

*The process of reentering society should begin as soon as an individual is incarcerated.
One group is cultivating hope for a successful life following incarceration.*

MENTORING INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

MEETING OTHERS WHERE THEY ARE

by Kristen Shook

Imagine you have just been released from prison or jail in a town hours away from your hometown. You are disconnected from all your relatives and friends. You've been given \$30 and the clothes on your back. As you walk out of the doors into an entirely new world, you hear, 'Good luck.'

After your release, what are some of the first things you would be thinking about accomplishing? Getting a job: *Who is going to hire a felon?* Going to the doctor: *You lost your health insurance while incarcerated.* Finding a place to live: *Where might you be able to rent without an income? How do you afford the down payment?* What about forms of identification? You don't have access or lost your birth certificate or social security card and now your state ID/drivers license has expired.

A 2022 report from The Sentencing Project claims as many as one in three Americans have some type of criminal record. Incarcerated individuals are stigmatized, intentional or not, by themselves, family, friends and society. With limited direction and opportunity within the walls of jail/prison to acquire new skills, develop social connections, and engage in assisted self-development, the time spent locked up, removed from society and decision making, has consequences that can last a lifetime.

One way to cultivate hope for a successful life following incarceration is to be mentored and there is a new way of thinking buzzing around the criminal justice field: The process of reentry should begin the first day of incarceration.

Rather than waiting until two weeks to six months prior to release, this process of reentering society should begin as soon as an individual is incarcerated, and can begin with peer mentoring.

In Topeka, the Community Action Against Human Trafficking Rotary Club has developed a program called Intersection to Care. Intersection to Care utilized an international grant intended to combat human trafficking to begin a mentoring program for incarcerated women. The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center states "individuals who experience trafficking are often arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for illegal activities they were coerced or forced to commit by their traffickers." By focusing on incarcerated women the hope is to decrease the likelihood of returning to a lifestyle that leads to being recruited or involved in human trafficking.

The ITC program has been implemented at Shawnee County Jail, who states that 2,116 women were admitted to the Adult Detention Center in 2021. An additional 218 females were on supervision through community corrections. Topeka Correctional Facility, the women's prison, reported an average daily population of 725 in 2023.

An ITC liaison works within the jail to assist participants, gain insight into their needs, and match mentors with a mentee. Once connected, mentors and mentees meet to build rapport and assist the individual with thinking about a plan for their release. Topics discussed are personal identification documents, mental health, substance use disorder history, housing options, and employment goals. The mentee develops their own goals while the mentor assists by providing connections and community resources.

Jodi, a program mentor, said having a mentor while she was incarcerated would've been a huge help. Releasing without a plan may lead someone back to the same situation that led to incarceration. Jodi has since found a mentor, "Having somebody to believe in me, cheer me on, and be there for the successes and the learning curves, as well as guiding me and providing encouragement, has helped me continue to grow. I've had help to come up with different solutions for various challenges, I felt not alone - someone actually cares about what I have going on."

She has been involved in the ITC program from the beginning. "There's definitely an element of purpose when it comes to helping other women succeed. Watching them make better choices and realizing there are different places that can help. Watching the benefits of mentorship in action and working has been a beautiful experience. It made me feel like I'm part of something really big, and I can actually see the success with my mentees."

Those who feel encouraged to become a mentor can reach out to me, Kristen Shook, Sharon Sullivan, or Melissa Goodman. The process involves an application, training through Family Peace Initiative and SNCO Jail, as well as a background check. Don't let the background check deter you; the program understands the importance of peers helping peers, and having those who have been through similar situations. We are seeking individuals who are willing to listen without judgment, guide others in obtaining their goals, and connect them to community resources. We would love to grow our ability to help more and that begins with mentors. To learn more visit rccaht.org. 