New Beginnings: Researcher Serves as Valuator for Program Supporting Former Incarcerated Persons

By Tom McLaughlin
As Brandi Blessett explains, the future success of formerly incarcerated persons is often a matter of “social capital.”

For these “returning citizens,” says the Rutgers University–Camden researcher, social-support networks – especially informal ties – are critically important in helping them transition to life as productive members of society.

“It’s a tough task for someone to do on their own, especially those who are entering a community that is worse off than when they went to jail, or they’re unfamiliar with the community in which they are reintegrating,” says Blessett, an assistant professor of public policy and administration at Rutgers–Camden. “The challenges are even greater for those who don’t secure employment, as statistics show that 66 percent of these returning citizens will go back to jail within two to three years if they haven’t found a job.”

Helping to close what she calls a “revolving door,” Blessett serves as a program valuator for Renew Camden, a program that helps former incarcerated persons reintegrate back into society, based at the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey in Camden. Begun in late June, the initiative, modeled after similar programs in Philadelphia and Newark, aims to create a comprehensive social-support structure for returning citizens.

Former incarcerated persons, identified as candidates by their parole officers, agree to participate in the program for a year in exchange for reducing their probation for the same amount of time.

Brandi Blessett

“It’s a great incentive,” says Blessett, a resident of Jersey City. “They get sufficient networking skills, establish productive relationships with the team members, and receive a variety of social-support services. They can get these things taken care of so that they can move forward.”

The program centers on a series of biweekly meetings, which bring together the participants and members of the Camden Renew team in the federal courtroom. Upon arriving, group members take their accustomed seats – a judge sits on the bench, parole officers and district attorneys sit at the table with the participants, and remaining team members sit in the jury box. Over the course of two hours, the participants – currently consisting of eight returning citizens – are given the opportunity to come to the microphone and share what they have been able to accomplish in the previous two weeks, as well as to address any issues, difficulties, or concerns that they might have.
“The discussions are very informal,” says Blessett. “The judge will ask them how a job interview went or where they could use more help.”

The experience allows the participants to “renown” the courtroom, she adds, noting that they typically regard the venue as an intimidating space.

“They don’t have the fondest memories of the last time they were in court, particularly their interactions with judges,” says Blessett. “They are able to use this space to create a more positive experience.”

According to the Rutgers–Camden researcher, participants have repeatedly expressed interest in improving a variety of life skills, such as maintaining a budget, writing a resumé, utilizing library resources, and preparing for a job interview.

In addition to identifying these challenges, she says, the evaluators are working to assess an array of available social services so that the program can be tailored to meet each participant’s needs. For instance, she notes, Rutgers Law School faculty are currently providing pro-bono legal work for participants on a variety of matters, such as helping them to secure identification cards and driver’s licenses, or catch up on child-support payments.

She sees even more opportunities abounding for Rutgers–Camden students and faculty to fill a niche.

“There are many individuals on this campus who could help participants acquire the life skills that they need,” says Blessett, adding, “Only by creating a comprehensive social-support structure can participants get the assistance that they require, rather than us deciding what is best for them.”

Over the course of the next two years, the evaluators will assess the success of participants and, ultimately, the program’s effectiveness and where improvements can be made.

“Did the participants get a job? Did they get any more infractions? Were they incarcerated again?” asks Blessett. “These are all questions that we need to ask.”

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