



**JANE ADDAMS
COLLEGE
OF SOCIAL WORK**



Starting All Over:

Service Needs and Service Responses in an Urban Neighborhood

**CREASIE FINNEY HAIRSTON, PH.D.
SEPTEMBER 2016**

Starting all Over

**Service Needs and Service Responses
in an Urban Neighborhood**

Published by the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research

Jane Addams College of Social Work

University of Illinois at Chicago

1040 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607

<https://socialwork.uic.edu/centers-and-research/jane-addams-center-for-social-policy-and-research/>

CREASIE FINNEY HAIRSTON, PH.D.



Creasie Finney Hairston, Ph.D. is Professor and Dean of the Jane Addams College of Social Work and Director of the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Previously

she served as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Research at the Indiana University School of Social Work and held faculty appointments at the University

of Tennessee, West Virginia University, and the State University of New York at Albany. Dr. Hairston is one of the pioneers in the development of family programs for correctional populations and has conducted research and written extensively on the impact of incarceration on families and communities. Her publications appear in leading academic and professional journals and texts and in the popular press. She is the editor of the *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, a past president of the Illinois Academy of Criminology, a member of the Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities (TASC) Board of Directors, and a recipient of the International Community Corrections Association's E.B. Henderson III Presidential Award.

JANE ADDAMS CENTER FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND RESEARCH

The Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research engages in university-community partnerships that advance knowledge about effective social welfare policies and services and promote social, racial and economic justice. As a unit of the Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the Center involves faculty and staff in public service and research activities that address the social conditions and needs

of urban communities, families and children, especially those who are poor. The Center conducts research and evaluation studies, analyzes public policies, disseminates research findings, tests new program models and service delivery strategies, and provides assistance to organizational leaders in implementing policy directives. The criminal justice system, human rights, and health equity provide the focus for Center work.

Prisoners' Community Reentry and Reintegration: Lessons Learned

Most reports on community reentry focus on former prisoners' return to community living, the problems they encounter, and, to a lesser extent, the services that are provided to help them. The academic literature and project reports are replete with statistics on high recidivism rates and documentation of the difficulties associated with finding and keeping jobs and housing. The high levels of substance use and mental illness among former prisoners are also commonly noted. More recently, the aging prison population, along with longer prison stays, has led to the inclusion of returning prisoners' physical health problems as an area in need of examination.

For over twenty years, Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research has engaged in projects designed to enhance public understanding of the impact of incarceration on prisoners' children, families and communities. Similar to other reentry efforts, we focused on identifying needs and problems and on examining policies and practices that were implemented to address them or at least show promise in making a difference. Toward that end we sponsored and cosponsored conferences and seminars featuring national and local experts; engaged different stakeholders in intensive dialogue sessions; and conducted research studies on family support, parenting experiences during incarceration, and prisoners' reentry and reintegration experiences. We also published and disseminated reports and

monographs on incarceration and reentry based on our experiences and findings.

In 2009 we implemented a consultation and technical assistance initiative with the twin goals of advancing understanding of how agencies (both formal correctional programs and community services) are responding to reentry and to help agencies better address the concerns and needs of returning prisoners and their families. We saw this more hands on initiative as one that would use what we knew and had learned from research and discussions to help build organizational capacity and strengthen services among agencies. We also saw this as an opportunity to learn by seeing and doing what works on the ground.

The Prisoners' Community Reentry and Reintegration Series presents lessons learned from these consultation and technical assistance projects. *Starting All Over: Service Needs and Service Responses in an Urban Neighborhood* focuses on a project that provided staff support for a faith based, grass roots resource center located in Memphis, Tennessee.

Creasie Finney Hairston, Ph.D.

Director, Jane Addams Center
for Social Policy and Research





INTRODUCTION

Best known for good barbeque, the home of Elvis Presley, and the site of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, Memphis, Tennessee exudes great charm and southern hospitality. Memphis, similar to many other large American cities, is an area of considerable contrasts. Home of FedEx headquarters, an NBA team, renowned health centers, and major tourist attractions, the city is prosperous in many ways. Streets lined with luxury automobiles, stately homes in gated communities, monumental churches and high end shopping centers provide signs of wealth and prosperity. At the same time, there are visible signs of despair concentrated in some areas of the city and statistics that paint a picture of a city with high crime and incarceration rates, high unemployment, poor health outcomes, and many other social problems. Poverty is front and center of many descriptions of the city. A front page story published in the city's major newspaper identified poverty as Memphis' biggest industry¹ and whether it is the nation's third or fourth poorest city depends on interpretation of the 2010 U.S. census data.

Memphis and the county in which the city is located have been progressive in responding to some criminal justice matters, including the return home of large numbers of former prisoners. The city was among the

early adopters of formal prisoner reentry programs and passed a "ban the box" ordinance for city jobs several years ago.² Similarly, Memphis area families of prisoners were at the vanguard in advocating for, and implementing, programs to support families and children affected by criminal justice system involvement. A grassroots organization formed by the wives of two prisoners at the Tennessee State Penitentiary in the 1980s, for example, predates most of the current better known family advocacy groups. Since then, different Memphis-based organizations and groups have been actively involved in family focused corrections work, including a national technical assistance project led by the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research (Policy Center).³ The Policy Center's partnership with one of the groups, a small faith based organization (FBO), is the focus of this report.⁴

-
1. See "Living in Poverty City" *The Commercial Appeal*, Sunday, December 20, 2012; p. 4v.
 2. "Ban the box" prohibits employers from inquiring into or considering criminal records or history in initial job applications.
 3. The Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research conducted a roundtable on family oriented reentry programs with Davidson and Shelby County Tennessee corrections and service agencies in December 2009. The roundtable was one component of a national technical assistance project funded by the Office on Violence Against Women.
 4. See "Partnership with Community Resource Center Changes Lives." *Affirmations: A Magazine for Alumni and Friends of the Jane Addams College of Social Work*: Chicago, Illinois: Jane Addams College of Social Work, Spring 2012, pp. 8-9.



THE FBO RESOURCE CENTER AND NEIGHBORHOOD

Established in 2009, the FBO operated as a community resource center under the auspices of a small church congregation (membership under 75) whose leadership included persons who had been involved with the criminal justice system as prisoners or were prisoners' or former prisoners' family members. The Pastor's wife, who was also a minister, served as Director. Volunteers, some of whom were members of the church, provided staff support.

The FBO's offices were located in the basement of the church where the congregation held services and about a block from a major avenue running through South Memphis. Although vacant lots, houses in need of serious repairs, and scattered debris surrounded the structure, the church was a visible reminder of the neighborhood's better days. Stained glass windows, nice pews, scattered hymnals and other regal accoutrements suggested past congregations, unlike many current members, were prosperous individuals with financial assets and

regular paychecks. Although the church's immediate neighborhood was one where poverty prevailed, a popular tourist attraction and a historically Black college campus were within walking distance. Neighborhood residents, like the majority of Memphis residents, were primarily African American.

Leaders referred to the resource center as a faith based organization and used Christian principles and references to the Bible to guide their work. The overall goal of the FBO was to assist clients in accessing services and navigating through the system of community resource providers. There was a special commitment to helping former prisoners transition successfully from prison to community living and use opportunities to start all over successfully. The idea of helping people start all over extended to individuals attempting to recover or bounce back from other adversities such as drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, and "street life."

To document prisoners' community reentry service needs in poor, urban communities and help the FBO build organizational capacity, the Policy Center placed two staff at the FBO. Both were long term residents of South Memphis and had prior incarceration experiences. One had an undergraduate degree in social work and was enrolled in a graduate management program. The other had a high school education and experience tutoring adults involved in the criminal justice system. In addition to documenting service needs and experiences they provided case management and referral and tutoring services, taught GED classes, provided staffing for FBO events and participated in activities sponsored by the church. The Policy Center director made regular monthly or bi-monthly visits to observe and participate in FBO and church events and activities, confer with the FBO leadership, provide consultation on organizational development, and meet with project staff. Policy Center staff not placed at the Center provided technical assistance on program evaluation and proposal development.

The Policy Center-FBO partnership combined Policy Center expertise with the FBO's unique strengths and vision. The cooperative arrangement built on findings from the national technical assistance project while expanding understanding of families' challenges and community resources. Lessons learned from the starting all over experiences, and the service needs and service responses observed and documented during the three-year partnership are presented here.

STARTING ALL OVER

Community reentry for former prisoners involves "starting all over." Some individuals envision that they can "pick up where they left off," and even try to do so. Only a few are successful. Even a short jail term can result in the loss of a job, home, and household furnishings. Longer prison terms often lead to fractured relationships and community connections as people move on to other partners; close relatives die and long time friends change their life styles. Prisoners, themselves, may change and want things for themselves that are different than what they desired when

first incarcerated. Families' and friends' willingness to embrace a prisoner's return may be based on the promise, or at least belief, that old habits and behaviors that led to incarceration will be dropped in order to "start all over." On the contrary, a few prisoners and their buddies operate with an assumption that former illegal (as well as legal) income producing work can be quickly reinstated. While that may be desirable, it is highly unlikely.

Barriers to successful community reentry are extensive ranging from social policies that bar former prisoners from holding certain jobs or obtaining social benefits to prisoners' personal problems such as educational deficits and behavioral health challenges. Documentation of these barriers is found in many articles and reports and was borne out in FBO observations and records as well.

Starting all over, whether dealing with imprisonment or other life adversities, is a complex process that involves many different conditions and aspects of life. The path to successful reentry and community reintegration, however defined, is circuitous, rather than linear. Formal reentry programs and the reentry literature seldom address the ongoing process of reentry; false starts, setbacks, restarts, and recovery, however, are the norm. Many problems that returning prisoners experience are part of the everyday conditions experienced by poor people living in underresourced neighborhoods. Criminal backgrounds and incarceration experiences exacerbate these problems and difficulties.

POVERTY DRIVEN SERVICE REQUESTS

Poverty is a dominant theme in the community where the FBO is located and in the lives of most of the residents who came there for help. The dilapidated condition of many houses and vacant lots covered with weeds and other debris provide a visible, "in your face," image of that poverty. Although there are some nice homes and buildings scattered throughout the neighborhood, the pervasive nature of poverty is inescapable. Even the condition of the corner store, gas station, and closest strip mall provide a clear picture that this is a place where poor people live and do business.



Clients' requests for service differed in terms of specifics, but poverty was almost always an underlying issue, both in terms of the presenting problem and the corresponding service need and response. A job layoff or termination was more than a temporary setback that could be salvaged with savings. A car problem could not be resolved with a simple call to AAA for a tow to a car dealer since AAA membership was a luxury, not a basic expense and money for a major car repair was usually out of the question. Court costs, legal fees and fines, and other unbudgeted or unexpected fees could not be handled with "I'll charge it" as credit cards were nonexistent, already maxed out, or had very low spending limits.

A cash economy prevailed with the opportunity to "use now and pay later" restricted to situations which placed individuals in even more precarious financial situations. The failure to pay rent or utilities, for example, bought some individuals time but also led to evictions, utility shut offs, late payment fees, court costs, loss of furniture and personal items and many related problems.

THE REALITY OF HUNGER

Three nutritious meals a day is a fantasy for many poor and low income individuals and families. Their incomes, including government issued food purchase cards, are not adequate to purchase the quantity and quality of food needed to prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner on a regular basis. For many individuals and families living in the FBO area, hunger is a reality; there is no assurance that food, nutritious or not, will be readily available on an ongoing basis. Anything can and does happen. Chronic unemployment, getting laid off from work, sporadic paychecks even while working and just running out of money before the next payday or check day are among the forces that put low wage workers in situations where they are unable to buy food needed to make adequate meals.

Eligibility for governmental food assistance and nutrition programs (SNAP) provides no guarantee that there will be food on the table. Appointments for new applicants and renewals are often delayed; materials documenting eligibility are sometimes misplaced by staff who process documents; and notifications of due dates for renewal of eligibility are either not issued, lost or sent to the wrong address. Attempts to reach the right case worker by phone, as instructed on eligibility form directions, are often futile as well with recorded messages the norm and of limited help in resolving issues. And like those who use money, sometimes the amounts on the food card just don't last until the due date for the next monthly amount to be deposited. Prisoners returning to the community and residing with families already distressed amount to "one more mouth to feed" and less to go around for everyone else.

Residents used several measures to ward off hunger and obtain food for themselves and their families. These included requesting information from FBO staff about neighborhood food pantry days and hours of operations, seeking help with completing applications for SNAP, obtaining bags of groceries directly from the FBO when they were available, and stopping by the resource center to ask for drinks, snacks, and money to buy food.

Some individuals stretched their food budgets by participating in FBO programs where food was served as

a program component. These included a weekly luncheon held at the church, the weekly breakfast which preceded Sunday worship services, and a summer camp for children that provided breakfast and lunch. While some events may have been viewed as primarily social or educational activities, staff observed that attendance by some individuals and families suggested otherwise. Although summer camp attendance was uneven and sporadic when governmental assistance checks and food cards were first distributed, it was regular and at maximum capacity the week before checks were due. Similarly, support group attendance increased when flyers indicated a meal would be served and several men who appeared for a weekly church luncheon were not participants in the FBO programs that were held at that time.

A PLACE TO LIVE

Housing is precarious not only for men and women just leaving correctional facilities but for their families and friends as well. Homelessness is chronic and an ongoing reality for many individuals. Some have learned to make do by sleeping in abandoned houses and in community run shelters where they spend the night and leave with their backpacks and shopping bags during the day. The individuals who came to the FBO provided a different picture of homelessness. Some were being (or had been) evicted from their homes and apartments for failure to pay rent. Others had nowhere to go as they had overstayed their welcome or had been put out following a romantic break up.

Some individuals had been released from prison or jail or from a hospital following an extended stay. Sometimes, former prisoners or jail detainees had been “let out” but were not necessarily “coming home.” They were returning to a familiar neighborhood but had in essence nowhere to go. Relatives and friends were not welcoming them back for one reason or another or had moved long ago with no forwarding address. In a few instances, returning prisoners had never lived in the FBO area and did not know anyone there. They saw the rundown neighborhood as a place where they might be able to find a place to rent with the few dollars they had or could expect to get.

The belief that rentals there could be obtained without the credit checks, background inquiries, and references required in nicer neighborhoods was also instrumental in their decisions. It was also fairly well known that factors of this nature precluded former prisoners and their families from obtaining housing in nicer neighborhoods even when they had money and the income to support higher living standards.

Shelter needs were often urgent and immediate as some people needed a place to spend the night. Others asked for help in finding an apartment, assistance in getting lights, heat and water turned on or from being turned off, and help with deposits required to secure housing. Some individuals needed help in establishing or reestablishing households. They had a place to live but



lacked basic furniture (beds, tables, chairs) and amenities (sheets, cooking utensils, dishes). Needs were often barebones, especially for former prisoners and others who were literally “starting all over.”

Paying rent and utilities on time and having housing basics did not guarantee immunity from temporary or permanent housing loss or homelessness. Fires, flooding, neighborhood violence and domestic disputes posing safety risks were among the reasons that led to unexpected ousts. These sudden, unexpected losses

were exacerbated by precarious economic situations where emergency savings, if any, were meager, and insurance protections against loss were a luxury. There were similar problems among homeowners. Failure to pay a mortgage or property taxes could lead to foreclosure or a tax sale with even a home that had been in a family for decades and passed down through generations subject to being taken away. One resident reported how the failure to pay delinquent taxes led to the auctioning off and the near loss of his grandmother's home. The taxes, though modest in some respects, were far more than the family could afford after covering other more immediate living expenses.

The exteriors of several houses in the FBO neighborhood suggested the housing was substandard. One might reasonably infer based on a Memphis news media series on serious housing code violations in similar neighborhoods in other sections of the City that this was the case in the FBO neighborhood. In one apartment complex the situation was so severe that the City mandated that residents vacate their apartments immediately. In another, residents complained of rodent and pest infestation, faulty plumbing, appliances that did not work, and general disrepair. A final blow was having their water turned off because the apartment owner had not paid the water bill (though the company had collected the rent) in several months.

TRANSPORTATION: GETTING AROUND

Transportation is challenging and often not reliable. The FBO is located a block away from a major bus line, thereby giving residents who do not have cars access to amenities such as a full service grocery store, drug store, hospital, doctors, shopping mall, job centers, etc. not found in the neighborhood. Many locations that residents need to frequent, however, require transfers and frequent stops resulting in extensive travel time for what might otherwise be a short trip. In addition, buses (including those on a main line) are not frequent, do not run all hours, and do not cover all city areas or the surrounding suburbs. Bus fare, though modest, presented yet another challenge and was

often requested by clients needing transportation to get to a shelter, food pantry, or job application site.

Many of the cars that could be seen parked or traveling in the neighborhood were more than 15 years old and in poor condition and would have had difficulty passing safety and emissions checks. It was not uncommon to hear car owners talk about their cars breaking down or not starting, having (or not having) enough gas to go places, receiving citations for faulty vehicles or no car insurance, or having their licenses suspended for failure to pay tickets.

Individuals without cars waited for the buses (usually a half hour or more between runs), asked others with cars to drop them off and walked long distances to get to where they needed to go. Taxis were rarely, if ever, seen in the neighborhood (even at the tourist attraction), were expensive, and could not be depended on to come in a reasonable time if called. (Uber was not active in Memphis at the time of the partnership.) To keep cars running, men and their friends worked on cars themselves, bought used tires and parts, patronized local shops or businesses with low costs, but questionable equipment and certifications, and sometimes just ignored safety conditions as long as the car was running. Owners who offered "jitney" (pay for rides) service for those without cars obtained money to cover gas and other car expenses while also providing an important neighborhood service.

MAKING A LIVING

Most people seeking help at the FBO had little (financial assets, nicely furnished homes, late model cars, etc.) in comparison with middle and upper class households. It is pretty clear, however, that whatever they had did not come easy. Stable employment in a well paying job was not the norm. Employment in the regular job market was often sporadic with layoffs or job termination par for the course. Serial jobs with low pay and no or few benefits constituted a normal work history for many able bodied, hardworking job seekers.

Working off the books supplemented low incomes from "regular" jobs both while working and when in between jobs. A housekeeper employed by a homemaker service

agency might also have a family for whom she did house cleaning on her “day off” on her own. Home health aides had independent clients in addition to those they assisted through an agency based service. Lawn and landscape workers did “extra” lawn work for fees paid directly to them rather than to the landscape business owner. Some companies paid workers off the books, or hired them as “subcontractors” thereby allowing the company to avoid paying social security taxes, for travel to different work sites, and for other job related costs and benefits.

Often articles in the academic literature and popular press about persons who are unemployed and/or poor identify the lack of job skills as a primary reason for their plight. Stories from the FBO indicate that the issue is far more complex. Most of the individuals who sought help from the FBO would not qualify for high tech jobs. Many did not have internet access at their homes nor did they own computers. With few exceptions, a college education was not a part of their resumes. Yet, many men and women had talents and skills that are important in sustaining viable neighborhoods and the overall economy; some were able to parlay those skills into income streams that sustained themselves and their families from day to day. They made a living outside the regular workforce.

Within this group were individuals who were self-employed and ran their own businesses. Since many did not have business licenses, they might not have called their ways of making a living a business. Their jobs served dual purposes in that they provided income for the individuals doing the work, while providing low cost or lower than market rates for the individuals purchasing services. Keeping these enterprises running often required long working hours and much negotiating and bartering around rates and services. Car mechanical repairs, appliance installation, car body work, car washes, car tire repair, home renovation, music and movie distribution, pest control, landscaping, gutter cleaning, hair styling, and child care were among the popular “businesses.”

Many persons who frequented the FBO were disconnected from the regular work force. Some had been in prison for extended stays; others were homeless



or as one individual reported, “near bout homeless” since he had no permanent address and others had chronic health conditions or behavioral health problems that interfered with them holding down a “nine to five.” These individuals sought help in getting on, or back on, their feet. Sometimes this meant looking or preparing for a job in the traditional work force. Often, especially for those who were elderly or disabled, it meant trying to access benefits such as SSI or Social Security.

The tasks that individuals with no regular income source undertook to survive are not usually classified as jobs. The efforts required to make a living this way, however, are clearly hard work requiring persistence, humility, and sometimes, loss of dignity. Standing in long lines with shopping bags or carts to obtain free food; spending endless hours waiting to be seen by an intake clerk only to be referred elsewhere; being placed on phone hold for up to an hour just to schedule an appointment; keeping multiple conflicting, though required, appointments in different parts of town are all part of the day to day living challenges of the “down and out.” Obtaining the knowledge and savvy to negotiate bureaucratic structures and service program mazes to obtain help is a job, in and of itself.

Residents who had jobs that were relatively stable had one thing they could rely on, a regular paycheck. They, were not necessarily in better financial shape, however, than those who bounced from one job to another. Even jobs that might command a living wage in other cities, often paid little in Memphis. Marketed by government officials as a low cost state, Tennessee attracts businesses and industries that employ low wage workers. This lowers the state's unemployment rate. As noted in a newspaper editorial, however, jobs that pay only \$10 to \$12 per hour, if that, do little to boost the spending power and living standards of many of Memphis' poor. These full time workers with "good" jobs also wound up at the FBO asking for help with issues related to income deprivation.

Unemployment and underemployment were pervasive in the FBO neighborhood and a part of the day to day reality. There was not a sense of complacency and acceptance, however, on the part of the residents who frequented the FBO. Help in getting paid, legal work

was the most requested service at the FBO. Persons with and without jobs came to the FBO for help in obtaining work. They wanted to know who was hiring, to get help in completing job applications, to use FBO computers to submit applications, and to get referrals and recommendations that could lead to better paying, more stable jobs. Some were dealing with sporadic employment and recent layoffs or terminations; others, chronic unemployment and for still others the need for a fresh start following a period of not being in the job market because of incarceration or drug addiction. To better prepare themselves for the job market, men and women enrolled in GED preparation classes offered by the FBO, sought help in learning how to use computers and the internet, participated in job skills sessions led by volunteers, and followed up with referrals to job training and apprentice programs. A few individuals with high school degrees and GEDs completed applications for, and enrolled in, technical schools and college courses.



JUSTICE SYSTEM ENCOUNTERS

Involvement in the courts and justice system is a fact of everyday living in the FBO neighborhood. “He is going to (or at) 201 Poplar,” was an expression well understood by FBO staff, visitors, and volunteers. 201 Poplar Street, site of the county jail and courts and in close proximity to bail bondsmen and attorneys was frequented by many community residents.

Many people were involved in justice system encounters on civil matters and needed basic information about options for handling different situations. These included tenant rights and evictions, unpaid parking or moving violation tickets, housing foreclosures, business licenses, and property liens. Family matters were also frequently the impetus for justice system involvement and the reason for service requests. Sibling altercations, suspected child neglect or endangerment, teenage disciplinary problems, and disputes with neighbors or colleagues were among the reasons that families called police or ended up in court proceedings.

Police intervention was not an unusual topic of FBO conversations. On one occasion, the church’s main air conditioning units were stolen. On another, staff reported that police were summoned to quiet an argument occurring between a staff member and a sibling visitor. On different occasions FBO staff subdued disruptions and maintained order and control by threatening to call in the police who regularly patrolled the neighborhood.

Persons who had been arrested and were awaiting court dates, those who were returning home from prison, and those who were sentenced to community service all found refuge at the FBO. Some came seeking help with clothing, food, a job, or a place to stay after “getting out” and finding they had nowhere to go period or no real place to call “home.” Others were referred to the FBO by court officials to work off their community service obligations. Sometimes, individuals on bond and awaiting trial for criminal offenses sought help from the FBO to identify and obtain legal representation or information about legal processing and procedures.

HEALTH NEEDS AND ISSUES

Few people came to the FBO with specific requests for help in obtaining primary health or behavioral health care. Observations and other data collected by the resource center indicated, however, that health and well-being were generally at risk. It is doubtful that the many out of work men who frequented the center had health insurance and were receiving routine wellness checks. The surveys completed by teenage participants in a summer program revealed that their knowledge about HIV/AIDS and STDs was negligible. The types of things that support healthy lifestyles, i.e. jogging paths; well maintained parks and recreational facilities; full service grocery stores with fresh fruits and vegetables, and gyms were noticeably absent and certainly not within walking distance of the FBO.

Some men and women who requested help for other things were not even aware that they were eligible to receive health care benefits and did not know how or where to obtain free or low cost health care. These included persons who indicated they had been diagnosed as having a chronic health condition. Moreover, several visitors to the FBO appeared to have alcohol problems, be in need of dental care or have health problems requiring ongoing attention and care. Periodically, individuals talked about having gone to a hospital emergency room for an urgent health problem. In sharp contrast, appointments for routine health care were hardly ever mentioned. Similarly, although the FBO was located in a high risk drug use area, requests for help obtaining drug treatment were rare. Casual conversations indicated that some individuals went to the Pastor for counseling for different personal problems. Counseling for emotional problems seldom appeared, however, as a documented service request at the FBO.

MEETING NEEDS: SERVICE RESPONSES

The FBO had minimal financial resources and, with the exception of Policy Center staff and the Director, no full time personnel on a consistent basis. Yet the organization provided a range of services to meet pressing needs and uplift those who came for help.

PRACTICAL HELP

Providing tangible services that met basic needs was a core component of FBO's services. The FBO provided a weekly lunch, free Sunday morning breakfasts, and meals for children participating in summer camp on a regular, consistent basis. Bags of groceries were distributed to families at Christmastime or Thanksgiving and backpacks and school supplies were provided for neighborhood children returning to school following summer vacation. A clothes closet maintained by the FBO could be accessed by persons needing a warm jacket or change of clothing and bus tickets were provided if needed to get to other service agencies. Many services were connected to programs or events (Sunday morning worship, back to school celebration, summer camp, etc.) that included individuals with financial resources as well as those in need. These programs provided much needed help to families who were stretching their food budgets, short of cash during holidays, or without proper wear for job interviews in ways that protected their dignity while also engaging them in meaningful social or uplifting activities.

One of the major strengths of the FBO was its referral and follow up program. The FBO, in particular its Director, had vast knowledge of the Memphis health and human services network and criminal justice system and tremendous understanding of how to navigate bureaucratic systems to obtain help for those in need. Persons needing a place to stay for the night, help in getting a loved one buried, or information about a missing check or SNAP card were not simply given a number to call, or perhaps a name. The focus instead was on assessing the problem and assuring that persons were connected with individuals and agencies who could help and had the authority to do so. Attention was also given to

assuring that clients knew and understood the processes they needed to use, and information they needed to have to obtain positive results. Follow up to determine if needs were met was a routine part of service delivery.

NEXT LEVEL JOBS

Helping individuals move to the next (i.e. a higher) level was a guiding force at the FBO. The FBO Director and Policy Center staff working at the FBO often made reference to "moving to the next level" when talking about different programs, individual participants, themselves, and the FBO itself. The phrase was used most often when discussing accomplishments related to educational achievement or job attainment.

The FBO provided comprehensive services along an education/job continuum, encouraged and supported men and women to move along the continuum and celebrated achievements at different steps. The resource center provided basic literacy tutoring, GED classes, and GED preparation tests. Special attention was given to helping adults learn how to take tests, solve problems, and build basic educational skills. Staff assisted students in completing applications for the GED test, arranged transportation, if needed, for them to get to the test site and followed up to determine results.

Beyond basic skills training the FBO offered job preparation workshops and an electrical apprenticeship training program run by volunteer licensed electricians and college information sessions. Individuals received help in identifying college and training program opportunities and in completing applications for both admissions and financial aid.

Persons seeking jobs received assistance in identifying job openings and in preparing resumes and applications that reflected their work skills and job strengths. For many persons, particularly those who had been incarcerated or out of school for several years, this involved teaching them how to use the computer and the internet. Determining individuals' skills, experience and interests involved looking not only at formal work histories but also at jobs held while in prison and tasks carried out on their own or as a part of the underground economy. FBO staff and

volunteers helped participants make direct connections with hiring managers and vouched for participants when they had direct knowledge of their abilities and interests.

Congratulatory calls, notes, and public recognition were the norm for successful achievement at different milestones. These hands on approaches, follow ups and recognitions were important in retaining individuals in GED classes and training programs and in helping them secure employment and enroll in college.

PERSONAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Spiritual growth, social development and commitment to doing better and leading a different lifestyle were at the heart of the ministry that guided FBO services. Many opportunities were provided for individuals to engage in growth activities. These included various church groups, formal church services, bible study, spiritual literature on display at the FBO, church leaders who served as mentors and role models and church members who volunteered at the FBO.

The FBO's approach to personal growth and social development extended beyond formal church connections, however, and was diffused throughout the organization. There was a general belief that starting all over, required giving up old ways while embracing new experiences, if not a new identity. Accordingly, efforts were directed to providing FBO staff and participants with exposure to things and lifestyles that were uplifting and possibly new to them as well. As examples, the FBO's holiday luncheon was held at an upscale restaurant that staff would not ordinarily patronize. The Jane Addams College of Social Work and a Chicago community service organization hosted a Chicago visit for participants in the FBO's youth development and gang intervention program. None of the youth had ever spent time on a university campus and most had not been outside Memphis; some had never stayed in a nice hotel.

Some FBO programs and activities provided opportunities for personal reflection and discussion with others experiencing similar situations. A weekly support group for men centered on men's real life problems and

challenges and was designed to help eliminate day to day pressures. This men's meeting attracted men who were members of the church, FBO staff and volunteers, neighborhood residents, and both regular and infrequent attendees. Group membership was diverse and included former prisoners, professional men, working and unemployed men, and older as well as younger men. Anger management, relationship problems, parenting and discipline are examples of the topics covered. Though topics varied, they had an underlying biblical basis and spiritual message.

The FBO offered monthly sessions on similar topics for men staying at a Halfway House for Federal prisoners located in South Memphis. Those sessions also introduced men to the FBO and its services and provided a means for men who were being released to receive much needed and appreciated community based connections and help.

As an approved site for community residents to do community service rather than serve time in a correctional facility, the FBO offered social development programs as a component of the service assignments. In addition to carrying out various tasks such as building maintenance, lawn work, clerical tasks, and shelving or sorting for the clothes closet and food pantry, community service participants were able to engage in self-development classes. These included different workshops and information sessions that representatives of community agencies offered at the FBO for anyone who was interested. Sexual health and disease; opening a bank account; intimate relationships; career options; community resources; and voter registration were among the subjects covered.

A PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY

The FBO served as both a resource center and a gathering place and social outlet. Volunteers, staff, and clients seemed to share camaraderie when at the FBO. People did not appear to be eager to leave once they completed a task or class or an event was over. Some individuals came to the FBO even when they had no specific reason to be there. Others dropped in to see what was going on or to

chat briefly with the Director or staff. Sometimes, people asked to speak to the Pastor. Some individuals, primarily from a nearby assisted living facility for persons with a mental illness, stopped by to ask for coffee or a soft drink or to use the telephone. The fact that the FBO had heat in the winter and air conditioning during Memphis' hot, humid summers could have been a contributing factor to some of the informal drop ins.

The FBO and church were more, however, than a social outlet. They provided a place where a person could be somebody. Former prisoners and their families and children, neighborhood residents and other visitors were warmly welcomed by the church congregation and at the resource center. Statements made in casual conversations and testimonials during worship services, indicated that many, if not most, of the congregation had experienced incarceration of a family member. Individuals and families from different backgrounds were fully embraced and occupied positions of leadership and trust. Former prisoners led devotions, secured the building, and sang in the choir. They also organized events and provided services including tutoring, training, and facilities management. Children were able to see their parents engaged in positive endeavors and were able to be involved in many fun and positive things themselves. Both the church and the FBO provided a safe space for sharing information about life challenges, recovery from drug use and street life, and making do with few resources. People were not stigmatized because they had served time, were poor, had a mental illness or had used drugs. Although it was disappointing when some persons slipped back into criminal activity or drug use, they were invited back and encouraged to reengage in constructive activities.

CONNECTIONS, CONNECTIONS, CONNECTIONS

A lively robust informal system of networking and information sharing supplemented the FBO's formal information and referral program. The FBO was a place where recommendations about who or where to call for products and work required for daily living could be obtained. House painting, carpentry, car repairs, electrical

work, car detailing, lawn care, child care, used items were all up for grabs. Someone at the FBO (staff, volunteers, program participants) usually had information or even direct connections to a provider source. Unlike FBO services which were provided free of charge, these type connections involved a fee for the work. Typically, that fee was below, however, what could be obtained by checking the yellow pages, Angie's List or the Better Business booklet. In many cases, the recommendation came from someone who could vouch for the quality of work because they or someone close to them had used the workman. Individuals could also find out here where not to go because the provider did poor work, should not be trusted, charged too much, or was basically a "rip off."

IN AND OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Finally, the FBO created a church presence in the neighborhood that went beyond Sunday morning worship and a mid-week prayer meeting. While attending to pressing problems and needs, the FBO culture and service approach celebrated community strengths and recognized the things that bond people together in poor urban communities. Many people in the neighborhood were long term residents with generations of families having lived there. People knew each other. They knew who was using drugs, had been arrested, was back at work, etc. While dealing with poverty, drugs, and other social and economic ills, families went about the usual tasks of community life. People could be seen walking their children to school, planting gardens, hosting a backyard cookout, etc. They also helped each other out in ways that are not that typical in more prosperous areas. Families and friendship networks were relied on to borrow food, keep an eye on children playing outside, or get a ride to go shopping. Neighbors observed police interactions, looked out for children whose parents might not be doing so, and knew when and how to report or intervene in matters that appeared to be getting out of hand.

The FBO capitalized on these strengths by engaging with community residents in ways that built further bonds and trust. The FBO sponsored neighborhood gatherings and attended community events. Staff

represented neighborhood needs at City-wide meetings and spoke with, and on behalf of, residents. They met with mainstream organizations (banks, health departments, schools, etc.) to garner resources and collaborated with other grassroots organizations to leverage assets (computers, supplies, food donations, volunteers) and have broader impact.

Word of mouth among families and friends was the FBO's major marketing source. The resource center did not have slick marketing brochures or large signs denoting its basement office; the website was negligible. Yet there was a steady stream of visitors to the resource center and active participation in FBO and church events. The resource center and church were both in, and of, the neighborhood.

FINAL NOTES

Starting all over is difficult; a criminal background and poverty make it even worse. Individual service needs run a full gamut ranging from things people request to things they do not even know exist or that they might be eligible to receive. For former prisoners, navigating reentry involves far more than avoiding being arrested or reincarcerated for a criminal offense. The odds that men and women living in poor neighborhoods can successfully address the many challenges they face with little or no support are negligible. This is the case, whether or not they have a criminal record.

Immersion in the day to day activities of the FBO indicated over and over that the situations that brought visitors to the resource center were, by and far, related to the challenges they faced in the struggles of daily living. Those challenges were ongoing and taxing and formed the context and day to day reality of what it means to bounce back. These realities were reflected in their formal requests for help, in their informal conversations with Policy Center staff, and in the behaviors they displayed and activities Policy Center staff observed while working at and visiting the FBO.

The FBO would not be identified by academics as using evidence-based practices. Its service approaches were not guided by social science theories or conceptual frameworks. It did not have the infrastructure needed to receive Federal program or research funding. Even after upgrades with Policy Center support, the data systems and records would not meet typical social service program reporting requirements. The FBO did have, however, its finger on the pulse of what it means and what it takes practically, emotionally, and socially to "start all over." Moreover, on a daily basis it demonstrated what organizations can, could, and should do to make a difference that matters in poor communities generally and for returning prisoners and their children and families specifically.

Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research

Jane Addams College of Social Work

University of Illinois at Chicago

1040 W. Harrison St.

Chicago, IL 60607

<https://socialwork.uic.edu/centers-and-research/jane-addams-center-for-social-policy-and-research/>