AUSTIN·TRAVIS COUNTY

REENTRY ROUNDTABLE

Reentry Progress Report & Recommendations

September 2020

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Introduction & Background

The Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable (Roundtable) is an ongoing forum for academics, practitioners, community leaders, policy makers, advocates, and formerly incarcerated individuals working to address the challenges to effective reentry and reintegration of persons with criminal histories. The Roundtable is a volunteer organization, and membership is open to organizations and individuals who confirm their interest in supporting its mission and work. Members include representatives from governmental agencies, academic institutions, community organizations and other nongovernmental entities, individuals with lived experience in the criminal justice system, and other community representatives.

This report is submitted to the City of Austin Downtown Community Court and Travis County Justice Planning as required documentation for financial support of the Roundtable. The City of Austin and Travis County contract with the Roundtable to improve outcomes for individuals reintegrating into the community from incarceration. This report meets the following FY19-20 contract deliverables:

City of Austin: *Final report on practices and release data for jail and prison facilities that release individuals to the Austin/Travis County area. Summary report to include data analysis of research, copy of data obtained from jail and prison facilities, and recommendations based on that research which may include, but is not limited to state policies that could be considered by the legislature, local policies for service integration, and/or recommendations for social services.*

Travis County: *Design a project plan that could result in a robust strategy to provide resources to the reentry population in Travis County. This could take the form of a facilitated task force and/or an enhanced technological solution and/or any other ideas forwarded by the Reentry Roundtable.*

To address the deliverables above, the working group developed learning objectives for their work:

- *What are the demographic characteristics of the reentry population in Travis County, and are there disparities, or over- or under-representation of any demographic characteristics of the reentry population in Travis County?*
- *Are there typical patterns of reentry pathways that we can identify to help us better understand the needs of persons returning to the Austin/Travis County community?*

These questions inform the structure of the report that follows.

Austin/Travis County Reentry FAQs

What is reentry?

Reentry is the transition of individuals from incarceration back into the community from incarceration. Incarceration includes both prisons and jails, although much of the current emphasis on reentry in the policy, practitioner, and academic communities focuses on prison reentry. For the purposes of this report, reentry includes all persons who have served at least some time in incarceration or on community supervision (probation).[1]

From which institutions do people returning from jail or prison in Travis County exit?

While individuals living in Austin/Travis County who are exiting incarceration may be returning from federal, state and/or local correctional institutions across the country, the vast majority of persons reintegrating in Austin/Travis County exit from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) system or the Travis County Jail and/or Travis County Correctional Complex (TCCC) operated by the Travis County Sheriff's Office (TCSO). Individuals returning from the TDCJ system have been convicted and are either released having completed their sentence or may be released on parole (an allowance to serve the remainder of a sentence in the community with supervision). Individuals returning from the Travis County Jail and/or TCCC may be released on pre-release bond and awaiting trial; may be released through participation in a jail diversion program; or may have completed their sentence.

Individuals serving time in the TDCJ system may be incarcerated in a state prison, a state jail, a Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facility (SAFPF), or a transfer facility.[2] Those sentenced to state jail are incarcerated for a two-year period or less with no eligibility for parole.[3] While most state jails and prisons are operated by TDCJ, some state jails and prisons are operated by private prison corporations.[4]

In addition, TDCJ and the Federal Bureau of Prisons contract with private entities to operate residential reentry centers (commonly known as halfway houses). Residential reentry centers are for individuals released on parole or mandatory supervision; there are two adjacent residential reentry centers in Travis County co-located on the TCCC campus, including the Austin Transitional Center which provides transitional housing for those released from TDCJ with upcoming parole dates and individuals enrolled in TDCJ's residential substance abuse treatment program; and the Austin Residential Reentry Center which houses mostly inmates transitioning from federal prison (both facilities are operated by CoreCivic, a private corrections corporation).

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[1] In general, the Roundtable focuses its efforts on anyone who is system-involved (e.g. has a criminal history including those who have only an arrest record as well as those who have been convicted and are serving a sentence.

[2] TDCJ Unit Directory. Online at www.tdcj.texas.gov/unit_directory/index.html.

[3] The term state jail is a misnomer; Texas state jails are actually minimum-security prison facilities. Source: Texas Jail Project.

[4] TDCJ Private Facility Contract Monitoring/Oversight Division. Online at www.tdcj.texas.gov/divisions/pf/index.html.

What are the correctional facilities in the Austin region?

Name	Capacity (Beds)	Privately Operated	Private Corporation	Gender Served
Austin Transitional Center	435	Yes	CoreCivic	mixed gender
Austin Residential Reentry Center	116	Yes	CoreCivic	mixed gender
Blackwell-Thurman Criminal Justice Center/Travis County Jail	286	No	n/a	mixed gender
Federal Correctional Institution - Bastrop	1238	No	n/a	men
Kyle Correctional Center	520	Yes	Management & Training Corporation (MTC)	men
Halbert Substance Abuse Facility	612	No	n/a	women
Lockhart Correctional Facility	1000	Yes	Management & Training Corporation (MTC)	women
Travis County Correctional Complex	3095	No	n/a	mixed gender
Travis County State Jail	1161	No	n/a	men

Sources: TDCJ, TCSO, Federal Bureau of Prisons

Note: while this list includes correctional facilities in the Austin area, there is no certainty that an individual sentenced in Travis County to TDCJ will serve a sentence in this geographic area, nor will individuals released from the TDCJ system to Austin/Travis County necessarily have resided in the Austin/Travis County area prior to their incarceration.

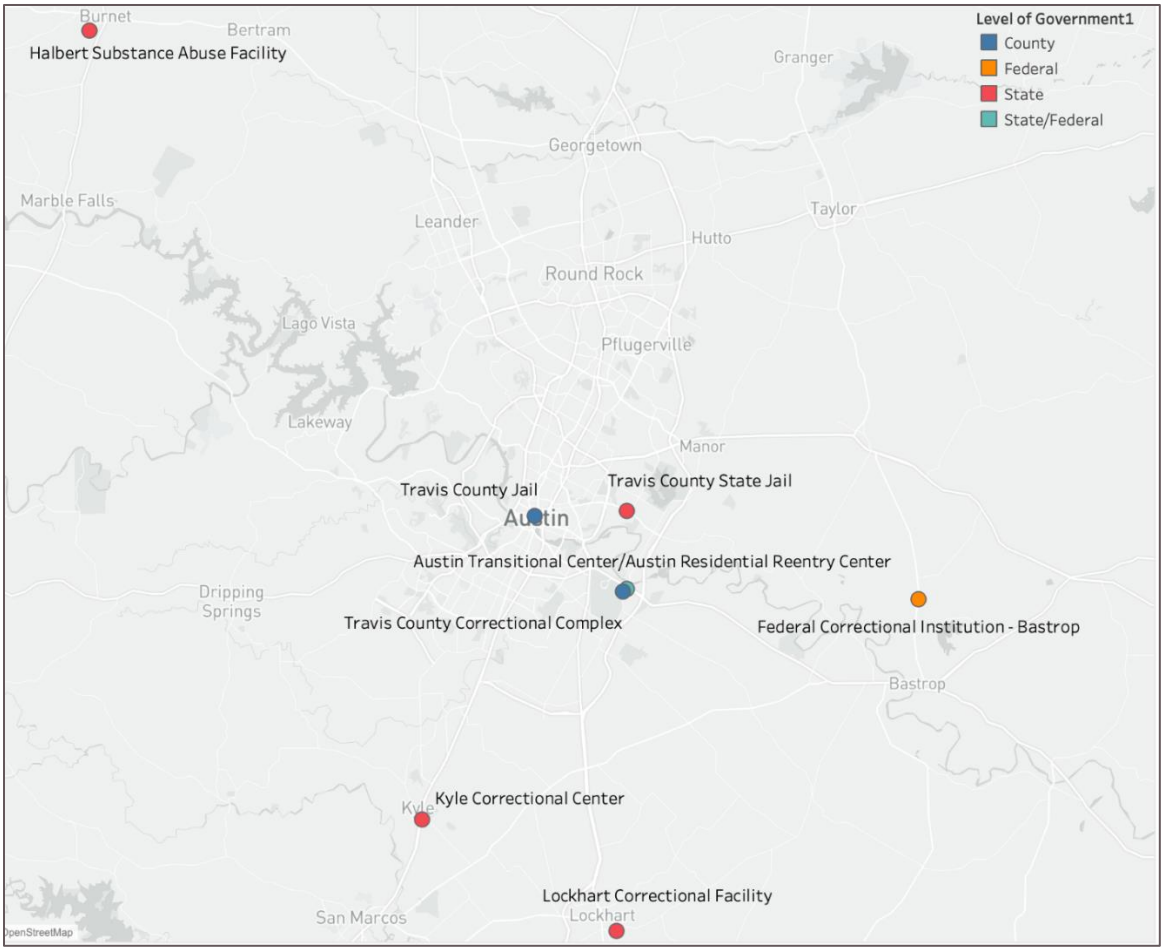


Figure 1: Correctional Facilities in the Austin MSA Region

Reentry Population in Travis County

How many persons are released from jail or prison to Austin/Travis County annually?[5]

- 2,642 individuals were released due to completion of sentence from state prison, state jail or SAFP to Travis County in 2019 (this has remained relatively steady for the four preceding years; the 4-year average was 2,652);[6,7]
- 958 individuals who were convicted in Travis County were released from state prison or SAFP to parole supervision in 2018;[8,9]
- 9,877 individuals were on community supervision (adult probation) in Travis County in 2018;[10] and
- 37,767 releases from the Travis County Jail/TCCC occurred in 2019, 25,333 of which appear to be unique (unduplicated) individuals.[11]
- It appears that less than fifty individuals are released from the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) system to Travis County annually;[12] thus we can estimate that a very small proportion of the persons released to Austin/Travis County post-incarceration are exiting the federal system.

In any given year, we can estimate that nearly 40,000 individuals, or about 3% of the total population of Travis County, experience reentry from prison or jail, and/or are on some form of community supervision.

Where do individuals exiting incarceration live when they are released?

We can surmise that the geographic trends of individuals returning from jail or prison are likely to follow similar trends to other vulnerable populations in the Austin metro area; namely, the suburbanization of poverty to eastern Travis County, noted in the 2014 Roundtable Reentry Report Card:[13]

> *Rather than locating on the east side of Austin, parolees are increasingly residing in communities on the east side of Travis County outside of Austin. Just as the Austin metropolitan area has seen an extreme suburbanization of poverty over the past decade, we are potentially seeing that the geographic distribution of parole is following the same course. To the extent that returning prisoners are moving outside of the City of Austin, there are potentially major ramifications. For instance, with social services concentrated in central Austin, the migration of parolees to communities further away from the center of town*

[5] Note that the data in this section was received at different times from a number of sources cited below and represents an estimate of the annual reentry population based on information received over different time periods.
[6] TDCJ Release Data 2019 (public information request 2020).
[7] TDCJ Release Data 2016-18 (public information request 2019).
[8] TDCJ Statistical Report: Fiscal Year 2018, p.51.
[9] There are likely many more individuals released on parole who were convicted in other counties and released to Travis County, but this figure was not available at the time this report was published.
[10] TDCJ Release Data 2016-18 (public information request 2019).
[11] Travis County Sheriff's Office Response to Public Information Request, February 24th, 2020.
[12]
[13] 2014 Roundtable Reentry Report Card. Online at www.reentryroundtable.org/roundtable-publications/

means that it is more challenging for parolees to access services. Moreover, the burden of reintegrating former prisoners shifts relatively more to Travis County.

The following map shows that a concentration of persons released from the Travis State Jail in 2019 indicated the 78617 (SE Travis County/Del Valle) zip code as the zip code in which they would reside upon release.

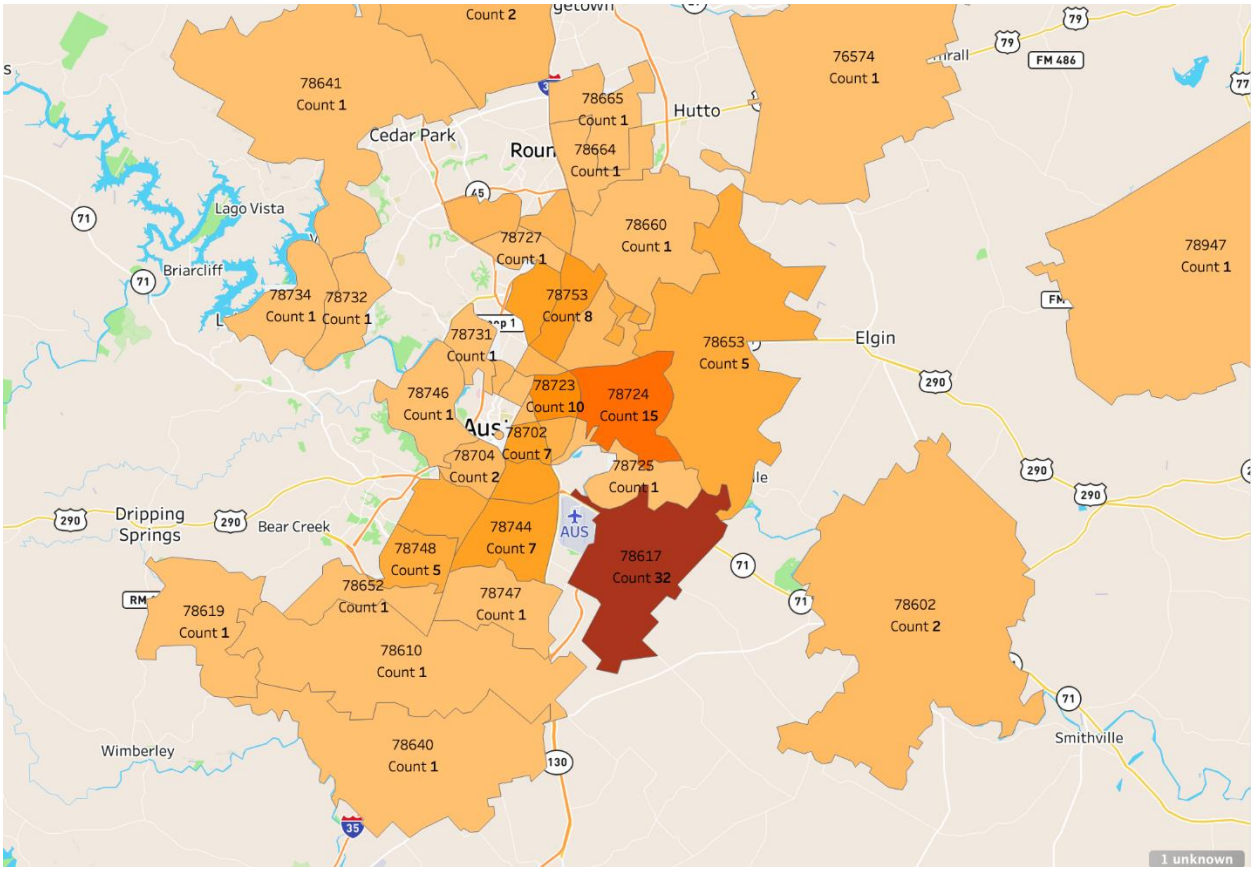


Figure 2: Geographic Distribution of Releases from Travis State Jail (2019)

Are black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) overrepresented in the number of persons returning to Austin/Travis County from incarceration?

Yes. Approximately two-thirds of the individuals released from the TDCJ system to Travis County identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian or some other race, while those groups make up approximately 51% of the Travis County population.[14]

[14] Travis County ACS Snapshot 2018. Online at www.traviscountytx.gov/images/health_human_services/Docs/2018-acs-snapshot.pdf.

Who experiences reentry in Austin/Travis County?

Based on 2018 data, we know the following demographic characteristics about the reentry population in Travis County:[15]

Releases from State Prison to Travis County:

- 78% male
- Approximately two-thirds are people of color
- Average age is late 30s
- About 30% are incarcerated for a violent offense
- Approximately 20% have High School diploma or GED

Releases from State Jail to Travis County:

- 83% male
- Approximately two-thirds are people of color
- Range in age from late 30s to early 40s
- Approximately 90% incarcerated for a Property or Drug Offense
- Approximately 7% of released individuals have their High School diploma or GED

Community Supervision (Adult Probation):

- Approximately 75% male
- Approximately two-thirds are people of color
- Age range in mid 30s
- Approximately 53% released with a misdemeanor
- Approximately 73% of released individuals either have their High School diploma or GED, or have some college or higher

[15] TDCJ Release Data 2016-18 (public information request 2019).

Understanding Typical Reentry Journeys

Understanding the journeys of persons in reentry both during and after incarceration is critical to providing the appropriate resources and services to support their success and prevent a return to incarceration. Journey maps are a visual mechanism to better understand and depict the experiences that persons exiting jail or prison go through. The three journey maps below are based on focus groups conducted with reentering individuals in Travis County and their families. While there is no singular experience that defines an individual's journey from jail or prison, the journey maps are composite stories of a number of commonly cited thoughts, feelings and experiences during the reentry process, and hold a number of considerations for future planning and practices.

Figure 3: "Sally" Journey Map photo (source: Shutterstock)

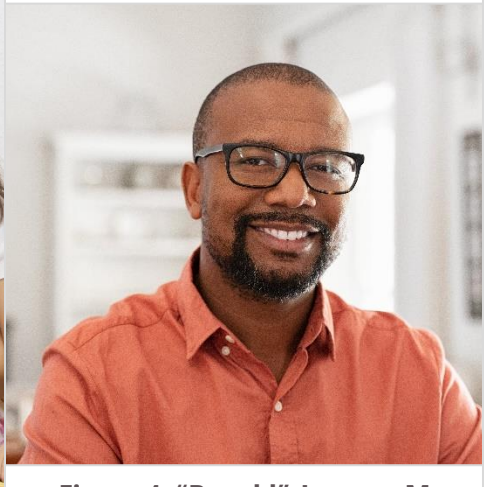
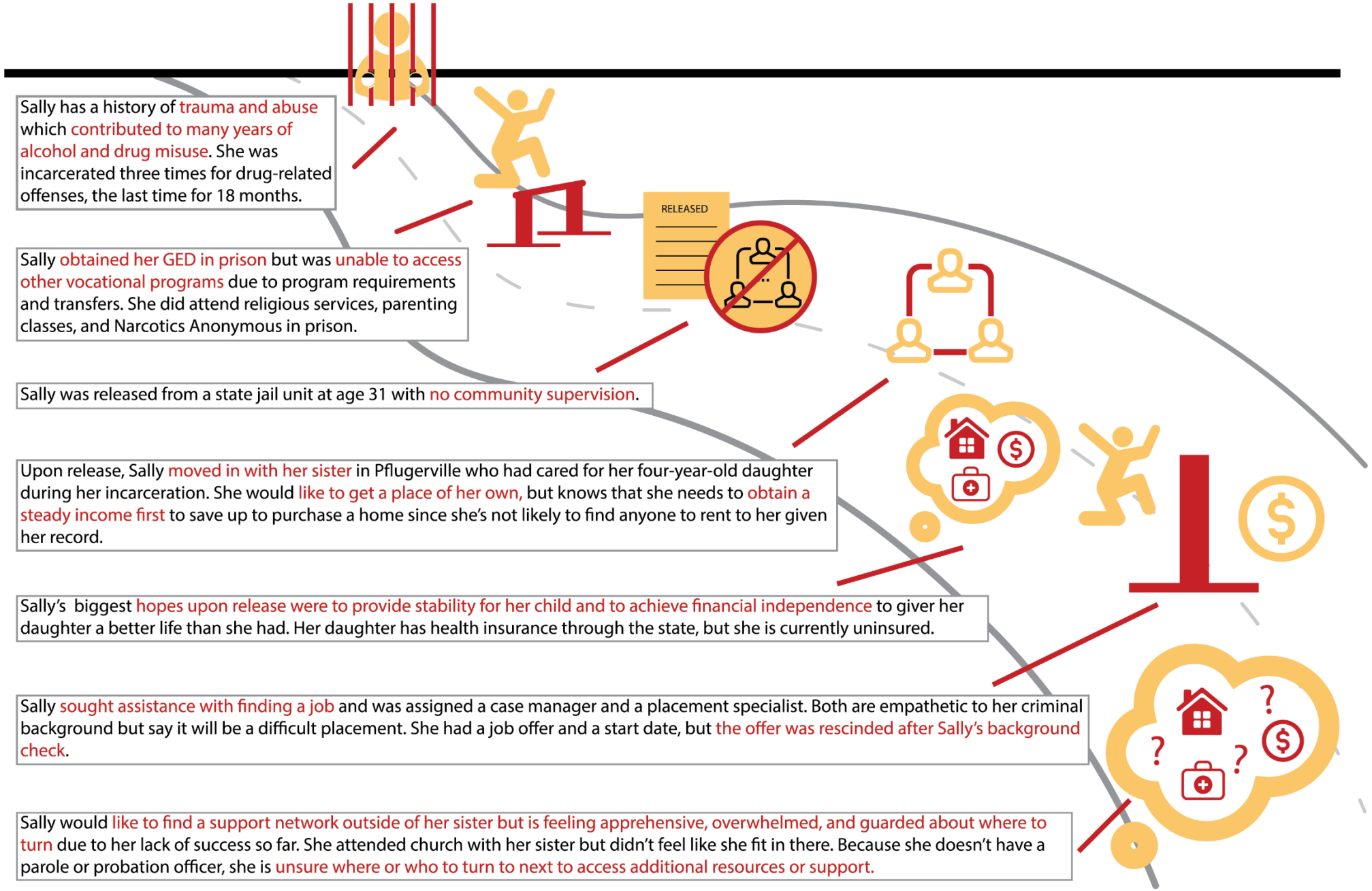


Figure 4: "Ronald" Journey Map photo (source: Shutterstock)

Figure 5: "Marcos" Journey Map photo (source: Shutterstock)

Our research showed that several dynamic risk factors - namely health, employment, housing, skill development, mentorship, social networks, and organization type - significantly affect the success of reentry. ***Successful Reentry: A Community-Level Analysis,*** **Harvard University Institute of Politics Criminal Justice Policy Group (December 2019)**

Sally's Journey: Facing the Collateral Consequences of Substance Abuse



Sally has a history of trauma and abuse which contributed to many years of alcohol and drug misuse. She was incarcerated three times for drug-related offenses, the last time for 18 months.

Sally obtained her GED in prison but was unable to access other vocational programs due to program requirements and transfers. She did attend religious services, parenting classes, and Narcotics Anonymous in prison.

Sally was released from a state jail unit at age 31 with no community supervision.

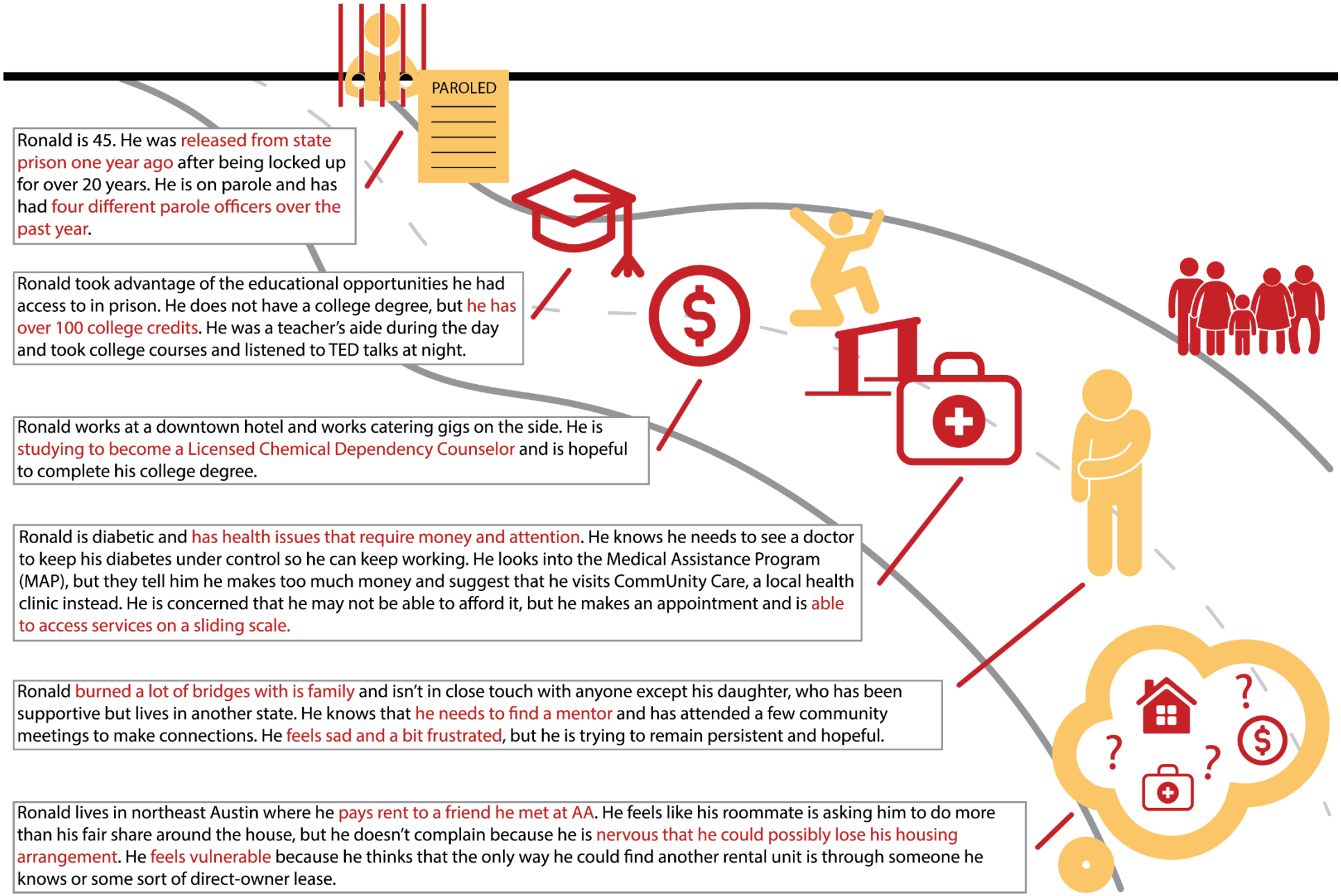
Upon release, Sally moved in with her sister in Pflugerville who had cared for her four-year-old daughter during her incarceration. She would like to get a place of her own, but knows that she needs to obtain a steady income first to save up to purchase a home since she's not likely to find anyone to rent to her given her record.

Sally's biggest hopes upon release were to provide stability for her child and to achieve financial independence to giver her daughter a better life than she had. Her daughter has health insurance through the state, but she is currently uninsured.

Sally sought assistance with finding a job and was assigned a case manager and a placement specialist. Both are empathetic to her criminal background but say it will be a difficult placement. She had a job offer and a start date, but the offer was rescinded after Sally's background check.

Sally would like to find a support network outside of her sister but is feeling apprehensive, overwhelmed, and guarded about where to turn due to her lack of success so far. She attended church with her sister but didn't feel like she fit in there. Because she doesn't have a parole or probation officer, she is unsure where or who to turn to next to access additional resources or support.

Ronald's Journey: Seeking Wellness & Purpose Without a Support Network



Ronald is 45. He was released from state prison one year ago after being locked up for over 20 years. He is on parole and has had four different parole officers over the past year.

Ronald took advantage of the educational opportunities he had access to in prison. He does not have a college degree, but he has over 100 college credits. He was a teacher's aide during the day and took college courses and listened to TED talks at night.

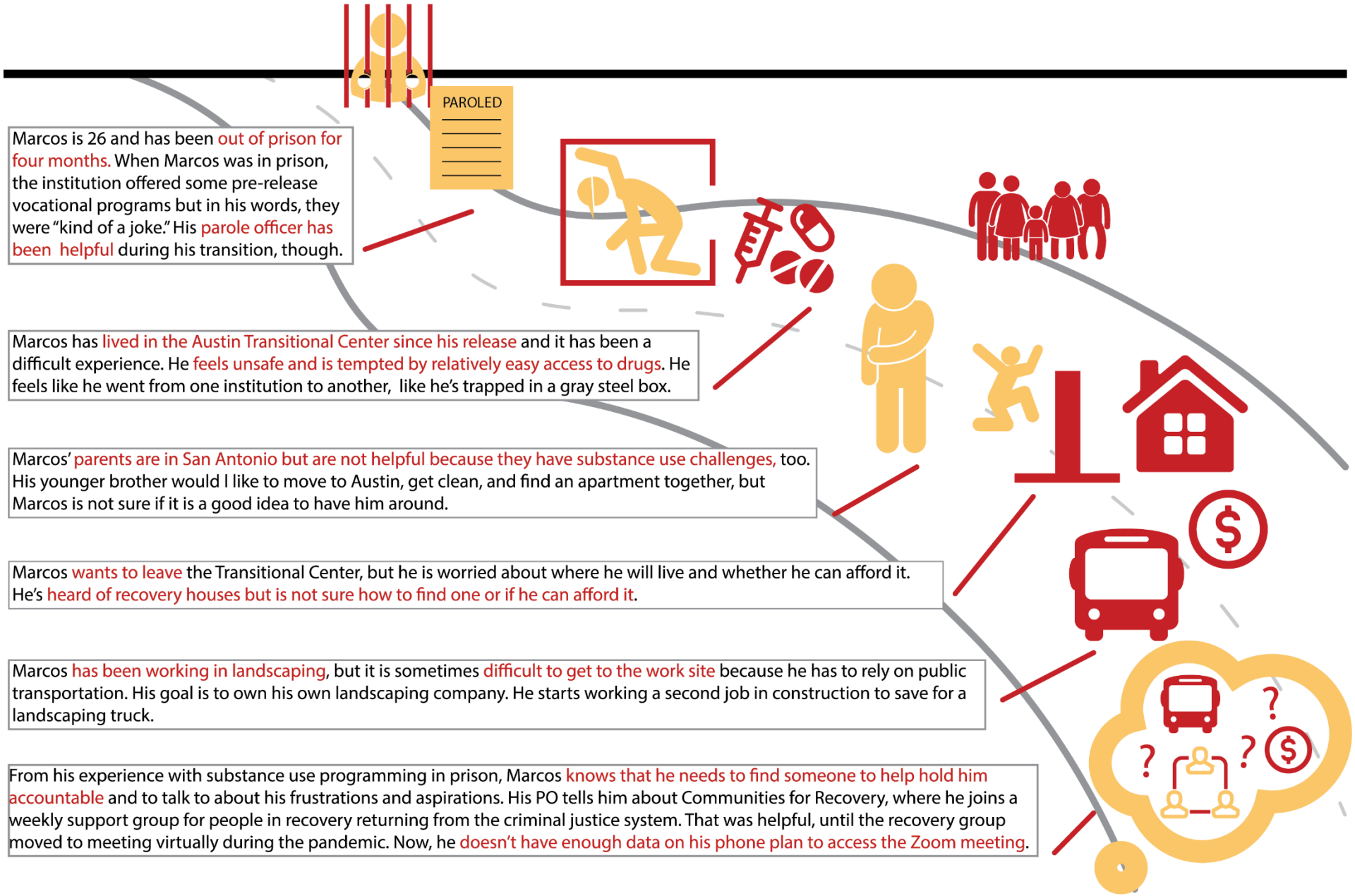
Ronald works at a downtown hotel and works catering gigs on the side. He is studying to become a Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor and is hopeful to complete his college degree.

Ronald is diabetic and has health issues that require money and attention. He knows he needs to see a doctor to keep his diabetes under control so he can keep working. He looks into the Medical Assistance Program (MAP), but they tell him he makes too much money and suggest that he visits CommUnity Care, a local health clinic instead. He is concerned that he may not be able to afford it, but he makes an appointment and is able to access services on a sliding scale.

Ronald burned a lot of bridges with is family and isn't in close touch with anyone except his daughter, who has been supportive but lives in another state. He knows that he needs to find a mentor and has attended a few community meetings to make connections. He feels sad and a bit frustrated, but he is trying to remain persistent and hopeful.

Ronald lives in northeast Austin where he pays rent to a friend he met at AA. He feels like his roommate is asking him to do more than his fair share around the house, but he doesn't complain because he is nervous that he could possibly lose his housing arrangement. He feels vulnerable because he thinks that the only way he could find another rental unit is through someone he knows or some sort of direct-owner lease.

Marcos' Journey: Big Challenges & Big Dreams



Marcos is 26 and has been out of prison for four months. When Marcos was in prison, the institution offered some pre-release vocational programs but in his words, they were "kind of a joke." His parole officer has been helpful during his transition, though.

Marcos has lived in the Austin Transitional Center since his release and it has been a difficult experience. He feels unsafe and is tempted by relatively easy access to drugs. He feels like he went from one institution to another, like he's trapped in a gray steel box.

Marcos' parents are in San Antonio but are not helpful because they have substance use challenges, too. His younger brother would l like to move to Austin, get clean, and find an apartment together, but Marcos is not sure if it is a good idea to have him around.

Marcos wants to leave the Transitional Center, but he is worried about where he will live and whether he can afford it. He's heard of recovery houses but is not sure how to find one or if he can afford it.

Marcos has been working in landscaping, but it is sometimes difficult to get to the work site because he has to rely on public transportation. His goal is to own his own landscaping company. He starts working a second job in construction to save for a landscaping truck.

From his experience with substance use programming in prison, Marcos knows that he needs to find someone to help hold him accountable and to talk to about his frustrations and aspirations. His PO tells him about Communities for Recovery, where he joins a weekly support group for people in recovery returning from the criminal justice system. That was helpful, until the recovery group moved to meeting virtually during the pandemic. Now, he doesn't have enough data on his phone plan to access the Zoom meeting.

Considerations for Future Planning

It is important to recognize that some things about the current reentry system are working, and that even against overwhelming challenges, many individuals channel their strengths into a positive path forward. Here are some quotes from focus group participants about the assets they utilized during their reentry process:

I just refused to be denied when I knew that people had resources.

[Recovery self-help programs] allowed me to see that I can overcome the obstacles that I am going through.

Educational opportunities and things of that nature are inconsistent within the system… You have to look for opportunities to do things for yourself.

[Self-advocated for a transfer to a unit with a CDL program] I bothered them until they finally sent me there.

I am proud of the jobs I had in TDC. I thought I did really well with them.

[My parole officer] is possibly one of the reasons I am talking to you today in the free world. He was encouraging. He was just a nice person. That made a world of difference.

This process also uncovered several considerations for system improvements, based on a review of institutional practices, interviews with institutional stakeholders as well as the voices of those who have been incarcerated and their allies:

- Some individuals have access to resources and planning, but it is inconsistent.
- Reentry services are typically not tailored to meet individual needs.
- Reentry planning typically does not happen until the final weeks of incarceration.
- Some individuals appear to be discharged on particularly fragile footing, lacking immediate basic needs, including shelter, transportation, medicine and/or access to personal identification documents.
- Families are not often engaged in the reentry process.
- Accessing resources is overwhelming, both for reentering individuals and their reentry counselors.
- Behavioral health challenges threaten successful reentry.
- Barriers to housing, employment and health care are real and must be addressed.

Recommendations & Project Plan

> *Most criminal justice practitioners, agencies, and community- and faith-based providers do not have the resources to provide every adult leaving prison or jail with the services they need to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. The process of reentry is hindered by a lack of treatment services available to offenders before release from incarceration. Additionally, for those programs offered in the corrections setting, most are not evaluated, thus making it difficult to observe "what works."*
> **National Institute of Justice**

Safe Streets & Second Chances is a national organization created with the goal of expanding evidence-driven reentry services and policy reforms across the United States.[16] The principles they have created for their work offer a helpful framework for reentry programming and planning:[17]

- *In-prison reentry programming must be crafted with incentives to enhance participation and guided by the **best available evidence.***
- *Enhance existing risk and needs assessment tools and classification processes to **ensure everyone is given access to recidivism reduction programs** that meet their needs.*
- *Expand access and funding for voluntary prison work programs to allow for the acquisition of **real-world job skills and prepare for successful reentry and sustainable employment** upon release.*
- *Expand access and funding for **continuing education and skilled-trades programming** at all levels.*
- *Evaluate and facilitate **public and private partnerships that improve pre- and post-release employment opportunities**.*
- *Prioritize funding and support for programs that demonstrate **evidence-driven practices** proven by randomized controlled trial, to help reduce recidivism.*

> *A holistic approach to offender reentry—one that emphasizes the challenges faced by offenders as they return, and the impact of their return on families, victims, and communities—is critical to addressing public safety.*
> **The National Institute of Justice**

[16] Safe Streets & Second Chances. Online at safestreetsandsecondchances.com.
[17] Ibid.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DURING INCARCERATION

- Support early, person-centered, proactive release planning while the individual is incarcerated.
- Ensure that the correctional system workforce is trained in evidence-based and promising practices that facilitate recovery from trauma.
- Develop positive working relationships between service providers and criminal justice institutions including parole to create pre-release connections for a warm handoff.
- Include family and outside supports in reentry and parole planning.

ADDRESSING IMMEDIATE REENTRY NEEDS

- Support the provision of basic needs including food, shelter, medication, identification/legal documents, and physical and behavioral health care during immediate transition from incarceration.
- Develop a centralized local reentry resource repository that is updated on an ongoing basis.
- Design and invest in a community reentry center to provide navigation support and individualized referrals to local services and resources according to a client's risks and needs.

ADDRESSING LONG-TERM REENTRY NEEDS

- Invest in housing, physical and behavioral healthcare, and vocational training for returning individuals.
- Improve coordination between criminal justice entities and the local Homeless Continuum of Care to develop a coordinated and community-based housing plan for people leaving state prison.
- Help those returning develop a pro-social worldview through peer support and positive community relationships.
- Address collateral consequences of incarceration through policies to eliminate barriers in housing, employment, education, and access to services.
- Explore technology solutions to promote effective reentry (e.g. mobile apps and remote check-in capability).
- Bolster the regional reentry workforce by investing in more case managers, peer support specialists, workforce/education specialists focused specifically on addressing the needs of persons experiencing reentry from jail or prison.

PROJECT PLAN

Activity	Supports which recommendation	Who	Timeline
Conduct reentry services landscape to assess current reentry service provision.	Develop a centralized local reentry resource repository that is updated on an ongoing basis	Roundtable, Aunt Bertha	Oct 2020 - June 2021
Highlight gaps in reentry service landscape for community investment.	Develop a centralized local reentry resource repository that is updated on an ongoing basis	Roundtable, Aunt Bertha	Oct 2020 - June 2021
Develop web/mobile application to support improved resource navigation, both for reentering individuals and persons supporting their reentry.	Develop a centralized local reentry resource repository that is updated on an ongoing basis; Explore technology solutions to promote effective reentry (e.g. mobile apps and remote check-in capability).	Roundtable, Aunt Bertha	July - September 2021
Create an enterprise application geared at reentry workforce professionals to improve reentry resource navigation and case management	Develop a centralized local reentry resource repository that is updated on an ongoing basis; Explore technology solutions to promote effective reentry (e.g. mobile apps and remote check-in capability).	Aunt Bertha	TBD
In partnership with Community Coalition for Health, pursue Robert Wood Johnson Community Solutions for Health Equity grant to support improved physical and behavioral outcomes for the Travis County reentry population	Invest in housing, physical and behavioral healthcare, and vocational training for returning individuals; Bolster the regional reentry workforce by investing in more case managers, peer support specialists, workforce/education specialists focused specifically on addressing the needs of persons experiencing reentry from jail or prison.	Roundtable, Community Coalition for Health	Fall 2020

Activity	Supports which recommendation	Who	Timeline
Strengthen institutional partner engagement in Roundtable.	Support early, person-centered, proactive release planning while the individual is incarcerated; Ensure that the correctional system workforce is trained in evidence-based and promising practices that facilitate recovery from trauma; Develop positive working relationships between service providers and criminal justice institutions including parole in order to create pre-release connections for a warm handoff; Include family and outside supports in reentry and parole planning; Support the provision of basic needs including food, shelter, medication, identification/legal documents, and physical and behavioral health care during immediate transition from incarceration.	Roundtable, institutional partners	FY21
Create communications plan to inform and engage policymakers.	All recommendations	Roundtable	FY21
Continue to advocate for increased investment and continued policies to address collateral consequences of incarceration.	Design and invest in a community reentry center to provide navigation support and individualized referrals to local services and resources according to a client's risks and needs; Invest in housing, physical and behavioral healthcare, and vocational training for returning individuals; Address collateral consequences of incarceration through policies to eliminate barriers in housing, employment, education, and access to services; Bolster the regional reentry workforce by investing in more case managers, peer support specialists, workforce/education specialists focused specifically on addressing the needs of persons experiencing reentry from jail or prison.	Roundtable, Advocacy partners	ongoing
Conduct a scan of peer city reentry centers (Philadelphia, DC, Baton Rouge)	Design and invest in a community reentry center to provide navigation support and individualized referrals to local services and resources according to a client's risks and needs.	TBD	As resources allow

Activity	Supports which recommendation	Who	Timeline
Convene task force to develop vision for reentry center and to identify potential costs (staffing structure, annual budget, facility requirements), cost savings and key considerations for implementation	Design and invest in a community reentry center to provide navigation support and individualized referrals to local services and resources according to a client's risks and needs.	TBD	As resources allow
Participate in conversations with key stakeholders regarding proposed policy changes to TCDJ transitional housing and reentry housing planning	Improve coordination between criminal justice entities and the local Homeless Continuum of Care to develop a coordinated and community-based housing plan for people leaving state prison.	Roundtable, TCJC, ECHO, TDCJ Reentry	FY21

Appendix 1: Key Themes from Focus Groups with Individuals in Reentry and their Families

Preparing for Release

FORMERLY INCARCERATED

When asked about what their respective institutions did to prepare them for release, participants shared stories of variable vocational and educational opportunities.

> *"Educational opportunities and things of that nature are inconsistent within the system… You have to look for opportunities to do things for yourself."*

There were success stories shared where workshops and classes set individuals up for successful employment; while others shared that their previous education, sentence length, or facility program availability left them with limited (and often low quality) options.

> *"I am proud of the jobs I had in TDC. I thought I did really well with them."*

> *"They always give you an option of things to do but it's hard, it's like trying to fight for a space in there."*

Congruent with well-known risk factors for recidivism, participants expressed that their greatest concerns before and after release had to do with the access and maintenance of **housing**, **employment**, and **sobriety** (the latter of which was recognized as requisite to successfully maintain the former). Several participants shared that their respective releasing institutions did "nothing" to prepare them to overcome challenges to accessing these basic needs.

> *"They did not do too much of anything to help get us ready for the free world at all. I don't think so. It was pretty much learn as you go.*

FAMILY MEMBERS

Family members described the excitement they experienced in anticipation of their loved one's release; however, this was tempered by their common concerns of how to link their loved ones to **appropriate resources**, how to support their loved ones who had **experienced trauma in prison**, and concern about how their loved ones' criminal histories would create **barriers to a "second chance"** at housing and employment.

> *"When they come out, we don't know anything."*

Families felt ill-prepared by the system in terms of what to expect when their loved ones were released. They were often met with the responsibility to fill in the gaps of housing, transportation, and employment with no available resources to support this effort. Yet, they were left out of any and all reentry planning.

After Release: Collateral Consequences & Experiences on Parole, Probation

FORMERLY INCARCERATED

When asked about their experiences on parole, participants most often cited a **supportive parole officer** as being instrumental to their success. Not all participants had this experience but those that did, recognized this as an essential factor in their success. Participants shared that finding **safe, supportive transitional housing** and **employment** were some of the greatest barriers to meeting the conditions of their supervision – challenges that have been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19.

> *"It's a challenge every step of the way."*

Participants shared a common **struggle to locate and access resources** outside of prison. The most commonly cited sources of information were others in sober living housing and parole officers. Others shared local, Austin-based providers that were instrumental to their access to resources: Goodwill, Texas Fair Defense Project, AIDS Services of Austin, Salvation Army, and recovery self-help support groups (i.e., Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous).

> *"How do I bounce back from this?"*

EMPLOYMENT

Several participants revealed that they encountered **significant barriers** to locating employment opportunities because of their criminal history. Those that were able to find work quickly, did so through the support of Goodwill or their support system. There are significantly more barriers to accessing employment during the COVD-19 pandemic.

> *"They paint you a pretty picture in prison and they tell you that Austin is a second chance for housing and a second chance for jobs and education and all that but it's really not."*

HOUSING

Barriers to housing because of criminal history were common experiences among most participants that did not have family or other support persons to live with after release. Participants who were connected with alternative sober living options, such as Oxford Houses, shared that these living situations were vital to their success; while others told stories of inadequate, unsafe transitional housing that made it challenging to stay sober and find employment.

> *"Housing is such an incredible issue."*

HEALTHCARE

Several participants also revealed that accessing healthcare was **particularly challenging** after release. Many shared that, while difficult to initiate, MAP healthcare assistance and other supplemental insurance programs (i.e., Ryan White Assistance; VA health insurance) have been paramount to their continued healthcare needs. Experiences with local, community-based providers were variable wherein some were able to establish efficient care teams and others were not able to get the support they needed to take care of their chronic medical issues.

Coping with Trauma: Previous, During, and After Incarceration

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Many participants described their experiences in prison as traumas. Trauma was also cited as a source of feeling isolated upon leaving prison. The lack of adequate mental health resources before and after prison were recognized as essential to helping individuals cope with mental health issues that place them at higher risk for recidivism.

> *"I'm not sure that trauma ever goes away. It certainly evolves and changes and you are better equipped to deal with it but I'm not sure that trauma ever disappears… we just learn to cope with it as it comes."*

> *"I went to prison without even fully acknowledging or knowing the trauma that I had survived. When I got to prison, there was a whole lot of trauma-fying things that I didn't even recognize. At the time it was just day to day life."*

> *"There is trauma associated with the experience. It was a rough go. I try not to think about it too much. There are moments where I have issues communicating with people because of what I experienced in prison. There is a stigma, but I try not to let it bother me."*

Access to Mental Health Care: During and After Incarceration

The need for improved mental health care was a resounding theme throughout the focus groups with both family members and formerly incarcerated individuals.

> *"The mental health aspect of it I think is the biggest thing"*

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Participants who had mental health needs in prison were provided medications while in prison, but rarely appropriate therapeutic services. Those that were referred to treatment programs in prison found these programs to be ineffective.

"All of the reasons that we send people to prison are not solved or made better by people going to prison. If you are a drug addict and go to prison it doesn't solve your addiction issues or offer you treatment most of the time."

FAMILY MEMBERS

Family members also expressed concern for their loved ones' mental health – both the underlying issues that lead to their incarceration and the trauma they experienced during their incarceration.

"We have to go back to the root of the problem. How did they end up there? What is the underlying problem?... How can we address it, what can we do?...

Collateral Consequences for Family: Preparing & After Release of Loved Ones

Families of individuals currently and formerly incarcerated are often overlooked in broader discussions of system reform.

"When they come out, we don't know anything."

While many participants shared a common narrative of families wary to trust their returning loved ones, many also cited that these same family and friends were still supportive and instrumental to their success – providing housing and basic needs.

FAMILY MEMBERS

Families bear the brunt of system resource and service gaps, which is often more than a financial but an emotional and mental burden as well. Families expressed concern about how to support the mental health needs of their loved ones, particularly as it relates to the underlying conditions that led them to prison and the experiences of being incarcerated. In addition, families are often faced with finding ways to provide them housing, transportation, and financial support in the face of significant barriers to their loved ones becoming self-sufficient.

"It's like having another child that you have to handhold through everything and be that support. It's pretty much like having another child in the home. They have no license, no job, and no cell phone. They have to get everything again… Not only are they like children in the sense of the support you have to provide for them initially, but they are also like second class citizens because of the limitations on what they can do."

A Vision for System Reform

FORMERLY INCARCERATED

When asked about what changes they would like to see made to the current system, the most common answers were: giving people the resources they need to **address basic needs and underlying issues**; **improved mental health services** both during and after prison; and provision of **peer mentors and**

counselors with lived experience who can help reduce the isolation, social stigma, and hopelessness of having been incarcerated.

> *"We need more strong and solid projects surrounded by social workers and attorneys to make every step in the process able and capable"*

FAMILY MEMBERS

Supporting the Formerly Incarcerated

Family members would like to see their loved ones connected to **sufficient resources to meet basic needs**, such as housing, employment placement, and mental health resources and support. Several family members mentioned the necessity of wrap around services including life skills classes and coaching. Others recognize the need for broader system reform that includes diversion of nonviolent offenders, treatment alternatives to prison, and strategic initiatives to reduce racial and ethnic disproportionalities that disadvantage Black and Brown individuals.

> *"Just to know where to go to find the resources that are needed, but also what resources are out there for families that have a formerly incarcerated man or woman coming out or that are already out and need some type of assistance. I would love to know."*

Supporting the Families

Families would like to be **engaged in the reentry planning process** to better plan for and meet their loved ones' needs. Additionally, some members expressed a desire for support as primary custodians of their loved ones' basic needs, recognizing the financial burden that families incur when supporting their loved one in avoiding recidivism.

> *"What did I do wrong? It isolates you because people look down on you. It traumatizes the family, it really does. And there was no support… On a community basis, I wish there were more resources for the families."*

> *"It was galling how expensive it was …Having that relationship with your inmate as they are incarcerated is a weird financial cost for families when they (the families) are not the ones in jail.* ***I don't understand why families are being penalized in the system****."*

Appendix 2: Key Themes from Criminal Justice System Stakeholder Interviews

Organizational Strengths & Assets

- Developing partnerships with criminal courts, other government agencies, and community-based organizations to augment available services;
- Employing a workforce with a holistic approach to supporting inmates; employees who respect and care about inmates as people
- Collaboration between different functional areas of the workforce (e.g. probation officers and counselors)
- Use of technology to support reentry – utilizing mobile apps that can be used for encouragement, reminders for individuals in reentry

Challenges & Roadblocks to Successful Reentry

- **Workforce/Staffing**. Staffing a reentry workforce instead of having to rely on volunteers, and better use of technology to ease staff stress level and caseload size which will allow them to spend more time with clients.
- **System Issues** including:
    - Uncertainty of not knowing how long a person is going to be in the facility (little communication between the client and the court system) impacts their ability to engage.
    - Differentiation between the shorter-term sentences and the longer-term sentences in the preparation for reentry.
    - It can also be a challenge when a judge orders a quick release because they have a short notice to arrange support in the community.
    - Redesigning the system so shorter-term facilities would look more like an educational facility than prisons.
- **Community perception** about the workforce – they are not law enforcement officers but helping people stay out of jail.
- Need for **improved service coordination/navigation** to connect clients to services/resources and develop a referral network for the entire county and/or regional
- Lack of **available and affordable housing**
- Lack of **family support.**

Suggestions to prevent or reduce recidivism

- Investment in prevention activities and earlier engagement of inmates
- Investment in alternatives to imprisonment
- Innovation - technology for job interviews, mentorships

- Addressing housing barriers for returning individual
- Addressing transportation challenges (e.g. offering a public transit pass good for 3 months)
- Creating community liaison positions for people reentering the community
- A centrally located community reentry center - not a "one-stop shop," but a fully staffed place with ongoing support where people can get support from social workers, reentry coaches and peer support
- Evidence-based trainings
- Training and professional development in trauma-informed approaches

SUGGESTIONS ON HOW THE ROUNDTABLE COULD BETTER SUPPORT CRIMINAL JUSTICE INSTITUTIONAL GOALS

- Strengthen relationships and engage more criminal justice system representatives, especially Parole
- Facilitate partnerships between criminal justice system and community-based organizations
- Help educate the community and local decisionmakers about the local, state and federal reentry process/system
- Address those exiting prison with unstable housing situations through the use of homeless outreach coordinators
- Support investment in more reentry coaches
- Addressing innovation in new practices, especially with current virtual dockets

Appendix 3: Methodology/Data Collection Overview

Focus Groups with Individuals in Reentry and their Families

The Roundtable sponsored a participatory process that began in January 2020 and ended in August 2020. Carl Hunter, the RAP Representative on the Roundtable Executive Committee, designed and facilitated the project which consistently engaged more than 20 people (not including survey or focus group participants) in a participatory planning process over the eight-month period. The group defined the purpose of their work together as follows: *The purpose of the RAP Focus Group and Community Forum Initiative is to identify the needs of justice-involved individuals by elevating the voices of those directly impacted.*

The problem/opportunity statement articulated by the group was as follows: *The Reentry Advocacy Project (RAP) is organizing virtual focus groups of formerly incarcerated persons and their family members. The results of these focus groups will be used to shape programs and policies to help people better thrive and succeed when reentering society after incarceration. We seek to facilitate focus groups of formerly incarcerated persons and their family members to understand the barriers they face reentering society. The goal of these focus groups is to better direct future policy and programmatic changes to alleviate these barriers to reentry.*

The group also developed a set of values to operate by throughout the co-design process:

- Honesty to self and team
- Respect for team and yourself
- Trust
- Accountability

The group conducted the work in three general phases:

- Phase 1: Preliminary Design and Pilot Focus Group
- Phase 2: Outreach & Pre-Focus Group Survey
- Phase 3: Focus Group Implementation

Initially, all of the engagement with persons with criminal backgrounds and their families/allies was planned to be done in person. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the group shifted to digital/virtual engagement. In addition, the group was initially planning to host a community forum to share the results of the focus groups which was also postponed due to the pandemic and will be incorporated with the Roundtable's planned activities for FY20-21.

Phase 1: Preliminary Design and Focus Group Pilot

The initial phase of the project was conducted in consultation with four students from Professor Charlee Garden's Consulting for Social Impact course at the University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs. The students engaged with the planning group to develop a set of questions and to recruit participants to participate in a virtual pilot focus group. The pilot focus group took place on April 2, 2020. It was 90 minutes and engaged 5 participants with lived experience in the justice system (4 male, 1 female). It was

facilitated by graduate students from the LBJ School of Public Affairs and occurred online using the platform Zoom.

Phase 2: Pre-Focus Group Survey & Outreach

The second phase of the project was to develop a pre-focus group questionnaire in order to screen participants to participate in focus groups, and to conduct outreach to potential focus group participants. The survey asked basic information about the location and length of incarceration, community supervision status, housing status, health insurance status, employment status, basic demographic information, and interest in participating in a virtual focus group. The survey also served as a mechanism to obtain consent to record the participant during the focus group (since all sessions were planned to be recorded, any participants not wishing to be recorded were not invited to participate in a focus group session). 54 individuals identifying as formerly incarcerated and 25 individuals identifying as a family member of a formerly incarcerated person completed the survey.

Phase 3: Focus Group Implementation

Five virtual focus groups were conducted via Zoom in July 2020. The focus groups included a total of 27 formerly incarcerated individuals (10 women, 27 men) and 9 family members (siblings, spouses, and parents). The schedule was as follows:

- Tuesday, July 14th (evening) – formerly incarcerated women (5 participants)
- Wednesday, July 15th (evening) – family members (9 participants)
- Thursday, July 16th (evening) – formerly incarcerated mixed gender (8 participants)
- Saturday, July 18th (morning) - formerly incarcerated mixed gender (8 participants)
- Saturday, July 18th (afternoon) - formerly incarcerated mixed gender (6 participants)

After the focus groups were completed, each session was transcribed using the recordings.

INSTITUTIONAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

In addition, the Roundtable sought to inform the recommendations in this report by engaging the perspectives of persons working within the criminal justice system, including administrators, planners and those providing direct reentry support. Interviews were conducted in July 2020 with six criminal justice stakeholder entities: Management & Training Corporation (private prison corporation); TDCJ Reentry; TDCJ Parole; TCCC/TCSO; Travis County Adult Probation; and Core Civic (Austin Residential Reentry Center). In addition, a criminal justice stakeholder meeting was held on September 3rd, 2020 to share the results of the interviews with criminal justice stakeholders and to collect additional feedback on the interest of regional criminal justice partners in supporting successful reentry.