OPINION

A prescription for those leaving prison

What would our communities be like if all were connected to a job on their way out of prison?

By Katherine Gergen Barnett Updated September 20, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



Eric Anderson, director of communications and special projects at the Transformational Prison Project, held his 11-month-old son Marcel on April 8, 2023, while attending the first meeting of We Are Joint Venture, a group of individuals who gather together to focus on sentence parity in the Massachusetts criminal law system. Founded and led by a group of men at MCI-Norfolk, We Are Joint Venture focuses on creating a network of information about the criminal law system. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

I recently received a handwritten letter to my hospital address. It was from a man I have never met who has spent the past several decades incarcerated in a Virgina prison. On a crisp piece of folded paper and in neat handwriting, he opened with his name, age, race, and conviction. In the following sentences he explained what he is seeking: a job.

He had read a Globe op-ed I had penned in 2023 sharing the results of a small pilot several of us at Boston Medical Center ran last year, whereby a small group of patients in our family medicine clinic received training to become medical assistants (conducted through a partnership with the YMCA) and were then hired by our hospital. This pilot was a great success and, as a result, is continuing this year. The letter writer inquired about the possibility of a job and ended with these powerful words: “Having a plan for release is a very important aspect of release, as far as increasing my chances of success.”

Too often citizens are forced to leave prison and return to their communities without a plan. As a physician on the front lines, I have witnessed firsthand the devastation that this kind of reentry can wreak on individuals and their loved ones. Returning citizens have to navigate housing, jobs, health care, and mental health challenges. Evidence demonstrates that reentry can be far more dangerous to one’s life than all of the years in prison. Some estimates have placed risk of mortality — largely from cardiac disease, homicide, suicide, or overdose — within the first two weeks of reentry as 12.7 times higher than citizens of the same age, sex, and race. Another recent international study of nearly 1.5 million released inmates bore out the same staggering statistics.

ADVERTISING

What would our communities be like if all returning citizens were connected to a job on their way out of prison? And what if these jobs were specifically aimed toward a greater purpose and life of service?

This is the path that my friend in Boston, Jamal, was fortunate to find after spending three decades in prison. Jamal wrote that he "grew up in the unforgiving embrace of a gang culture that thrived in the shadows of towering skyscrapers" which he "navigated with the instinct of a seasoned predator, always on the lookout for the next opportunity, the next score." "In my youth," he added, "I was blinded by the allure of fast money and street cred, and I traded my innocence for a false sense of power and belonging." Jamal was young when he was imprisoned, but while he was there he learned an invaluable tool — that of restorative justice. Jamal and others became a part of the Transformational Prison Project, whereby prisoners learn and engage in restorative justice practices. Through these practices, Jamal felt equipped with "tools of problem-solving skills and emotional awareness" and he was determined to "make amends and heal the wounds that he had once inflicted."

Now working with the Department of Youth Services, Jamal works with troubled youth, offering them guidance and mentorship, sharing his own story as a cautionary tale of the dangers of following in his footsteps. He volunteers at community centers and outreach programs and is working on starting a nonprofit that will foster emotional fluency and build civic engagement and accountability as a way out of the cycle of violence and despair. Jamal said that it was in this process of giving back that he learned to forgive himself — to accept that he could not change the past but that he could shape the future.

While Jamal's path is unique in some ways, he is certainly not alone. There are other programs, such as Everyday Boston's Bridge Project, that provide paid opportunities for returning citizens to contribute to and connect with the larger community. In the process, members of The Bridge Project develop the communication skills, self-worth, and sense of belonging they need to become engaged citizens.

But these programs and organizations should not be rare jewels in the rough. State and federal leaders need to consider building and supporting an infrastructure whereby people exiting incarceration and returning to communities have opportunities to enter jobs that have meaning and dignity. As Jamal shared with me, this kind of work became a "beacon of hope amidst the darkness, a testament to the power of redemption, and a living embodiment of the transformative power of second chances."

Second chances that come in the form of jobs with dignity and meaning are indeed a critical prescription to keep returning citizens alive and healthier. And I, for one, am very much hoping that one day soon I can write a letter back to the man seeking hope from inside the walls of a Virginia jail letting him know that second chances like this are waiting for him.

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