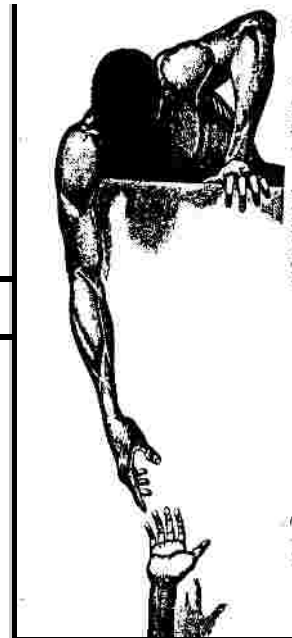


# CURE-NY *Newsletter*

To Reduce Crime and Uplift Society

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“He Ain’t Heavy”  
by Gilbert Young

## Sept 25 Gathering of the Coalition for Rehabilitation and Reentry

At the Schuyler Inn, Menands, NY;

to work together.



**George Oliveras:** Welcome to this historic gathering of thirty-three New York State organizations who are vitally concerned with rehabilitation and reentry, and determined to move a progressive agenda forward..

**Alison Coleman:** The *DOCS Family Handbook* was a long time in coming.

It is finally here. It was reported to me that the Commissioner had asked a DOCS PI rep to call me for a quote for a press release. I was shocked and very pleased that families have been included in this process. It seems our handbook in NYS DOCS is going to become a model for similar handbooks around the country.

**Father Peter Young:** I think it is important that you and your home church knock on your legislator’s door and let them know we want change. They said it’s a black problem. I said it’s our problem. It is society’s problem if we don’t have the necessary resources to help the formerly incarcerated succeed on the outside.

**Amy Oliveras:** We need to have unity in our issues and how we go about making changes. 1) Can we agree on a statewide platform? We have proposed a platform today. 2) Can we agree to be among the organizations involved to move our structure forward? 3) Can we agree to work together? If we can answer yes to these three questions, then I believe we can move our issues forward.



We have not resolved all the issues but we all want the same things. It’s going to take being allies of the state, it’s going to take being allies with the survivors of crime. We all want lower crime rates, safer communities, reduced rates of recidivism. To achieve that, we want

**Rudy Cypser:** We are at a cross over point. We sense there is an opportunity we have not had for years and years. There may be a chance now for a major change in NYS. I want to introduce you to a new word we are speaking about at the UN – *employability*. For employability we need treatment, education, vocational training, an infrastructure of everything in our platform. A vision that works for restorative justice is employability, decent work for a decent life, and the underpinnings for that. We need to put this into words and action as part of our campaign.

### **DCJS COMMISSIONER DENISE O’DONNELL: I**

consider re-entry a vital component of our criminal justice strategy, and one that requires the cooperation and coordination of many different government and non-government entities – several of which are represented here today.



Conferences such as this one, that bring together people from different disciplines and with different viewpoints, help us in government as we attempt to devise effective re-entry strategies. I know that many of you were at the Open Meeting on Reentry that DCJS hosted in May with our partners at the Department of Correctional Services and the Division of Parole, Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives. More than 100 re-entry organizations were represented at this first-ever meeting and over 30 offered testimony. The open meeting marks the beginning of a continued dialogue. I am especially glad to meet with you today, and to continue that dialogue and learn from you as we move forward to implement our statewide re-entry strategy.

I know that some critics misinterpret re-entry as a soft on crime approach to criminal justice. However, the reality is just the opposite. To a considerable extent, we know what factors are likely to precipitate recidivism, and

## Sept 25 Gathering of the Coalition for Rehabilitation and Reentry

Commissioner Denise O'Donnell, Continued from page 1

what initiatives help prevent it. Whether you subscribe to the view that society carries a moral obligation to rehabilitate those who have committed a crime or not, I think we can all agree that successful re-entry decreases recidivism and promotes public safety. Simply put, successful re-entry reduces crime. So there is a very tangible result to successful re-entry programming, from both a criminal justice and economic standpoint.

We now *know* – not *think*... *know* – that a returning offender's ability to adjust to life outside prison is linked to his or her success in obtaining housing, securing employment and dealing with drug or alcohol dependency and other health-related issues. Conversely, the inability to procure these necessary resources can increase the risk of recidivism. It is essential that we harness the growing body of knowledge of "what works" in corrections and infuse in our institutional and community programming a scientifically validated strategy of re-entry. That starts with recognition that re-entry begins at the point of incarceration, not the point of release, and that we need to provide programming and treatment on the inside. Research also shows that to be successful an effective re-entry strategy should:

(1) Focus the most intensive interventions on offenders at the highest risk of recidivism.

(2) Target offender needs that are most closely tied to their criminality through programs that focus on attitudes, interpersonal skills, anger management, thinking style, moral reasoning and the link between thought and behavior.

(3) Involve the community in re-entry efforts by mobilizing religious, social service providers and governmental resources to support inmates in transitioning back to the community.

(4) Develop programs that will support and foster family re-unification.

(5) Work to remove barriers to successful re-entry.

Addressing these core issues is critical as a public safety measure, and a wise investment in our communities. With that in mind, I would like to briefly outline what we are doing on the state and local effort to promote successful re-entry.

We know that offenders with the highest risk of recidivism typically have multiple and, often, interrelated needs. The most effective approach is to address those varied needs in a coordinated fashion. Toward that end, New York has convened an Interagency Reentry Task Force, which is comprised of 13 criminal justice and human service agencies that are working together to develop and implement best practices for a comprehensive, statewide re-entry program. The overarching goal of the State Re-Entry Task Force is to

increase success rates for released offenders. Successful re-entry cannot be achieved without collaboration among all the state stakeholders to ensure coordinated delivery of support services, including educational, employment, health, addiction and mental health services.

New York State is one of only eight states nationwide to receive a technical assistance grant from the National Institute of Corrections to assist the Task Force's adoption of the Transition from Prison to Community (TPCI) Initiative model of national best re-entry practices. The goal of TPCI is to increase the success of released offenders by promoting an effective transition process through the coordination of criminal justice and human service programming. As part of the TPCI model, the State Re-Entry Task Force has created a Research and Information Support Team that is comprised of researchers from various state agencies to help us measure the effectiveness of re-entry initiatives, and ensure that our approach is based on the evidence based data of what works and what doesn't.

While the statewide Re-Entry Task Force takes a broad, bird's eye view of re-entry, we recognize that the needs in each county differ substantially. In other words, one size does not necessarily fit all. So, the Division of Criminal Justice Services implemented a grant program to support the establishment of County Re-entry Task Forces to coordinate local re-entry efforts and to identify and address local gaps in re-entry services.

We all know that it takes the involvement of the entire community to help offenders succeed when they return from prison. That means local law enforcement, religious, community and neighborhood organizations, – YOU, ME-- All OF US-- are all stakeholders in this process. The County Re-entry Task Forces were formed to coordinate and mobilize these community resources to address the wide spectrum of needs of offenders returning to the community; to develop transition plans for high-risk offenders; and to expand the capacity of local jurisdictions to provide re-entry services. Currently, the County Re-entry Task Forces are operating in 12 counties – and we recently expanded to Dutchess, Onondaga and Niagara Counties. Grant funds must be used to expand treatment, facilitate the procurement of housing and employment for parolees and for other initiatives designed to reduce gaps in services consistent with each county's re-entry strategy. DCJS has provided, and will continue to provide, training in evidenced-based practice, case planning, substance-abuse treatment and other important areas to the Local Re-entry Task Force Partners later this year.

Although federal support for these task forces is no longer available, Governor Spitzer included \$1.5 million in

## Sept 25 Gathering of the Coalition for Rehabilitation and Reentry

Commissioner Denise O'Donnell, Continued from page 2

his 2007-08 budget to continue the crucial work of the County Re-entry Task Forces. We will continue to work to expand the capacity of the existing County Re-entry Task Forces and establish new task forces in counties where they currently do not exist.

Looking to the future, on the state level, we intend to coordinate efforts between state agencies to facilitate new re-entry strategies; work to implement a risk/needs instrument throughout DOCS, Probation and Parole; improve re-entry preparation and case planning and the availability of transitional housing and services after release.

As you will hear shortly, DOCS and Parole are working closely to develop a prototype re-entry model program at the Orleans Correctional facility that can become a prototype for the State. Probation is spearheading the use of the COMPASS risk needs instrument on a state-wide basis to ensure that levels of supervision are based on the level of risk, and that needs of probationers are identified early and programs developed to meet those needs.

And we will continue to work, wherever possible, to eliminate barriers to effective re-entry – barriers that make it difficult or impossible to obtain employment or housing. Research indicates that a key factor in reducing recidivism is gainful employment. Roughly 60 percent of people released from prison or jail are unemployed a year after their release, and over 80 percent of the people who violate the terms of their probation are jobless...

Some barriers may be necessary to ensure public safety. Others may achieve precisely the opposite effect. Does it really make sense to deny an individual with a criminal conviction a license to work as a barber because he or she allegedly lacks the moral character to work in that trade? I believe it is time to eliminate those barriers which do nothing to improve public safety and only inhibit successful re-integration. If we make it unreasonably difficult for ex-offenders to obtain housing or jobs, we increase the odds that the individual will re-offend – which means we increase the odds that an innocent member of our society will become a crime victim.

### **We need to break that cycle!**

After Governor Spitzer was elected, during the transition process, we were told by many advocates that the single most important step the Governor could take to further the goal of re-entry was to ensure access to Medicaid benefits for the vast majority of former inmates who are un-insured. Without Medicaid, there is no access to medications or substance abuse treatment which is critical to so many individuals at the time of release. As many of you may know, Governor Spitzer early this year signed into law a bill to suspend Medicaid benefits for offenders while in prison, so

that Medicaid eligibility can be restored immediately upon release. This was an important step forward for the 25% of the inmates who were on Medicaid at the time of incarceration, and we are working both at the State-wide task force level and at the local task force level to streamline the process for Medicaid eligibility so that benefits are available during the critical days following release when the risk of re-offending for addicted and mentally ill former offenders is the greatest.

Earlier this year, Governor Spitzer also signed a bill that protects against unlawful discriminatory employer practices directed at youthful offenders and persons convicted of violations. He signed another bill that extends protection from criminal record-based discrimination to current employees and licensees, rather than just applicants for employment.

In creating the Commission on Sentencing Reform, the first Commission in 40 years to re-examine New York's Sentencing structure and laws, which I am honored to chair, the Governor directed the Commission specifically to look at "... the extent to which education, job training and re-entry preparation programs can both facilitate the readiness of inmates to transition into the community, and reduce recidivism." The Commission has heard from renowned national re-entry experts and that testimony is already shaping state policy at the Department of Corrections, Parole, Probation and DCJS and will no doubt have an even greater impact as the Commission continues its deliberations and issues its Report.

But while a successful statewide re-entry strategy entails a great deal of coordination and commitment among and between those of us in government, it also entails a commitment and partnership with all of you – the advocates and the families. The wealth of information obtained at the May 29<sup>th</sup> open meeting gives us a great start to a productive and historic partnership. A recently formed sub-committee of the Statewide Re-entry Task Force will be focusing on the recommendations from advocates and service providers at the Open Meeting, and ways to foster our partnership and work together in the future.

While much remains to be done, the current administration ...as you will hear from my colleagues at DOCS, Parole and Probation, is committed to working closely with communities throughout New York State to develop new and better ways to transition offenders back into the community. To all of us, re-entry is an exciting component of the criminal justice process because it is one area where we know we can make a difference.

## Sept 25 Gathering of the Coalition for Rehabilitation and Reentry

Denise O'Donnell and Brian Fischer Continued from page 3

Together, I am convinced we can and will make a difference.

Thank you again for hosting this conference and keeping this discussion going. I am both willing and eager to work with you, and truly believe we can accomplish some great things together.

Q & A's::

**Rudy Cypser:** In Westchester, we found over a hundred organizations, public and private that could help formerly incarcerated persons and their families. A number of counties are making documents to inform on such services to people while they are inside. Could you get every county to provide such a document of County Reentry Services?

**Denise O'Donnell:** Yes. It's a great idea. We even talked about forming a pin map on where those services are located.

**Unidentified Participant:** We noticed Texas and other states have had a lot of success with pre- apprenticeship programs. It can also help them garner some number of college credits and helps transition them into real apprenticeship programs and jobs. Education reduces recidivism and improves reentry. Do you support education?

**Denise O'Donnell:** I am going to defer to Commissioner Fischer, who has been a strong advocate for education and higher education and I support him.

**DOCS Commissioner Brian Fischer:** Let me first introduce Mary Bogan de Belmonte, my Assistant Commissioner for Reentry.



have before.

I have some questions. Are the programs we are providing now really meeting the needs of the inmates? How do we know? If they're not working, do we have the wrong programs or do we have the wrong people working on the

programs? What works? We have a tendency to focus on the one third that come back. But two thirds don't come back. Why are they successful? Is their success related to something we can do, us, you? If it's related to Parole, we need to acknowledge that.

Next question: Is there a correlation between prison programs and later success in communities? This goes back to the concept of therapy and growth. If you have a teacher in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade who teaches you something but it doesn't register in you until you are in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, how do you prove what was said in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade is what really made the difference in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade? We don't know that; the individual knows that.

We need to start emphasizing domestic violence, parenting, and thinking for a change. I can't change anyone until they are ready for a change.

I am not an apologist for Corrections. I think we do more than people give us credit for. The Governor and I had a conversation just prior to his acting on the "Call Home program." He was not aware of the circumstances of the Call Home program. I informed him and changes were made. This Governor is really trying to do the right thing and we need to keep him informed.

I approached DMV and hopefully soon an inmate can leave prison and go to DMV and get a non-driver's license ID and he doesn't have to pay for it; we'll pay for it.

We hit the peak in 1999 with over 70,000 inmates, and as a consequence, a number of changes were made to early release programs. We dropped 8,000 inmates, and guess what? Recidivism rates didn't change. We sent a lot of people home early and only the same number of people came back. Not every inmate needs to be in jail as long as they are. We need to get that information out. Those who stay in longer do not necessarily do better than those who get out early.

**Family relationships:** Here's a true story. It creates a problem for me. This weekend, we had two young women come visit their spouses or significant others at two different facilities, each with a baby under 2 years old, each smuggling in drugs. Each was arrested, with their babies. They are acting as enablers for inmates who continue to behave badly. You as a community need to help us with this. We cannot enable bad behavior.

**Funding:** We have X dollars to spend on inmates, and for Parole programs. Everybody is fighting for the same dollars. Not every program is a good program. Not every group is a good group. We need to be a little more critical of ourselves – we do and you do.