**“Good Luck” Is Not Enough**

I have never been incarcerated. But, over the past ten years, I have spent time in four different Iowa prisons as a teacher and volunteer. Nearly every visit (and I consider myself fortunate to be only a visitor) raised the issue of release and reentry. The concerns of the men and women as they thought about leaving prison and starting their lives outside echoed in my mind. Specifically, I remember a letter I received in early 2017. A man wrote that he was being released in six months and wanted to know what supports there were in his community. I was doing prison reentry work in Iowa City, but not in his area. After a Google search turned up empty, I sent him information on his county’s social services and wrote back, “Good luck!” But his situation gnawed at me. I wondered, what else could be done besides simply wishing someone - ‘Good luck”?

The Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC) estimates that over 95% of the current prison population will be leaving incarceration and returning to the community. So, what support and assistance was available for those 95%? My goal was to search for reentry organizations across Iowa and create a state-wide resource guide entitled - ‘**First Stop after Prison: Re-entry Support Resources (Iowa)’**.

The key to successfully returning to the community starts with the individual. And each person’s situation is different. But I kept hearing over and over how important finding support on the outside is crucial to staying out of prison. At first I tried to list any resource I could find, but soon found it was better to focus on those that offer help with housing (especially suitable parole locations), employment and health care. In addition, I wanted to find organizations that were welcoming and offered assistance with finding other area resources.

My quest began in the summer of 2017 in Des Moines. There I­­­­ met an amazing woman named Deb Theeler who oversaw the Freedom Houses that provide sober living for those returning to the community after incarceration. Like many small organizations, Freedom Houses has no website so I consider myself lucky to have stumbled upon Ms. Theeler. Next, I wrote to the IDOC and each of the nine prisons to ask if they knew of any reentry organizations. The staff from the prison in Mitchellville shared a long list that was aimed at women. The IDOC central administration shared their extensive resource guide which included many governmental and correctional agencies. However, my hope was to locate primarily non-profit organizations.

One year later (summer of 2018), I thought the list was still quite sparse. Too many regions of the state had little or no reentry resources. I made the decision to hit the road and visit as many areas as I could. I wasn’t sure what I would find, but it seemed important to actually see the towns and talk with people directly. Besides, it gave me the chance to see more of the state.

My road trip over five months included the towns of Burlington, Des Moines, Waterloo, Davenport, Spencer, Cedar Rapids, Dubuque, Marshalltown, Newton, Council Bluffs, Harlan, Mt. Pleasant, Fairfield and Ottumwa. What an eye-opener! In every town I was completely awestruck by the commitment and dedication of organizations offering their help to those leaving incarceration. I was told over and over, “We want people to stop here first. We will make sure they get connected to the resources in our area.” These positive efforts across Iowa are incredibly inspiring.

There are currently 135 organizations in the listing. Also, there are 32 recommended ‘**Places to Start**’. These organizations are positive places which will help you connect with other area resources and assist with your return to the community. The most recent news is that the IDOC plans to make multiple copies of the guide available in all 9 prison libraries. Our work is not yet complete, but every region of Iowa has some resources available.

Returning to the community is a huge challenge. The more resources and options a person has, the more likely they will find success. I hope the ‘**First Stop after Prison: Re-entry Support Resources (Iowa)’** guide provides real assistance to anyone getting ready to leave incarceration in Iowa. Just saying “Good Luck” is not enough.

Here is a sample of mission statements from a few organizations:

*“Transitioning back into the community can be overwhelming. Things like finding a job, housing, food and transportation can be hard on your own. Together we can open the door toward a brighter future by connecting you with resources and services post-release.”* This is from the Jail and Prison Ministry based in Dubuque. They provide mentors and other support in thirty counties in northeast Iowa.

*“Remnant Fellowship would like to be known throughout Council Bluffs as the beacon of light and hope for that demographic that is often dismissed whether through poverty, homelessness, addition, incarceration or criminal activity.”* This is fromRemnant Discipleship Center in Council Bluffs. They are an encouraging group that offers housing and recovery support.

*“Who can participate? Anyone in Iowa! Hope4Healing is there to help you find the solution and connect you with someone who will encourage you. You do not have to face difficult times alone.”*  This isfrom Hope4Healing based near Marshalltown. They will locate help in any part of the state and can start finding resources before a person leaves prison.

*“Even if you are not dealing with addiction issues, we can help you find the resources in Burlington to rebuild your life.”*  This is from ADDS in Burlington. They understand the challenges of returning to the community after prison. Their staff is warm and welcoming.

*Author’s note: Mike Cervantes is a long-time volunteer at IMCC. He is the Reentry Organizer for the non-profit organization - Living Beyond the Bars.*