayment of fines. It also introduced additional court requirements and conditions for restricted driver's permits.
- [Senate Bill 353](#), now Act 1048, created a framework to facilitate the resolution of pending misdemeanor offenses for incarcerated individuals and encouraged courts to refrain from additional fines. It also established a task force to study methods for assessing, collecting, and recording fines, fees, and restitution within the criminal justice system.
- [House Bill 1604](#), now Act 453, amended the application of the habitual offender sentence enhancement, refining the determination of the number of felonies for which a defendant may be convicted. It addressed situations where multiple felony possession charges arising from the same set of facts are considered a singular offense.

Rockefeller Ethic Role

Although present in all the work of the Institute, the Rockefeller Ethic was especially essential in the iR3 program. Many collaboratives might disagree on the right way forward or have different perspectives on an issue, but few cohorts have such a distinct rift as the one between those who have been incarcerated and those that manage and uphold incarceration. That stark divide, however, makes the issues that both groups can agree need to be solved even more pressing. And the solutions which are borne by such a group that much more meaningful.

Creating a holistic and nuanced approach to addressing issues within the Arkansas justice system was a real test of the Rockefeller Ethic. It was also, however, a test the Ethic was designed for. While all the people who made iR3 possible might not work together as closely on future projects, they did come together during the scope of our time together to create real impact. And because they engaged in the Rockefeller Ethic, that positive impact will be felt beyond silos or individual sectors of the

The Way Forward

Although their time on the mountain has ended, the iR3 cohort and their work will continue into the future.

The participants of the iR3 program will continue to drive transformational change in Arkansas through the community diversion program piloted in 10 Arkansas counties. This diversionary program will test the best practice recommendations in the toolkit created by the Community Diversion Playbook working group, which will guide the pilots' policies and procedures. The mission of this pilot is to prove these best practices and use the data gathered to propose that the Arkansas legislature dedicate funds annually to the Administrative Office of the Courts to run diversionary programs in district courts across the state.

The Arkansans for Smart Justice series of magazines and podcasts, began as the major deliverable for the Public Awareness working group, has become a standalone effort. The stories shared as part of that platform will continue to tell the human story of incarceration, reentry, and reunification with loved ones. Those stories, and those of working to continually find improvements in the justice system, will help address the stigma around incarceration.

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Most importantly it can help amplify the voices of those looking for solutions, especially when those voices have limited platforms and visibility.

Arkansas 211 and the many programs supporting those returning to their communities from incarceration will continue building a list of accessible resources. Having such a concentrated effort of statewide programs all sharing information to one source is a great collaborative effort. Certainly, those people involved in iR3 now know where to turn to find resources outside their area and will hopefully spread that knowledge to those that need it most.

The iR3 program stands as a testament to the power of collaboration and proactive advocacy, resulting in tangible changes to policy, public perception, and the actualization of innovative programs aimed at reducing recidivism, supporting reentry, and reuniting families. The ongoing initiatives and partnerships established during the program position it as a catalyst for sustained positive change within the Arkansas justice system.

