

2024 Pinal County Reentry Roundtable Report

Introduction

On December 5, 2024, the 2024 Pinal County Reentry Roundtable gathered around 80 participants at the Pinal County Library who represent different organizations, institutions and interests to address reentry efforts and programs in Pinal County.

Opening Remarks

Evelyn Casuga welcomed participants, setting the stage for the day’s program including interactive “Arizona Town Hall” style conversation over the lunch hour.¹

Cinda Thorne, Chair of the Pinal County Coalition to End Homelessness shared her personal story and how it both informs her understanding of those who have experienced incarceration and her passion for the importance and impact of reentry programs.

Jeff McClure, Pinal County Board of Supervisor Vice Chair shared examples of what can happen to those who get caught up in the criminal justice system and are unable to reenter effectively into their community. It often results in a revolving door of reincarceration, negatively impacting generations and the community at large. It serves no one, costs more money, and has other repercussions to the community. If, on the other hand, services are provided for substance use, mental health and job training, there is a much better opportunity for people to become productive and valued members of the community.

Welcoming Home Pinal County’s Returning Citizens

Sherriff Mark Lamb expressed the importance and value of community work that brings in the humanity of those coming to the jail and finds a way to return them better to the community than when they came in. As a result of these types of reentry programs, money has been saved, children who were struggling were helped and the community benefits. Once he saw the effectiveness of these programs with children, he began to work on adult programs, seeking ways to help adults reenter more effectively into their communities. This approach and the community efforts supporting them have been so effective that they have brought in additional funding for programs and have become models for other areas. The goal of reentry programs is to restore the dignity and respect of people as soon as they walk outside the door so they can more effectively become a part of the community. This includes clothes, transportation, community services and other services that represent community collaboration. Reentry programs help serve the community—making it better and reducing crime.

Incoming Sheriff Ross Teeple said he ran for Sheriff in part because of the reentry programs. He has learned that there are people who commit bad acts but are not bad people. There are services, including reentry programs, that are extremely valuable for individuals and the community at large.

Pinal County Attorney Ken Volkner said that to understand the issues, we need to understand history. He recounted a grandfather he encountered who had been in and out of prison suffering from substance use disorder. Then he had cases with the son and grandson who had the same issues—three generations with history repeating itself. He asked the County Attorney at the time, “What are we going to do different to stop history from repeating itself?” The answer was, “It’s not our problem.”

¹ This report was prepared by Arizona Town Hall.

It *is* our problem. We need to interrupt these generational patterns to make a difference. This is what prompted him to run for County Attorney and to take an approach of being smarter. He discovered it takes a lot of collaboration across organizations to be successful.

Government alone cannot solve these issues.

We need to create opportunities for people to have a successful life if we don't want them to return to jail. This includes housing, services and basic needs. If we really want to be a safe community with low crime rates, we have to find answers for placement, transportation and safe and stable housing. While statistics and numbers are important, we also need to ensure that humanity and our individual stories and victories are celebrated. We need to celebrate every individual victory because these individual victories in turn impact many others. For every person we can't help, there are many more we do. Every person working together is what makes Pinal County a safer stronger place.

Reentry Simulation and Guided Processing

Shanda Breed, Director of Adult Probation Arizona Supreme Court, shared the impact of going through the Reentry Simulation in helping everyone understand the challenges and the opportunities for positive change. She then led the participants in the Reentry Simulation.

Feedback and reflections:

1. (Week One) Participants had limited or no success in week one of reentry and found it very stressful. Those who already had a state ID had more success. Many experienced frustrations with transportation, resources, and a lack of knowledge about how to get needed services.
2. (Week Two) Participants shared that week two was generally worse than week one. While some progress was made, many experienced setbacks and further frustration. Some still did not have their state ID and most did not yet have sufficient (or any) food or other basic needs. Many were overdue on rent and were being evicted and at least one person was already back in jail.
3. (Week Three) Participants were still experiencing challenges. Some had returned to jail. Others still had not eaten. There were some limited successes with participants who developed creative strategies for success (including not reporting to probation so they would not be put in jail). Most were still struggling. Those with children had extra burdens. Recognition of challenges experienced by participants as part of this simulation has changed policies and helped to reduce probation challenges that were not necessarily related to success.
4. (Week Four) Many felt disrespected by service providers and community service organizations. They also were frustrated by limited hours. If someone treated them well, they were more motivated and able to better continue with the process. Hope matters. If they were treated rudely or did not have support, they were less motivated to continue. Support often comes from those going through similar experiences. Yet, there are rules prohibiting people from being around others with criminal convictions. This insight from other simulations has also led to policy changes in this area.

Many reentering society have these challenges and many others, including lack of life skills such as time management and organization. And those with requirements to have a job and who get a job are then unable to meet other requirements (such as seeing their probation officer). These challenges create survival strategies that necessarily involve lying to authorities or other "out of character" behaviors simply to survive and to not return to jail. Others expressed how they just wanted to quit or give up because of trauma or anxiety.

Participants felt hopeless, helpless, powerless, despair, disappointed, set up for failure, alone, guilty, anxious, frustrated, defeated, criminalistic, stressed, angry, overwhelmed, irritated, sad, frantic, desperate, lost, surprised, unmotivated, apathetic, and—for some—ready to do anything to survive.

As we think about what people encounter when they try to reenter our communities, we also can think of ways to create positive change. There have already been many positive changes because of the increased understanding of these challenges and there are many more opportunities for improvement. If we can assist people in more easily entering society after being released from the justice system, they will impact others in a more positive way, and we will make our communities safer and better.

Panel: Reentry Housing from Different Angles

Chief Matthew Hedrick, Pinal County Sheriff's Office

Barriers to effective reentry include leadership. We need leadership that comes from a place of humility and that supports reentry. This includes supporting personnel who work directly with those who are in the criminal justice system. The devil is also in the details. It includes securing identification, transportation and shelter. These are specific items that people struggle most in obtaining.

As community leaders and law enforcement officers, we need to come from a legacy of love for members of the community using evidence-based practices that work. We need to remember what it felt like in the simulation. It can also be helpful to visit the jail or shelters. It is when we are in service to others that we are in service of God.

Nori Burrell, Ivory Tower Real Estate

It's a big struggle for those coming out of the system to find rental housing, especially sex offenders. Some property managers are more helpful than others, but it is still challenging, especially because many just coming out of the justice system do not have IDs or funds. There are some organizations in Pinal County who can assist with these challenges such as CAHRA (Community Action Housing Resource Alliance). Month-to-month rental agreements can be an effective way to begin an arrangement. People also need assistance with filling out and submitting forms. Volunteering time to assist can, make a big difference.

Lydia Montano, Casa Grande Alliance

Having a felony makes it very difficult to find rental properties. Many landlords will not rent to felons, and it takes individual education of the landlords to overcome their reluctance. Former inmates may also need extra help to overcome substance use and transportation challenges, and to secure other support.

Robert Robles & Breannalee Shank, Horizon Health and Wellness Homeless Outreach Team

Families and the elderly are very underserved. With families there are no immediate solutions which makes it more difficult to assist them.

Another challenge in getting people housed is first impressions. Those who have been homeless may be dirty or have old clothes. If they are provided with nice clothes and provided with other services to make a better first impression, they have better success with getting housed. Persistence is important. It also helps to talk with the landlords, to advocate for clients, and to provide a deposit and several months' rent.

Those who are homeless can lose their confidence and their feeling of being “human.” Providing them with support can help them to gain confidence and reconnect them to others. We are all just one mishap from being in the homeless situation. Practice the golden rule.

Audience Discussion

Modular could be a solution for finding more affordable housing and rentals for people who need it. We should create a model that allows them to be successful and that is sustainable.

The human connection is also important in finding landlords who are willing to take on tenants with a criminal history.

Town Hall Discussion

Over the lunch hour, participants gathered at their tables to discuss and reflect on the following questions.

1. What can you or your organization do to address the transitional housing gap?
2. What do you need to move to action?
3. With whom do you need to connect?
4. What additional information do you need?

Key points from their discussion are summarized below.

Key Points

Address Administrative challenges

1. Create greater ease with accessing resources and information, including one centralized location or portal, and online options. Explore having one application for all services.
2. Get rid of duplicate requirements.
 - Arrange to get background check information for rentals completed and in a central location so it only needs to be done once.
 - If everyone is asking for the same federal document, get them eligible at one place and then everyone has access to it, so they do not have to repeatedly be screened (using the AHCCCS model).
3. Simplify organizational guidelines and incentivize better coordination and cooperation between agencies. Have “one stop shopping” for agencies (IDs, social security cards, food assistance, job assistance, phones, etc.).

Housing

1. Create a shelter in Pinal County. Create a focus group or committee to make sure a homeless shelter is a reality in Pinal County.
2. Get in touch with city officials to obtain land for housing.
3. Incentivize landowners to rent to underserved population.
4. Reduce barriers to obtaining housing.

Collaboration is key for moving to action

1. Work together to reduce barriers across and between agencies and other organizations and to create a central place for all available resources in Pinal County.
2. Create group boards to bring information together to get past barriers.
3. Improve partnerships with other agencies working in the field—include both outside resources and resources within Pinal County.
4. Work together to obtain and expand resources in Pinal County, including a shelter and transitional housing.
5. Bring clients together more effectively with those who provide resources.
6. Connect court system employees and community providers.
7. Have more meetings like this one that bring people together to share knowledge and to help with housing, resources, peer support, and other programs.

Funding/Resources

1. It's hard to get consistent funding for housing and there are no dollars for the reentry population.
2. Seek more grant funds to grow and expand service options, including for housing. **Arizona Complete Health has funding for housing.*
3. Use grants more effectively. Use homeless funds to “lift up” not to hold people down or “get rid” of them.
4. Seek resources for sex workers and domestic violence victims.
5. Increase funding through community reinvestment.
6. Seek funding for:
 - Rental assistance/eviction prevention.
 - Connecting people to resources for mental health and medical needs as well as other community resources.
 - Bus passes or other transportation support, diapers, food, and homeless and reentry bags.
 - Obtaining vital documents.
 - Expansion of service options and access to the internet.

Education

For returning citizens:

1. Provide resources, referrals, peer support, and education on the crime-free addendum.
2. Increase awareness of programs that support reentry, including GED scholarships, the skilled workforce program that provides up to \$5,000 towards trade schools, technical degrees and certifications and transportation assistance (e.g. \$500 towards car repairs, and the bicycle program for those working or looking for work).
3. Programs that provide set-aside assistance for prior criminal convictions.

For the general public and policymakers:

1. Advocate.
2. Highlight the concept that “housing is healthcare” and show how housing is beneficial for accomplishing other goals and reducing costs.
3. Inform property management and landlords on the crime-free addendum and programs that can assist with deposits and rent so they will rent to returning citizens. Consider an educational lunch or dinner for landlords.
4. Educate about an approach of “they did their time, give them a chance.”
5. Get buy-in from community leaders and lobby county and state elected leaders.

For providers

1. Consistent training, including advocacy training and how to successfully apply for grants.
2. A more extensive list of resources, including specifics of programs and the benefits they provide.
3. The importance of showing kindness to all we encounter.

AHCCCS Housing and Health Opportunities (H20) Program

Liz De Costa and Alex Ruth provided an overview of the AHCCCS Housing and Health Opportunities (H20) Program and Justice Initiatives. Their presentation is summarized in the attached PowerPoint.

