



**A SAFER RETURN:
A COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT REENTRY INITIATIVE
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Recognizing the critical role of community in the reentry process, the Safer Foundation (Safer) is working with a private foundation to design a demonstration project in two or three high-reentry impact communities hardest hit by the influx of returning prisoners: East Garfield Park and Humboldt Park in Chicago and Aurora, the second largest city in Illinois. The project Safer is proposing—Safer Return: A Community Empowerment Reentry Initiative—will focus on strengthening and building the capacity of our target communities to facilitate a smooth journey from prison to community. The initiative is designed to address both the transition needs of returning prisoners and their communities, thereby protecting communities from further crime and disruption and minimizing the public dollars spent re-incarcerating individuals. Acknowledging the importance that environment plays when an individual leaves prison and returns home, we plan to work diligently in each of the communities to create a seamless process of coordination among community-based and faith-based service providers as well as the public providers (parole, probation, police, and human services). Faith-based and community-based organizations will be engaged in preparing for welcoming people back to communities, providing mentors and acting as liaisons to returning prisoners in following through with their case management plans and adjusting back to life in their neighborhood. Community-based organizations will address a range of transitional needs demonstrated by the former prisoners; and law enforcement agencies will assist in identifying likely participants for the program and work in partnership with the efforts of the initiative to ensure successful reintegration. This plan also includes productive community involvement from returning prisoners themselves.

The window of opportunity to implement an innovative demonstration project that is centered around the role of communities in the prisoner reentry process has never been greater anywhere in the United States than it is in Illinois and particularly Chicago. For a number of reasons, Illinois, and especially Chicago are well positioned to lead a demonstration initiative, which will provide the rest of the country with a model of “reentry done right”. First, the national and local political view of reentry has changed dramatically in the last decade, discussions about the prisoner reentry process that were unheard of a decade ago are finally happening at the state and local levels of government. We have come from years where the process of prisoner reentry was completely missing from the public agenda to where the Governor of Illinois and the Mayor of Chicago have both identified reentry as one of their top policy concerns and have assigned staff to focus on this issue and test innovative solutions. Second, Chicago is a city that is organized around a strong community-oriented culture. State processes work through city agencies which ultimately work through communities. Third, valuable research resources have already been concentrated on understanding prisoner reentry in Illinois, which has yielded a critical understanding of Chicago’s reentry landscape. Fourth, Safer Foundation, based in Chicago and operating for over 30 years is the nation’s largest and



oldest provider of employment services to persons with criminal records, serving more than 8,000 persons a year. Safer is an entity that understands and is dedicated to serving the population of individuals leaving prison. Additionally, Safer has a long-standing commitment to develop and test research-based models, focused on both evidence-based and best-practice principles.

Project Description

Based on national models and local experiences, Safer sees reentry in the context of a community and sees that community as a key strength to draw upon in promoting successful reintegration and reducing recidivism. At the very core of this project is an understanding that the reentry process is complex and thus in order to address it, we have to affect the entire environment of the returning individual. In addition, we have to involve the entire population of individuals returning if we are going to empower whole communities. To this end, we will have a tiered risk structure to ensure that the needs of individuals with different offenses, risk levels, assets, and service needs will be appropriately addressed.

At the core of this project design is the concept of effective relationships. In each community Safer will work to facilitate and formalize partnerships between community-based and faith-based partners, local businesses, parole, police, human services, people with criminal records, and workforce development agencies. The project will be focused on engaging entire communities to achieve significant changes in reintegration outcomes for returning prisoners. Safer Return: A Community Empowerment Reentry Initiative will be a community-centered demonstration aimed at reducing crime and recidivism rates, by utilizing community and faith-based organizations to provide mentoring, transitional housing, transportation assistance, and other wraparound services; parole, police, and corrections to help ensure project participation, monitoring, and community safety; workforce agencies and employers to leverage economic opportunities; people with criminal records as active participants in the solutions; and Safer to broker, manage, integrate, and support the formalization and working dynamics of these relationships.

Project Structure & Major Service Strategies

Safer will work with each community to assess the local landscape, determining what systems of service coordination need to be modified and what areas should be expanded upon to assist returning prisoners in establishing long-term and meaningful relationships with their community. Safer will work with each of the target communities to implement the following strategies:

Welcome Home Panels. The role of the community in the reentry process will begin while returning community members are still incarcerated. Panels comprised of citizens from the community to which the individual is returning will go into prisons 60-90 days pre-release to plan/prepare for the reentry process and individual's goals and needs.



Comprehensive Social Network Case Management. A critical component of Safer's strategy is comprehensive case management including the returnee, the family, and important peer associations.

Community-Based Needs Assessment and Referrals for Additional Wraparound Services. In conjunction with the case management plan will be a strategy to provide formerly incarcerated individuals with a full range of appropriate services and supports. Sites will establish mechanisms where each program participant receives assessment and referral to needed services, including substance abuse treatment, mental health services, parenting programming, transportation services, etc.

Law Enforcement Partnerships. Safer's initiative will build on Safer's current partnership with police, corrections, and parole agencies.

Mentoring with Caring, Community-Based Adults. Safer will sub-grant funds to community-based and faith-based organizations and will work with them to develop and implement a strategy that both recruits and retains 10-15 mentors per organization to be matched with returnees, a strategy that's been very successful in Safer's Ready4Work project.

Neighborhood Improvement Projects. Returning prisoners will be engaged in neighborhood improvement projects such as beautification initiatives or "public works" projects as identified by the City of Chicago or Aurora.

Employment Readiness, Placement and Post-Placement Support. Local community-based organizations will provide each program participant with work-readiness, soft skills and, where relevant, hard skills training; employment mentoring; and post-placement support.