

March 22, 2007

**Compassion in Action Roundtable on Prisoner Reentry
White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives**

**Keynote Address: Fred Davie
President, Public/Private Ventures**

As we meet here today, in this beautiful and historic setting, it can be hard to remember that only a few miles from here, at 1901 D Street S.E., there are hundreds of people sitting in cells in the DC city jail, some serving sentences, some awaiting trial or transfer. They are positioned to join the *2.2 million Americans* who are now behind bars—a group that is disproportionately male (although the number of women in prison is rising), disproportionately minority, disproportionately undereducated and—perhaps most striking—disproportionately from this nation’s poorest neighborhoods.

Some 650,000 adult prisoners are released every year. Nearly two thirds are rearrested, and half are back behind bars by the third year of their release. In a time of yawning budget deficits, American tax payers spend \$60 billion a year on prisons and jails. And this means that hundreds of thousands of lives are going to waste every year.

But there is hope. Across the country, community and faith-based organizations, local businesses, criminal justice agencies, and public officials are working together to solve the prisoner reentry crisis. I’m here today to discuss findings from Ready4Work, a three-year national demonstration that concluded last September. Ready4Work programs were implemented in 11 adult sites, and later in 7 juvenile sites. Findings from the initiative are preliminary but extremely promising, giving hope for the millions of Americans churning in and out of our nation’s jails and prisons.

Over the past four years, Public/Private Ventures has worked closely with diverse players—the Department of Labor, practitioners and scholars in prisoner reentry, and program staff of prominent philanthropies—to design and test a set of interventions in the lives of returning prisoners. We wanted to see whether a partnership of government, business, faith-based and community organizations providing jobs, mentoring and wraparound supportive services to returning prisoners might reduce the likelihood of their reincarceration and increase their chances for successful reintegration into their families and communities.

I must admit I did not really understand America’s prisoner problem until I was invited, as a Program Officer at the Ford Foundation, behind the walls of Sing Sing Prison in New York, where I met a man named Robert Sanchez. That was 1999, and Robert was 30 years old. At 19, he’d been arrested in a raid on a crack house, where he’d been looking to make quick money. Given a sentence of 15 years to life, he had served eleven years when I met him. He asked me to stay in touch, and I decided to learn more about the plight of men and women returning from prison.

So I read the bleak statistics. And two years later when Robert was let out as part of a work release program, I couldn’t help but fear that he would be headed back inside.

But then Robert introduced me to Julio Medina. Julio had been incarcerated too, a former and major entrepreneur in illegal drugs in East Harlem. When he was released after 12 years in prison, Julio committed himself to becoming a different kind of entrepreneur. He created Exodus Transitional Community, a program in East Harlem, where he had plied his drug trade, and dedicated himself to breaking the cycle of incarceration. The staff that Julio built at Exodus knows firsthand what it's like to go to jail. They're former prisoners who've walked many miles in their clients' shoes.

Now I have to say, as one who was very new to this world, I had more than a healthy degree of skepticism. But I was moved by Julio and Robert's passion and the potential of a program like Exodus to stem the awful churning in and out of prisons. I promised Robert and Julio, as I moved from the Ford Foundation to Public/Private Ventures, that we would find a way to apply the lessons they had learned to other cities and states. We would find a way to support programs that blend hardscrabble experience with the hope for a better life to produce real change in the lives of ex-prisoners.

And that really is what the Ready4Work program is all about.

It took a while to get Ready4Work up and running. At P/PV, our mission is to identify and develop promising approaches to tough social problems, and then to *rigorously test* these approaches to determine if they are effective. In carrying out our mission, we work with foundations, the public and business sectors, and nonprofit organizations. And so it was with Ready4Work. We collaborated with staff at the Department of Labor's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, led by Brent Orrell, and we drew on the ideas of scholars and policymakers. But our touchstone was always the experience of people who had been in the trenches—organizations like Operation New Hope in Jacksonville, FL, and East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership here in Washington, DC, people like Rev. Sam Atchison, the chaplain at New Jersey State prison in Trenton, and Yolanda McFaddon, director of the Second Chance Program run by the Mayor's office in Memphis, TN. And a great many others, some of whom are here today.

They were people of faith and secular specialists. They were Democrats, and Republicans, conservatives, liberals and moderates.

A variety of stakeholders invested their resources in Ready4Work: the Departments of Labor and Justice, the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. President Bush raised the issue to a new level when he invited Julio Medina to the state of the union address in January 2004 and asked Congress to support reentry programs.

All of those involved agreed that the two pillars of the Ready4Work program had to be hope for a better life for ex-prisoners, and a real-world understanding of what it takes to get there. So we started with what experts have known for a long time: ex-prisoners who do manage to find steady jobs and connect with their communities have a much better chance of staying out of jail. Thus, we made jobs and connections an essential part of Ready4Work.

But how to foster these attachments? In developing the program, we applied lessons P/PV had learned through testing interventions for other high-risk populations. And we drew on lessons learned in Harlem from Julio Medina, in Trenton from Sam Atchison, in Anacostia from Rev. Donald Isaac of the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership and in Florida from Kevin Gay of Operation New Hope, and from so many others who had spent years honing strategies to help ex-prisoners.

The lessons had to do with the intense work that it takes to prepare ex-prisoners for the labor market, the necessity of treating employers as true partners in that work, the importance of providing wraparound services to meet ex-prisoners' many needs and the centrality of supportive relationships—which are crucial for anyone trying to right his or her life.

Ready4Work launched in 2003 in 11 cities around the country. In each place, lead agencies built partnerships among local faith, justice, business and social service organizations. The lead agencies included faith-based organizations, secular nonprofits, a for-profit, and a mayor's office. Every program provided employment-readiness training, job placement and intensive case management, including referrals for housing, health care, drug treatment and other programs. And to address the need for supportive relationships, the sites worked hard to develop mentoring programs for ex-prisoners—which was relatively uncharted territory.

The local sites had tough targets—those who are most likely to go back to prison: 18- to 34-year-old, nonviolent, non-sexual-felony offenders. Across the country, the 4,500 ex-prisoners who participated in Ready4Work were predominately black men; they had an average age of 26. Half had been arrested five or more times, and a majority had spent more than two years in prison.

Despite the challenges the ex-prisoners brought to the table, the sites demonstrated remarkable progress in each of the major program areas.

First, on Employment:

With employment rates for ex-prisoners at dismally low levels, the Ready4Work sites knew their participants faced serious barriers. They provided intensive job-readiness training and ongoing support, through the job search process and beyond. They also nurtured relationships with employers, identifying job opportunities and following up after participants were placed—to help insure a successful match. Their efforts paid off. Almost 60 percent of Ready4Work participants got a job, and nearly two thirds of them remained employed for at least three consecutive months. A third managed to remain employed for six consecutive months. These accomplishments are impressive, given the many barriers these ex-prisoners face in returning to the labor market.

The sites also developed strong Mentoring programs:

Mentors helped by providing two kinds of support that everyone needs, support that most middle class Americans take for granted, and support that ex-prisoners often lack.

First, they provided emotional support. Reentry can be a time filled with so much fear, anger, isolation, confusion and sadness, it can send people spiraling back down—unless someone is there for them.

Mentors also provided returnees with practical support to meet the dozens of everyday challenges that years in prison can make so daunting: finding a place to live, getting a driver's license, figuring out how to commute to work. One young man participating in group mentoring had this to say about the experience, *“They keep my mind on the right track and keep me thinking positive. If I'm feeling depressed, they would give you words of encouragement to keep you from doing stuff that you really don't want to do.”*

Local sites recruited a committed set of volunteer mentors. Mentors ranged in age from 18 to 80, most were male, and more than 85 percent of mentors were African American. That fact bears repeating: 85 percent of the Ready4Work mentors were African American. Traditional mentoring programs have often found it difficult to recruit a diverse body of volunteers. This effective involvement of African American mentors is a tribute to the pastors of the many African American congregations who got involved in Ready4Work and from their pulpits called parishioners into action.

Parishioners who answered the call and became mentors went through extensive training and preparation. Mentors and their sponsoring organizations were well versed in prohibitions against proselytizing and the requirement to offer services to all, irrespective of religion, in keeping with government regulations prohibiting discrimination in service delivery. Our research shows faith as a motivator but rarely a means for mentoring men and women returning from prison.

Finally, in the area of Supportive Services:

Case management, provided by each of the lead organizations, was in many ways the glue that held the other program components together. Case managers provided participants with a range of direct and referral services to address critical needs, whether it was navigating child support and custody issues, helping ex-prisoners obtain government identification necessary for work or connecting them to drug rehabilitation or other health services. Case managers also worked to support the employment and mentoring components of the program, helping ensure that they ran smoothly.

So, three years into the Ready4Work demonstration, what have we learned?

First, former prisoners will work and business will employ them. There are 800 small and mid-size business leaders across the country who put these men and women to work, who took a risk to give them a job. Many of those businesses were concerned about the appearance of hiring ex-prisoners. What would customers think? But, in the end, they reported that Ready4Work participants were not that much different from the labor pool they typically employ. The added value of a program like Ready4Work is that it brings a community of support with the employee and the imprimatur of a local faith or community organization to vouch for and support the new hire. Small and mid-size businesses were the backbone to the employment success of this program.

The second lesson, a hugely important lesson, is the power of mentoring.

Because about half of Ready4Work participants received mentoring, we were able to compare the experiences and outcomes of participants who were mentored with those who were not mentored. You'll read the details in the materials we've released today, but several findings stand out and bear highlighting here.

Ready4Work participants who met with a mentor:

- Remained in the program longer;
- Were twice as likely to obtain a job; and
- Were more likely to stay employed than participants who did not meet with a mentor.

And this is not surprising: One of the key findings from P/PV's work over the course of 30 years, studying various kinds of social programs, is that a strong relationship with a supportive, responsible adult improves the life chances of people in high-risk circumstances.

The third lesson from Ready4Work is that there is hope to break the devastating recidivism cycle. Now, it's important to remember that our research on Ready4Work is early-stage research. We don't have a random-assignment evaluation, which could definitively show whether or not the program *caused* the positive outcomes that we observed. But, even given the preliminary nature of the research, the findings on recidivism are extremely encouraging.

Based on our latest analysis, which includes incarceration records from all 11 adult Ready4Work sites, we found recidivism rates that are at least one third below the national average. Just 2.5 percent of Ready4Work participants returned to state prison within six months of their release, compared with 5 percent nationally; and only 6.9 percent did so within one year, compared with 10.4 percent nationally. When we looked specifically at African American nonviolent felons, ages 18-34, who represent the bulk of Ready4Work participants, just 2.9 percent return to state prison within six months, compared to 5.6 percent nationally. Only 7.6 percent return to state prison within one year, compared to 13.3 percent nationally.

Keep in mind that behind each of those statistics is a human being who turned his life around, who is on the path from despair to hope, and who is helping his community instead of dragging it down—people like Greg Negroni, a young man who is profiled in *Hard Road Home*, a new documentary about the Ready4Work site in East Harlem, Julio Medina's Exodus Transitional Community. Greg Negoroni was first incarcerated as a juvenile, then returned for a two-year stint in an adult facility. At 21, he came to Julio Medina's program, a veteran of the prison system in New York state. He was in some ways typical: a flawed kid who had made some serious mistakes, but who showed intelligence, humor, warmth and tremendous potential.

Last week, Greg got on a plane for the first time and joined Julio and the award-winning director, Macky Alston, for the film's premier in Austin, Texas. He stood in front of a nearly full 1200-seat theater and talked about his experiences in the Ready4Work program. "It helped me a lot," he said. "I'm still getting services from Exodus so I can improve my skills and get a better job."

Greg is working, and looking ahead to new opportunities. A year after he came to Ready4Work, Greg is a new kind of role model for his younger sister and two younger brothers.

These changes, these lives lifted upward are exciting. It is also exciting that Ready4Work is part of an expanding mosaic of programs that is helping ex-prisoners. Yet clearly we have a long way to go. The fact is that the odds are still stacked heavily against those in the DC jail not far from here and the 650,000 ex-prisoners who return to society every year.

Ready4Work about cost about \$4,500 per participant, per year—a whole lot less than the \$25,000 to \$40,000 it costs to keep someone in a federal prison for a year.

Ready4Work and other programs demonstrate that investing in young ex-prisoners yields huge dividends, for the people trying to put their lives together, for their communities, and for the nation. But that good work could wind up as a footnote to history, and we might never reap those dividends.

All of us—the faith community, secular organizations, nonprofits and businesses, red states, blue states—must work together on job training and placement, social services and mentoring. That's the best way to increase the odds of turning despair into hope and failure into success.