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MENTOR: A Blueprint for Successful Re-entry

The numbers are unsettling.

Approximately 23% of convicted defendants who re-enter society after serving county sentences are arrested within one year. Among those who served sentences of incarceration, that figure jumps to 38%. In fact, nearly 75% of the 42,482 defendants arraigned in Philadelphia County in 2012, had previously been arrested. It's safe to say for Philadelphia, and many other municipalities in the U.S., recidivism is a pressing issue, now more than ever.

And it all comes at a cost. The countless dollars spent by taxpayers on law enforcement. The emotional burden heaped upon victims, as well as otherwise caring family members, of offenders. The perpetuated, criminal environment --one that is, at once, systemic and localized-- many law-abiding Philadelphian's are forced to live in.

Typically, upon sentencing, a defendant is either mandated to serve a period of probation or incarceration. Factors such as severity of offense, criminal record, and victim impact are taken into account. The defendant is sentenced and leaves the courtroom one of two ways: through the main entrance of the courthouse or, a decidedly less desirable route, through a side door leading to holding cells. They exit, often with little more than well-wishes, if that.

"I had hope," explained Common Pleas Judge Lisa M. Rau, who, along with Common Pleas Judge Michael Erdos, first fostered the idea of a mentor-based pilot program, "but no tools to offer."

Now, through a pilot program that is one of the first of its kind nationwide, those tools are finally available.

The Mentors Empowering Now To Overcome Recidivism (MENTOR) pilot program is a layered mentoring plan designed to match returning citizens, nay “participants” (for the purposes of MENTOR), with trained, community volunteers; a diverse group comprised of individuals who will be able to lend their own unique experiences to help improve the lives of people who can certainly use the assistance. The goal, ultimately, is to reduce the recidivism rate in Philadelphia by not only empowering offenders upon their return to the community, but also by empowering and encouraging the community to take greater ownership of rehabilitating offenders.

The second day of proceedings for the MENTOR program took place on June 11th, 2014 at the Stout Center for Criminal Justice in Philadelphia. To a packed courtroom of judges, volunteers, media and participants, Judge Erdos outlined the program; detailing the expectations of the mentors, various non-profit groups and, most importantly, the participants.

Participants entered the program after being approved by both the Defender Association of Philadelphia and District Attorney’s Office. Defendants with current firearm offenses, violent felonies or sex crimes, or a history of such offenses, were automatically disqualified from the program. Important to note is the fact that participation in MENTOR is not required for those who are pre-approved- a subtle, yet important, facet of the program. Court mandated mentoring can be difficult, as it positions the mentor in a role that may be perceived as simply another arm of the Court, akin to a probation officer.

MENTOR aims to utilize volunteers in a way that enables them to offer non-judgmental encouragement in addition to practical support that enables participants to overcome obstacles on the road to greater self-reliance and successful reintegration. Providing assistance to participants who need to follow through with addiction treatment and medical care, or, simply helping to put together a resume or prepare for a job interview can be vital to that end. Mentors, depending on the arena, may be a sounding board one day, while acting as a dependable confidant the next. Participants are to communicate twice weekly with their mentors and the two will meet, at minimum, twice monthly at designated locations around the city.

As Judge Erdos outlined, additional services and support are offered. First, each participant was accepted into the Mayor’s Office Reintegration Services for Ex-Offenders (R.I.S.E.) re-entry program. They will be assessed and offered services such as literacy and vocational training, as needed. Furthermore, Community Legal Services (CLS) will assess each participant and provide legal service intake.

Second, Judge Erdos will hold monthly status hearings for the participant’s in a group setting. Participant progress will be assessed and mentors and participants will have an opportunity to speak with the judge and offer feedback and personal updates.

The third aspect of the program, which will occur during status hearings, will be thematic presentations delivered by specialists who deal with issues that are particularly relevant to many reintegrating offenders. Cognitive behavioral therapy, conflict resolution, and family engagement are a few of the topics that have been identified as practical, educational offerings.

Fourth, a database of care providers will be made available to the mentors and participants to assist in matching participants with the proper agencies to address any needs that RISE and CLS are unable to. In addition to the invaluable knowledge and resources made available to participants, successful completion will result in a meaningful amount of probation, typically one year, being commuted from the participant's sentence. "There will be bumps in the road, but we know you can make it," Judge Erdos assured the five participants entering the program that day.

As of now, MENTOR is operating as an 18 month, pilot program. Over the course of the first six months, approximately 30 offenders will be accepted into the program for a 12 month period of mentoring. With the assistance of numerous non-profit and volunteer based organizations (including: R.I.S.E., CLS, Philadelphia FIGHT, the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, Pennsylvania Prison Society, among others) the pilot is operating at a negligible cost to the First Judicial District of Pennsylvania. Additionally, with no identical contemporary, the program has the opportunity to be a progressive model for re-entry and reduced recidivism.

In her remarks to the participants, Common Pleas President Judge Sheila Woods-Skipper reiterated where the onus of responsibility, ultimately, falls: "I hope you will take advantage of this unique opportunity. It's up to you," she went on, "to take the help and assistance."

Those interested in volunteering as a mentor for the MENTOR program can contact (215)-683-7047 to speak with one of the MENTOR coordinators or, send an email to MENTOR@courts.phila.gov.