

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council for the District of Columbia

INFORMATION SESSION


EVIDENCE BASED REHABILITATIVE MODELS IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Hear From:

Vera Institute, Georgetown Prisons and Justice Initiative, and others!

Learn About:

- Current Programs
- Evidence-Based Models
- Best Practices

 4:30 - 6:00 pm

 September 10, 2025

 MLK Library, 5th Floor
901 G Street, NW

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Website
cjcc.dc.gov

Introduction

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council for the District of Columbia (CJCC) hosted an information session on evidence-based rehabilitative models in correctional facilities. Evidence-based rehabilitative programming refers to structured interventions in the justice system that are proven through research to reduce recidivism, promote safety within correctional environments, and support successful reentry. These programs address root causes of criminal behavior, such as a lack of education and employment skills. Mentorship is a core component, providing individuals with consistent guidance, accountability, and positive role models to support personal growth and decision-making. Similarly, access to postsecondary education expands opportunities for meaningful employment, fosters critical thinking, resilience, and internal locus of control, qualities that promote desistance from criminal behavior. This session explored four rehabilitative programs underway in adult custodial agencies in D.C. and across the country.

Panelists included Matthew Lowen, Associate Director and Belinda Wheeler, Program Manager at Vera Institute-Restoring Promise, Dr. Brandi Reynolds, Psychology Services Branch, Reentry Services Division from the Bureau of Prisons—Life Skills Lab, and Valerie Coates, Prison Scholars Program from Georgetown Prisons and Justice Initiative.

Restoring Promise, Vera Institute

Restoring Promise (RP) is a national initiative that seeks to transform prison cultures and climates by partnering with Departments of Corrections (DOCs) around the country to reimagine prison housing units for young adults. Specifically, RP focuses on young adults 18-25, as young adults in prison have the highest rates of violence and are incarcerated at rates far above their peers. The program started in Connecticut in 2017 but now exists in six states across the country varying in size and population. Most RP programs take place in maximum security prisons.

Partnering with DOCs, RP conducts internal and external research to structure the best program for young adults. A key early step is identifying a specific housing unit where a mentorship program could be located. The plan is to set up the unit for success, which includes considering the furniture, common spaces, and even the color of the walls. Any successful program relies on mentors: incarcerated individuals over the age of 25 with life or long sentences who express interest in guiding youth. Mentors go through a rigorous application and approval process, and along with staff, participate in a 10-week training on restorative justice practices, social and historical contexts of prisons, and conflict resolution approaches. Staff and mentors work together to resolve any issues that exist within the unit. Often, staff, mentors, and incarcerated individuals find common ground as the RP program promotes a collaborative rather than a punitive environment.

Once a unit opens, there are quarterly culture surveys of staff, mentors, and inmates to gauge the progress of the program. The goal is not to measure individual change but to look at changes in culture of the unit. Frequently there is an upward trend in the general attitude on the units around safety and fairness. RP conducted a randomized controlled trial in their South Carolina prison and found that RP units had a 70 percent lower likelihood of violent incidents and 87 percent reduction in use of solitary confinement compared to other units. In one instance, a mentor was in the same unit with an

incarcerated person who harmed his best friend. He used the unit to meet with this person and conducted a restorative justice healing circle where they were able to resolve their conflict and continue to reside in the same prison.

Answering questions about Restoring Promise, Lowen emphasized that to be a mentor and join the unit, you must apply in advance. While the application process varies from state to state, the goal is for the unit to be representative of the overall prison population. It was noted that mentors often have very long sentences and were already engaging in informal mentorship. As a result of their work as mentors and changes in sentencing laws, many mentors are released early, with a few going on to work for the Restoring Promise initiative itself.

One area of concern is what happens when youth “age out” by turning 26. Some move to lower security or are released. Others are trained to become mentors themselves and can then remain in the unit if they would like. Other concerns include an inability to track former participants when they depart (except for those who choose to remain in touch) and a reluctance from some prisons to implement changes related to a mentorship unit. Overall, though, this program has shown immense progress in the states that have adopted it.

Life Skills Lab, Bureau of Prisons

Life Skills Laboratories are hands-on learning settings that resemble a home environment with kitchens, laundry machines, sewing supplies, and more. They provide opportunities for incarcerated individuals in certain BOP facilities with serious mental illness and/or cognitive disabilities whose self-care skills are underdeveloped or may have atrophied in a prison setting to learn and practice self-care that will be necessary for success for reentry.

There are five modules to the Life Skills program: health and hygiene; budget and shopping; manners and self-advocacy; cleaning and clothing care; and cooking. Each module is comprised of experiential opportunities to practice skills, watch video skits about applying the skills in the community, and other activities to target different learning styles. There are varying levels of tracks and multiple languages available. The life skills lab is an evidence-based recidivism reduction program formed after the passage of the First Step Act in which incarcerated individuals can earn reductions in time served by participating. Incarcerated individuals can earn up to 90 hours of credit for their participation. The facilities offer a variety of training and real-world opportunities including gardening, cooking, budgeting, and laundry.

Dr. Brandi Reynolds highlighted that Life Skills Labs are fully funded through Congress. Also, she noted, to be eligible an individual must be housed in the residential mental health program at one of the participating facilities where they can request services. It is important to note that individuals can repeat the program over as many times as needed, which can be helpful for those with lengthy sentences. The First Step Act requires research and assessment of programs, so Life Skills Labs are in the early stages of a post-release study.

Prison Scholars Program, Georgetown Prison and Justice Initiative

The Prison Scholars Program at the D.C. Jail offers classes year-round to individuals currently detained. Prison education courses are taught in person by Georgetown professors. While at first uncredited, the program now allows incarcerated scholars to earn credits through Georgetown University liberal arts courses. Scholars can take their credits from the program and transfer them to Georgetown to continue working towards a Bachelor's degree upon their release. Two staff members of the Georgetown Scholars program are formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in the program.

One of the pillars of the program is to simulate a real classroom experience. To do this, the program offers opportunities for Georgetown students from the main campus to come into the jail to participate in courses along with incarcerated scholars. The program also brings in guest lecturers, including university professors and community advocates, to speak with the scholars. At the end of semester, they hold a graduation ceremony to celebrate student accomplishments.

The time students spend in the program varies often based on the length of their detention. At the D.C. jail, students may spend anywhere from one month to five years incarcerated. As a result, the program staff try to switch up the classes offered each semester so that people who have been there longer can retain a variety of courses throughout their time.

Valerie Coates answered questions about Georgetown's Prison Scholars program. She noted that while the Scholars programs are not Pell funded, there are still efforts made to support students through the reentry process regardless of their education goals. Also, the program helps scholars identify education resources that may best suit them upon release. At the Georgetown Scholars program, they believe that education is liberation, as it allows people to imagine a better future.

Unlocking Potential, Vera Institute

Unlocking Potential is a national initiative that supports colleges and state corrections agencies that offer Pell grant funded educational programs in prison and build reentry pathways to support students when they are released. For the past 15 years, the Vera Institute has worked with over 200 universities to help schools work through the implementation of bringing their classes to prisons.

Postsecondary education in prison is an evidenced-based tool with a proven track record to reduce recidivism; save taxpayer money; maintain facility safety; support racial equity; and improve reentry outcomes. Incarcerated people who participate in postsecondary education programs have 48 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not.

The Vera Institute has supported the Second Chance Pell grant initiative that included over 200 colleges across the country providing education services in 48 states. Between 2016 and 2022 there were approximately 41,000 incarcerated people enrolled through the program who earned around 12,000 credentials. Currently VERA works with BOP and DOCs around the country to grow prison education programs (PEPs), which provide academic support to incarcerated people regardless of sentence length or conviction type.

When asked about the credentialing process for PEPs, Belinda Wheeler stated that universities must apply to a state Department of Corrections or the BOP, get approved by their accreditor, and then apply through the Department of Education (Ed) for final approval. Ed has a list of all 61 PEPs approved across the country. One obstacle for post-secondary education in prisons is the high demand exceeding the supply. For example, in Michigan there is a 7,000-person waitlist to join a program. The hope is that more correctional facilities will make space for educational programming and get innovative with hybrid classes.

At BOP, they currently do not have the technological capacity or financial resources to provide online courses to their population. Also, their rules stipulate that BOP may only work with colleges within 100-150 miles of the facility, which is a problem for facilities that do not have any colleges nearby. Despite federal funding cuts, Unlocking Potential has not seen resource reductions since Pell grants were reinstated for currently incarcerated students. Colleges are working with DOC and Ed to ensure students do not have to incur any expenses despite impending budget changes.

Overall, post-secondary education in correctional facilities has bipartisan support, so there is hope that the expansion of PEPs will continue.

The session ended with a formerly incarcerated person who served as a program analyst on the Young Men Emerging (YME) unit at the DC jail highlighting how he is living proof of the success of mentorship and post-secondary education programs in D.C.