



SVdP Immersion Reentry Program Works in the Mist of Pandemic

It is difficult enough going to the grocery store during these trying times amid the COVID19 pandemic. It is almost impossible to imagine being released from an institution of incarceration with no shelter, no food, no healthcare resources. This crisis exposes the already bleak realities that exist daily for our brothers and sisters upon their release back from incarceration into their home communities. These realities become more severe as the social safety network of agencies, such as our Society of St. Vincent de Paul, are limited in their access to the people we serve-those already most in need.

The Society has implemented a national reentry program-Immersion. The first phase of the program has been working since January in 6 sites: Sacramento District Council, Idaho Southwest District Council, DesMoines Council, Green Bay Council, the Attleboro Council and the Orlando Council.

All Immersion Program sites are facing the challenges of the COVID pandemic which has required Immersion sites to adhere to local government orders to shelter. However, our Immersion site leaders and volunteers understand most clearly that those persons reentering will end up homeless on the streets or in shelters without much protection for their health. Further, any possible support from their family or friends is severely limited, if not impossible, to access.

In the face of these severe needs, our Immersion sites response continues to be as best as possible. We are focusing on helping our returning persons with primary issues and moral support.

In the Sacramento Council Immersion program, mentoring is the primary focus. As California is severely affected by the pandemic, they see the need for assistance for finding a site center and in helping to find housing for our brothers and sisters returning from incarceration as a primary concern. The mentors are using available technology such as texting, emailing and calling on the phone to lend support to those who are currently in the community. They have also been able to distribute sleeping bags and tents to those who are released to the streets from incarceration. However, the Council and Immersion program have exhausted their resources for giving out supermarket gift cards, bus passes and gas cards.

In Idaho, the Immersion Program of the Southwest Idaho Council is blessed in their partnership with the Idaho Department of Corrections during this COVID crisis. While Idaho Immersion is currently unable to initiate home visits, the program continues its connections with reentry persons being released from prison in their area of Boise, Idaho. The Council and Immersion Program volunteers have created an emergency clothing voucher system through the SVdP thrift stores. Since the reentry center is next door to the Idaho Department of Corrections Reentry Services, the Immersion program volunteers have assistance from the state with limited food stamps and Medicaid applications. Finally, they state that “it is more crucial than ever to work collaboratively with our community support our returning citizens.”

In Iowa, the Des Moines Council Immersion program has developed technology to reach our prospective Immersion participants as they prepare to leave from incarceration. Virtual reentry meetings are held with up to 25 inmates as they receive healthy living course work that prepares them to reenter their communities. Further, a COVID19 protocol has been developed to assist the 488 inmates who have been released using technologies of Zoom and texting to mentor them through this crisis.

The Green Bay, Wisconsin Immersion program has developed new contact measures utilizing cellphones with facetime features. Also, meeting in parking lots while our participants stay in their cars facilitates person to person discussion to plan where our brothers and sisters can find resources to survive the shelter-in period. The emphasis is on keeping the personal connection alive.

The Immersion program in Attleboro Massachusetts is one of the hotspots in the Northeast region for the COVID infections. Since March 1, the Immersion site has worked with 14 persons returning from incarceration. Since many of the returning population are not eligible for government aid and often will not qualify for CARES Act funding, the needs are multiplied for our people. Leaders of the reentry work state "For the (formerly) incarcerated man or woman, and their families, the Covid-19 pandemic has made a difficult situation next to impossible".

Orlando Council's Immersion program has also begun utilizing video technology to connect with reentry persons. They believe that staying connected to our persons as they leave incarceration is critical to them not returning to prison. Many of the returning population require help with behavioral health issues so continuing our connection in this time of pandemic can mean the difference between survival and failure.

Finally, under the leadership of our National Reentry Task Force Chair, Marian Lamoureux, the National Reentry Task Force is gearing up to move forward in growing the work of the Immersion sites when we are allowed out of shelter. We are working diligently on grants for relief during this crisis for shelter, clothing and other emergency supplies so desperately needed by our returning brothers, sisters, and their families. We continue our work implementing the components of the Immersion program so that when we re-emerge from our shelter-in-place requirements, we are more effective than ever in walking with our brothers and sisters returning and reintegrating into their communities.

If you have any questions regarding the Immersion program or wish to donate toward assisting our returning brothers and sisters in your area, please do not hesitate to contact our Director of Prison Reentry programs at bmcpherson@svdpusa.org for assistance.