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# **CT prison release surge amid coronavirus crisis strains reentry programs for offenders**

By Lisa Backus

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**The state's reentry community has been trying to figure out ways to reintegrate more people as they are released from prison during the coronavirus pandemic.**

Rob Hebert is trying to figure out how to allow recently released offenders to participate in virtual job training classes while they are staying at the four halfway houses his company Career Resources runs in Bridgeport.

Carlos Sosa-Lombardo, the director of the City of New Haven Prison Reentry Department, has been working closely with the area's Coordinated Access Network to get short-term housing assistance for those who are being released from incarceration with no place to stay.

In his role as a senior reentry analyst with the Connecticut Reentry Roundtable Collaborative at Central Connecticut State University's Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy, Daryl McGraw is one of several people responding to a hotline established by the state Department of Correction for families with incarcerated loved ones to get information on inmates and COVID-19.

The past five weeks have been a flurry of activity as the state's reentry community has been trying to figure out ways to safely reintegrate more people as they are being released from prison during the coronavirus pandemic.

It's been a challenge on every level, said Hebert, the vice president for business development and reentry affairs for Career Resources.

"We're trying to figure out ways to continue operations as normal," Hebert said.

The four halfway houses in Bridgeport run by his company allow recently released offenders to have a place to stay while finishing their sentence and gaining job skills in anticipation of release into the community.

But in the weeks since Gov. Ned Lamont declared a state of emergency and began limiting places where people can gather, Hebert's clients have lost jobs or been released to a halfway house with no way of finding work.

"People who just came to the halfway house can't look for work," Hebert said. "The DOC has stopped all community passes, including family reunification passes and no one can get a pass unless it's for a medical appointment."

The company has a contract with the state Department of Correction to supply housing, supervision and training programs. Clients pay about 30 percent of their income to the company to augment the budget, but many have lost their jobs, he said.

“A lot of our folks are working restaurants, which have laid people off,” Hebert said.

He was able to score some hand sanitizer for clients from a Litchfield distillery.

“We’re scratching and clawing to do what we can,” Hebert said.

McGraw fielded about 10 calls in one day last week from families who have incarcerated loved ones and want to know how to get them out before the coronavirus pandemic sweeps through state prisons.

Advocates have been calling for weeks for a mass release of inmates, particularly those who may be medically vulnerable, to help reduce the inmate population to prevent the spread of the disease in close quarters. But DOC Commissioner Rollin Cook has been steadfast in his directive to do a more controlled release of people who have adequate community supports and a place to go.

“I was talking to a mom who is 83 years old who has cancer and diabetes,” McGraw said. “She wants her son to come out to help her two or three months before he’s eligible for parole. I’m hoping the DOC makes sure he’s not sick before they release him to her.”

In those types of cases, McGraw and others who deal with hotline calls reach out to the DOC to see if the person is on the radar for release. As of Monday, the DOC had released 895 people since March 1 — the largest one-month release in the department’s history, Cook said.

McGraw, Hebert and Sosa-Lombardo are all involved in the state’s Re-Entry Roundtable Collaborative, which brings stakeholders together to find housing placements and other resources in 10 cities for those who are recently released from incarceration.

Under normal circumstances, it’s tough to find adequate housing and resources for those who are recently released, said McGraw who was released from incarceration in 2010. But in the current environment where jobs are scarce and people need a stable place to hunker down to avoid contracting the virus, which has killed more than 300 Connecticut residents, it’s even more important to make sure no one is released to homelessness, he said.

“My goal is to assist others in their reentry,” McGraw said. “You can’t have dignity without planning for success. One of the most difficult things that I ever had to do in life was get out of prison and start over. Reentry is challenging.”

The city of New Haven’s Prison Reentry Department is focusing on finding housing for those who are about to be released, Sosa-Lomardo said.

“Right now, we have a priority to support prisoners who will end their sentences and will be homeless upon release,” Sosa-Lombardo said. “They are more vulnerable due to not having any type of supports that people under community supervision have.”

The Greater New Haven Coordinated Access Network, which helps to provide shelter and housing to the area’s homeless population, will provide short-term housing assistance to offenders who will be released without a stable place to live, Sosa-Lombardo said.

The department, which tries to reduce recidivism by connecting residents returning from incarceration with services, has helped 120 people in the past month in the Office of Project Fresh Start which is a reentry resource center in New Haven City Hall, Sosa-Lombardo said.

However, there are other glitches caused by COVID-19 that his department is trying to work out, he said. Service and treatment providers, workforce development and supportive employment agencies are all trying to figure out how they can still provide services during the pandemic, he said.

Some can switch to virtual programming, but many people returning from prison don't have access to computers and a phone, Sosa-Lombardo said.

"For them, it will be tough to take advantage of online or virtual sessions," he said. "We, the reentry actors, have to come together to think of creative ways to keep supporting them."