



AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

**Criminal Justice Section**

**State Policy Implementation Project**

## **EFFECTIVE REENTRY PROGRAMS**

Throughout America, state prison systems are bursting at the seams. Overcrowding has become a crucial issue, especially with the current budget crisis. With the high costs of housing prisoners, successful efforts to reduce recidivism will both save money and promote effective reintegration into the community. Effective reentry programs promote community safety and crime reduction by (a) preparing individuals for life after prison, (b) making smarter decisions about who to release, and (c) providing enhanced supervision and services in the community. Well designed reentry programs can create significant savings. For example, New York State pays \$183 a day to house a single prisoner while Brooklyn's reentry services cost roughly \$54 a day, have produced significant decreases in recidivism, and have demonstrated that a successful reentry programs can both save money and contribute to community safety and productivity.

In support of reentry programs, the American Bar Association urges states to prepare prisoners for release back into the community by implementing in-prison programs that include substance abuse treatment, educational and job training, and mental health counseling. ABA policy further advocates that states continue to assist prisoners who have already been released with transitional housing, job placement, and substance abuse avoidance.

**Implementation of comprehensive reentry programs focused on community safety and effective reintegration will lead to reduced recidivism, lower prison population rates, and taxpayer savings.**

**Reentry programs lead to reduced recidivism rates.** A [study](#) published in 2012 by the SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division found that the San Diego Prisoner Reentry Program reduced recidivism by 17% among non-violent felony offenders. The San Diego Prisoner Reentry Program, which was authorized by California's Senate Bill 618, operated from 2007 to 2012 when funding was discontinued. In Brooklyn, NY, individuals who did not participate in ComALERT (Brooklyn's reentry program) were twice as likely to be rearrested, reconvicted, and incarcerated one year after release. Even two years after release, ComALERT participants showed a significantly lower rate of recidivism – 29% were rearrested, compared to the 48% of non-participants rearrested. The state of Kansas also reduced recidivism through reentry programs: in 2006, probation and parole violations accounted for 65% of prison admissions. However, implementing reentry programs reduced the number of probation and parole violations by 48% in 2009.

**Reducing the number of former prisoners returning to the system saves taxpayer dollars.** In Michigan, it costs over \$32,000 to house an individual for one year in state prison. In 2010, the Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative (MPRI) led to a reduction rate of 33% fewer returns to prison for parole violations or new crimes – roughly 2,700 fewer individuals than initially anticipated from baseline expectations. Since 2007, the state's prison population has dropped from 51,554 to under 46,000. In response to the decreased prison population, Michigan will be closing three prisons and five prison camps in 2010, at a savings of \$118 million annually; the closings are considered to be a direct result of the success of Michigan's reentry policy.

**Not only does reentry save money, but it encourages effective reintegration, helping individuals become productive members of society.** In a 2010 [report](#), the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice identified the need to obtain and maintain employment as a critical factor to reducing future crime. In Brooklyn, ComALERT participants are nearly four times more likely to be employed than other parolees and have much higher earnings. This employment not only reduces recidivism and contributes to public safety, but also promotes community interaction.

The ABA urges states to implement reentry programs that safely promote reintegration into the community, while also reducing recidivism and saving taxpayer dollars.



# Kings County, New York and Michigan: Creating Safer Communities and Saving Money

## Reentry in the United States

Recidivism has become an over-arching problem throughout the United States. Without proper guidance, support, and preparation, an individual's return to substance abuse and crime is significantly more likely. A study in 2004 revealed that within three years of leaving prison, over two-thirds of the half a million people released each year will be re-arrested for a new offense, almost one-half will be re-convicted, and about one-quarter will be re-sentenced to time in prison. The expenses associated with these disappointing numbers is no less bleak: in 2006, the U.S. spent over \$65 billion on incarceration, and the average annual operating cost per state inmate is around \$26,000 per year. As prison populations continue to grow, in large part due to recidivism, states have begun to look to alternative programs that promote and enhance former inmates' chances for successful reentry into the community.

## Successful Programs

As reentry programs gain favor among states, two programs are at the forefront: ComALERT in Brooklyn, New York and the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative (MPRI) in the State of Michigan. Both ComALERT and the MPRI recognize the importance of community involvement in ensuring a former inmate's success. Rehabilitation does not automatically end upon release from prison. Often, inmates need assistance with drug treatment, housing, and employment; along with various other counseling and treatment. Through the use of various partnerships, community outreach, and/or in-prison services, ComALERT and the MPRI have proven to reduce recidivism, lower prison populations, increase community safety, and save significant taxpayer dollars.

## Brooklyn ComALERT

### *Saving Money with Successful Results*

Brooklyn's ComALERT program has saved significant money. In 2010, it cost Brooklyn over \$6,000 to process a single re-arrest. With significantly fewer arrests, Brooklyn saved almost \$450,000 on re-arrest costs alone. And this does not reflect the money saved on re-incarceration, which costs over \$53,000 per inmate, per year. Since 2004, the program boasts over \$2 million in re-arrest savings, over \$8 million in re-incarceration savings, and has increased tax revenue by more than \$600,000. Compared to the costs of incarceration (\$183 per day, per inmate), ComALERT's programs cost at most \$44 a day if the cost includes wages for the Doe Fund's transitional employment.

In addition to saving money, since implementing the programs current structure in 2004, ComALERT has serviced over 1,000 parolees. Over half of the ComALERT participants graduate from the program. Of those who do not, the program has still proven to be beneficial in reducing recidivism. Graduates have a low recidivism rate, along with a high employment rate. From July 2004 to December 2006, ComALERT graduates were substantially less likely to be re-arrested, re-convicted or re-incarcerated than parolees who did not participate.

### Recidivism Outcome Percentages of ComALERT Graduates and Non-participants

Status	6 months**		1 year**		2 years**	
	ComALERT	Other*	ComALERT	Other*	ComALERT	Other*
Re-Arrest	4	16	11	28	29	48
Re-Incarceration (new crime)	3	8	6	18	19	34
Re-Incarceration (parole violation)	1	6	7	14	16	24
Re-Incarceration (total)	1	6	7	26	19	30

\*Other refers to parolees who did not participate at all in Brooklyn's ComALERT program.

\*\* Time elapsed since release from prison

### *History*

Prior to the creation of ComALERT, the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office was familiar with the importance of rehabilitation efforts to reform offenders. The Office launched the Drug Treatment Alternative-to-Prison (DTAP) program in 1990. The program recognized that substance abuse was often a significant factor in whether a person committed a drug-related crime: if DTAP could treat an offenders' drug addiction in a community setting, along with providing vocational training, an offender was less likely to reoffend in the future. Seeking to apply the success of the DTAP program on a wider scale, Charles J. Hynes, the District Attorney in Brooklyn, began to explore other ways for the office to assist former offenders and promote effective reentry into mainstream society. Subsequently in 1999, the DA's Office launched ComALERT in three Brooklyn precincts, initially inviting potential participants to meetings discussing several services available from community organizations. Interested participants indicated which services they were most in need of – such as housing, drug treatment, job training, and education, ComALERT then referred them to several service agencies throughout Kings County.

Over time, ComALERT partnered with large organizations such as the Doe Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides transitional housing and employment; the Counseling Service of the Eastern District of New York (CSEDNY), which provides out-patient substance abuse treatment; and HealthFirst, an organization that offers assistance with Medicaid and benefits enrollment.

### *Current Program*

The current structure of Brooklyn's ComALERT program was established in 2004 and serves former inmates paroled to Kings County. In order to be eligible, clients must (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) need substance abuse treatment, (c) not be a sex offender or arsonist, and (d) not suffer from serious and persistent mental illness. ComALERT's eligibility requirements reflect the program's focus on substance abuse treatment and employment assistance, as well as its non-intensive, outpatient treatment. The program lasts three to six months, and clients attend one individual counseling session and one or two group sessions per week. The sessions relate to substance abuse treatment, anger management, and relapse prevention. Several on-site services are also available and include STD workshops, on-site physical assessments, and moderate mental health treatment. To graduate from ComALERT, clients must be drug-free for three consecutive months and be either employed or in school, if physically able.

In addition to participation in ComALERT's substance abuse treatment, one-third of its clients are given the opportunity to participate in the Doe Fund's Ready, Willing and Able Program (RWA). RWA provides parolees with transitional employment and housing, vocational training, 12-step programs, and courses on life skills. RWA participants work full time in manual labor positions, and compensation is partially paid in a weekly stipend while

the rest is deposited into a savings account for the participant. RWA clients are drug tested on a regular basis and the program has a zero-tolerance policy – one positive toxicology report results in discharge. ComALERT also provides service referral. The program has a network of several service providers throughout Brooklyn, and clients are continuously referred to organizations that provide vocational training, life skills courses, housing, and mental and physical health assistance.

## **Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative**

### ***Saving Money with Successful Results***

Since its inception, the MPRI has led to widespread savings in Michigan's budget. Compared to the \$34,000 per year, per inmate that it costs to house an offender in prison, parole supervision costs only \$2,130 per year, per individual. For 2011, the MPRI has a budget of \$56 million, a small fraction of the \$2 billion budget for the Michigan Department of Corrections. As prison costs have fallen, partially due to the MPRI, the state has reinvested almost one third of its savings into the programs that contribute to the MPRI's success. The state also announced in 2010 that it will be closing three prisons and five prison camps, at a savings of \$118 million annually. Over the years, the MPRI has engaged almost 25,000 prisoners in their intensive reentry units and standard MPRI prison in-reach facilities. At the end of 2009, 92% of these individuals had been paroled. The program has proven to be successful: recidivism has dropped and the prison population has decreased by 7,500. For the 22,000 MPRI parolees, the rate of return to prison for new crimes is the lowest it has been since 1995, and the return to prison rate has decreased from one in two to one in three. Not only has return for new crimes decreased, but Michigan's overall parole revocation rate in 2009 – 195 per 1,000 parolees – was the lowest rate since at least 1987, when record keeping began.

### ***History***

A leader in prisoner reentry, the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative (MPRI) is a statewide program that converges three methods of rehabilitation into a comprehensive model for prisoner transition services. The MPRI's realistically understands that 95% of all prisoners eventually return home and its ultimate goal is community safety and reducing crime. The program also clearly defines what it is and what it is not: the program will not completely eliminate crime and is *not* an early release program. It is a "comprehensive strategy that pulls together the state, the community, police, mentors, therapists, and others to give each returning prisoner a game plan for success." In 2002, the prison population in Michigan had increased by nearly 10,000 inmates in six years, and the state was running out of beds. With costs soaring, Michigan's Department of Corrections set out to transform the system and launched the MPRI at eight pilot sites in 2005; it now operates statewide in 18 regions. The program recognizes that community members are important stakeholders in a former inmate's successful return to society. With this understanding, the program draws on support from family and human services organizations, and includes community transition teams that work together to help returning prisoners successfully re-integrate into the community.

### ***Current Program***

The MPRI takes places in three phases: (1) Getting Ready, (2) Going Home, and (3) Staying Home. At all phases an individual is provided with treatment, screening, assessment, and training for returning to society following incarceration. The program also includes the use of Transition Accountability Plans (TAPs) at critical points of an offender's treatment. The plans provide clear guides to prisoners and staff of expectations, terms and conditions, and supervision.

*Phase One – Getting Ready:* Phase one of the MPRI begins as soon as an inmate is imprisoned. Upon intake, a prisoner undergoes risk assessment, vocational and educational aptitude tests, mental health reviews, and an in-depth review of the offender's history and family life. Offenders are then placed into relevant services that will prepare them for life after prison. The TAP at this phase establishes expectations for the prisoner, and moving to the next phase is based on decisions by the Parole and Commutation Board.

*Phase Two – Going Home:* Around two months before an inmate's expected release, treatment shifts to focus on release preparation, and the state convenes a transition planning team to review the prisoner's needs and current progress. When the prisoner's parole date finally arrives, a structure and support network of continuing care have already been put in place to promote success upon release.

*Phase Three – Staying Home:* Once released, community members from law enforcement and community based organizations apply risk and needs assessment instruments to determine appropriate supervision strategies. A supervision officer, who was assigned prior to release, continues to oversee the offender's TAP, and various community services monitor substance abuse and provide physical health services, as well as transitional employment and housing.

### **Conclusion**

With prison populations growing, states are increasingly confronted with the reality that recidivism is draining a significant portion of the corrections budget. The high rates of recidivism throughout the United States prove that new ways of handling inmates both during and after prison are essential to ensure community safety, reduce recidivism, and save money. ComALERT and the MPRI provide examples of how effective treatment and services both during and following incarceration can promote successful reentry into mainstream society. With a focus on treatment and employment, both programs have created invaluable services within their communities – on the local and state level.