

Anchorage Reentry Coalition
Meeting Minutes
8/6/20
Hosted online via Zoom

Representatives in attendance included those from the following organizations/groups: U.S. Probation; Alaska Department of Corrections; Southcentral Foundation; Partners Reentry Center; Alaska Behavioral Health; Department of Labor and Workforce Development; Norris House; North Star Behavioral Health Systems/Chris Kyle Patriots Hospital; Running Free Alaska; McLaughlin Youth Center; Juvenile Probation; Alaska Housing Finance Corporation; Alaska Native Justice Center; Division of Behavioral Health; Alaska Criminal Justice Commission; Office of Rep. Matt Claman; Oak House Residential; Downtown Hope Center; Alaska Public Defender Office; Christian Health Associates; Aging & Disability Resource Center, Anchorage Health Department; Arc of Anchorage.

Estimated Total Attendees: 38

*1. Introduction: Jonathan Pistotnik, Coalition Coordinator, Anchorage Reentry Coalition
(jpistotnik@nwaska.org)*

Mr. Pistotnik welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that the purpose of the meeting was to continue the discussion around the state of reentry in Anchorage and build off of what was discussed in the last meeting. Mr. Pistotnik highlighted some issues and concepts that emerged from the previous meeting, including: currently, there is a heavy reliance on technology to engage in services, and communication is a challenge for some people returning to the community and among service reentry providers; lack of information and accessibility to the institutions is concerning to both service providers, advocates, and family/friends of those who are incarcerated, and very likely those incarcerated; employment opportunities came up as a distinct topic of interest in the last meeting; and it is clear that despite community-wide disruptions, reentry services providers are continuing to engage with reentrants, reentry is continuing despite the pandemic, there is a need for continuing to serve this population and complacency is not an option for those of us engaged in reentry.

*2. Laura Brooks, Deputy Director, Health & Rehabilitation Services, Alaska Department of Corrections
(laura.brooks@alaska.gov)*

Ms. Brooks began by acknowledging that there is a fine line between social distancing and social isolation as it pertains to inmates inside correctional institutions, and that there have been efforts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 lockdown procedures; however, there are impediments and infrastructure limitations that are barriers that DOC are working to address (e.g. group meetings, technology access). Ms. Brooks is available to discuss this further.

Ms. Brooks proceeded to discuss the topic of COVID-19 testing inside the institutions. Ms. Brooks explained that in the Lower 48, there were many instances of COVID-19 hotspots that emerged early on in the pandemic in congregate settings (jails, nursing homes) and that the biggest risk to individuals living in those settings are people that come in from outside those settings. It was explained that AK DOC was quick to restrict outside access and began screening employees early during the pandemic. On July 1, DOC began testing inmates at booking; this became available once there were adequate testing resources and capacity to conduct universal testing at remand. It was stated that DOC conducts about 33,000 bookings annually. It was also stated that all inmates are screened when they enter the door,

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and during the intake process individuals are offered COVID-19 tests before being moved into a quarantine mod for 14 days, and subsequently a general population mod after that. Ms. Brooks reiterated that quarantine is not punitive in nature, and that individuals are still afforded routine privileges.

It was stated that to-date, there have been 1,100 COVID-19 tests at intake, 17 COVID-19 positive cases discovered at intake, and no institutional spread of COVID-19 has been identified. Ms. Brooks explained that individuals exhibiting symptoms are tested; inmates and staff have been educated on COVID-19 symptoms. DOC has been working with the State Office of Epidemiology to conduct contact tracing for any inmates or staff that test positive, which may lead to additional testing inside the institutions as necessary. It was explained that review of video camera footage inside the institutions can help aid in contact tracing efforts, and that there may be instances when mass testing in a mod may be undertaken. Testing also takes place if someone is to leave the facility, such as for a medical procedure, when an individual transfers between correctional facilities, and prior to transfer to a CRC, API, or furloughing to a treatment center. Ms. Brooks said that the safeguards that have been instituted appear to be working, as COVID-19 outbreaks have not occurred inside Alaska correctional facilities, unlike in many other states. Ms. Brooks attributed this success in large part to the staff and inmates buying into the safeguard measures. It was also explained that inmates have the right to opt-out of testing and that it is not mandatory, nor are there any punitive measures if one refuses a COVID-19 test.

Ms. Brooks was asked if there is currently a policy or procedure for testing people prior to release that are going to a transitional living facility post-incarceration and it was explained that universal mass testing of individuals leaving the facilities is not currently taking place. It was explained that although DOC cannot test all individuals leaving a facility, transitional housing providers that are accepting an incoming reentrant can request DOC to test that individual prior to release, and so far DOC has been able to accommodate those requests when given sufficient time. It was stated that test results can take between 2-6 days to be reported so transitional housing providers should request testing in advance of the release date. It was stated that Federal inmates held inside an Alaska facility are also able to be tested by DOC.

Ms. Brooks was asked about what a typical day looks like currently for inmates and she clarified that although inmates are not able to move as freely within the institution and program per normal conditions, inmates located within the same housing units are able to move around the facility as a group to go to meals, engage in recreation time, and that they are able to socialize with those individuals in their housing unit (some variations may exist if housing units contain a large number of individuals). It was explained that it was not accurate to say that all inmates are isolated only to their cells during this time.

Ms. Brooks explained that for those with a positive test even though they would be isolated from general population, individuals are still afforded access to their property, and given attention by medical providers and mental health providers; there are instances when TV/entertainment is available as well. It was reiterated that when someone is moved into isolation it is not meant to be punitive, but is intended to protect the health of the individual and others inside the facilities. It was stated that the phone vendor allows three free phone calls per week for each inmate and it is believed that all inmates are able to utilize phone call opportunities if they wish.

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3. *Demetria Veasy, Anchorage/Mat-Su Regional Manager, Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development (demetria.veasy@alaska.gov)*

Ms. Veasy began by explaining that the decisions of schools to either open using distance learning or holding in-person classes will have an impact on employers and how they operate, and that it will in turn have an impact on families and upon the larger economy. It was explained that DOLWD is working with employers on ways to approach structuring vacant positions that need to be filled (e.g. full-time vs. part-time). Ms. Veasy stated that there has been a rebound in job openings and that people are going back to work, but there could be another wave of unemployed workers concurrent with school starting again.

Industries and places that are hiring include: seafood industry (Pacific Star, Sitka Sound, North Pacific Seafood, Copper River Seafood, Trident Seafoods); transportation (BAC Transportation, Pegasus Aviation); retails (Lowes, Walgreens, etc.). Ms. Veasy reminded the audience that fidelity bonding is still available through the DOLWD, and it is a very easy program for employers to take part, and can be offered as an incentive for hiring someone with prior justice involvement; call the DOLWD Job Center to speak to a staff person for more information. [<https://www.labor.alaska.gov/bonding/>]

Ms. Veasy stated that AVTEC (the DOLWD vocational training program) is currently only offering online training options. Training opportunities and funding are still available through the DOLWD, and can be accessed by connecting with any of the job centers around the state. Currently the Midtown Job Center has four case managers to assist customers (phone: 269-0088), and one case manager in the Mat-Su Job Center (phone: 352-2500); there are efforts to fill vacant case managers positions. Case managers conduct intakes, assessments, determine eligibility for program, ensure training aligns with employment goals, create an employment plan, provide funding, and offer on-going case management support.

Ms. Veasy stated that UAA, Charter College, Alaska Career College are all doing distance learning, but all programs are still available; NIT and Center for Employment and Education are offering in-person training. It was explained that Alaska Jobs has replaced the ALEXsys system. It was explained that the Midtown Job Center in Anchorage is still closed to the public, but staff are aware that many job center customers lack access to personal computers, printers, and other technology; staff are helping customers to write resumes, create Alaska Jobs accounts, and are providing more technological support than usual. Computers are available at the library on a limited basis. Ms. Veasy stated that it is unknown when the Job Center will open back up, but is unlikely before the end of the year. It was stated that despite the challenges staff are still available to help people find jobs and access training opportunities, and can be reached by phone. The first Virtual Job Fair organized in partnership with DOLWD was held, and there is interest in having more employers engage in this type of recruitment which can be found on the DOLWD website [<http://www.jobs.alaska.gov/jobfairs/>]. When asked, Ms. Veasy confirmed that she had not heard of any employers not taking COVID-19 risks seriously thus putting employees at risk.

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4. *Hubert Dinkins, Employment and Training Program Coordinator, Partners Reentry Center (hubertdinkins@pfpalaska.org)*

Mr. Dinkins explained that PRC is meeting the needs of clients by continuing to offer employment services and working with employers to connect clients with employment opportunities. Employers that are continuing to hire and offer employment opportunities include: 49th State Brewery, Red Chair Café, Alaska Laser Wash, Sullivan Arena Monitoring Program, Lucky Wishbone, Kinley's Restaurant, Alaska Seal and Coating, and more. Mr. Dinkins explained that even now while PRC is closed to walk-in clients, clients are able to access housing services (and are afforded longer housing stays), access support groups, and have access to resources such as bus passes and bicycles, clothing vouchers, and phone vouchers. Mr. Dinkins stated that PRC case managers are still offering services to clients, and that one of the issues staff and clients are facing are obtaining identification. It was stated that the Focus Group support group is meeting in-person on Fridays from 9:15-10:30am and AA Support and Council Group are meeting on Mondays from 6:30-7:30pm. It was expressed that clients are expressing an ambivalent attitude during these uncertain times, and that clients are concerned with employment, housing, work credentials, identification, and access to food. Mr. Dinkins offered that next steps and solutions should include a cure for the COVID-19 virus.

5. *Richard Irwin, Director of Feed Me Hope Culinary Arts & Bakery Program, Downtown Hope Center (rirwin@downtownhopecenter.org)*

Mr. Irwin explained that the Culinary Arts & Bakery Program is a 16-week, faith-based program that includes training in kitchen culinary and bakery basics, as well as on-going life skills coaching; job skills training occurs five days a week. The program aims to create genuine transformation, not just behavior modification. The program assists students with obtaining a food handlers card, and aids in employment placement. Most recently a small group of 6-8 students were hired doing kitchen work. Mr. Irwin stated that interviews for the next training cycle begin August 19th and classes begin on August 24th.

Mr. Irwin stated that the Downtown Hope Center shelter is open to women, and that the current capacity is 50 people (normally it is 70). It was noted that only women are allowed to enter into the Bakery Program. It was stated that food is provide to 350-450 people every day at lunch that is currently being served outdoors, and that efforts are being made to open a food truck. Other resources and opportunities include showers, clothing, and a recovery group. Mr. Irwin stated that he is a firm believer of reconciliation and that clients frequently have the need/interest in re-building relationships with others.

6. *Cheryl Charic, Director of Intensive Services, and Luke Hobbs, Employment Specialist, Alaska Behavioral Health (ccharic@akbh.org; lhobbs@akbh.org)*

Mr. Hobbs explained that Alaska Behavioral Health (formerly Anchorage Community Mental Health Services) has a small team of employment specialists, and that clients arrive at AKBH employment support by way of referrals from clinicians or external partners - primarily DVR. It was stated that AKBH has similar employment information to DOLWD, and that AKBH is interested in partnering with more agencies to reduce potentially redundant efforts. Mr. Hobbs stated that AKBH has purchased bicycles for clients in

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response to the buses not running during the COVID-19 lockdown, and that bus passes and clothing are also available for clients. Mr. Hobbs explained that within their program there is a focus on skill building, and that case management, clinical services, and group supports are accessible through other AKBH staff. Employment support includes development of an employment plan, preparing individuals to seek employment opportunities (resumes, mock interviews, goal setting), and working with them as they apply for jobs. Mr. Hobbs stated that some clients have been incarcerated for long periods of time (a decade or more, in some instances) and are unfamiliar with the most current ways of applying for and seeking employment. It was stated that even after employment has been obtained, support is still available to clients to help them meet their goals and maintain long-term employment. Mr. Hobbs explained that he and his co-workers get the opportunity to have very candid conversations with clients, which affords them the opportunity to understand who they are working with and how best to serve them

Ms. Charic proceed to explain that AKBH has remained open during the pandemic which has been challenging in some respects for both staff and clients. It was stated that there are instances of AKBH purchasing technology and internet plans to facilitate client access to psychiatrists and health care providers. Ms. Charic explained that all staff are available via tele-health, and some are available in-person (depending on teams and staff). Rooms have been set up on-site to facilitate tele-health access for clients; there have been some limits on the number of people on-site at any one time to limit the risk of spreading COVID-19. Ms. Charic explained that out-reach services are on-going, and that there are efforts to engage with clients outside of the office and in the community, when possible.

When asked about the staff person that had been going to Anchorage Jail to meet with individuals, Ms. Charic explained the staff person (Judy Sparks) was challenged to perform regular duties because she no longer had access to the institutions to meet with people and had limited database access, thus making information gathering very challenging. It was stated that pre-COVID-19, clinical teams and staff were able to visit with prospective and existing clients inside the institutions. It was explained that Ms. Sparks works with institutional staff to attempt to schedule an intake within 48 hours of release or to re-connect existing clients with the appropriate AKBH support staff in the community.

7. *Oreyal Jacquet, Owner and Operator of Oak Residential Facility (oreyaljacquet7@gmail.com)*

Ms. Jacquet stated that she recently had come into contact with a prospective resident who had tested positive for COVID-19 which led her to ask the question: where should individuals go who are released from a correctional institution who test positive, and in particular those who have a release plan that states they will live in transitional housing? Also, where should individuals be sent that need to quarantine in those instances? Ms. Jacquet stated that she has discussed this with some other transitional housing providers, but there aren't clear housing solutions at this time for reentrants that test positive for COVID-19 that need housing. Ms. Jacquet stated that this is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. Ms. Jacquet explained that currently there are individuals that need medical care for non-COVID-19 matters that are not seeking out medical care or treatment.

Ms. Jacquet stated that during the pandemic there has been an increasing burden on housing providers to offer case management and other support (e.g. setting up Zoom and technology to access wrap-around services, prepping for employment and job search). Ms. Jacquet explained that she has a resident that

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was on-track, had graduated from a culinary arts training program, and was employed, but because the food industry has been negatively impacted due to COVID-19 and work opportunities have become more difficult to obtain, that led to this individual sliding back into old habits. Ms. Jacquet wondered what housing providers can do to help individuals such as this, since it is the housing providers that are around their residents on a daily basis and come to know them very well. She reiterated that housing providers, such as at Oak House, have been put into a position to assist their residents with more tasks compared to pre-pandemic times.

8. *Will Fanning, Alaska Division of Behavioral Health*

Mr. Fanning briefly introduced himself, and stated that he was newly hired at DBH and would be taking on projects relating to reentry and peer support within DBH.

9. *Jonathan Pistotnik, Coalition Coordinator, Anchorage Reentry Coalition*

Mr. Pistotnik closed by sharing that he had heard similar sentiments shared in the community around the notion that transitional housing providers are doing a lot to assist reentrants during COVID-19. He also alerted attendees of an up-coming meeting on Aug 20th centered around the issue of technology, access to technology inside Alaska correctional institutions, and the need among reentrants to leverage technology to engage with service providers and conduct routine communication; the invite is forthcoming and will be shared with the coalition soon.