

Saad Soliman Podcast

Link to the Podcast: <https://soundcloud.com/okori-christopher/reentry-week-podcast-saad/s-53f3a82b3Ey?in=okori-christopher/sets/2021-reentry-talks/s-R6PAmH6jR5B>

Mark Ferrante

Hello, and welcome to today's reentry week podcasts that will focus on the topic of participant recruitment and retention. I'm Mark Ferrante of the American Institutes for Research, joining me today Saad Solomon from Just Leadership USA.

Saad is as an individual with lived experience, and he will respond to a series of questions we have generated pertaining to today's topic. Without further delay, Saad the first question is, what does recruitment and retention mean to a reentry program and how does recruitment and retention affect outcomes for these programs?

Saad Soliman

Thank you, Mark. Excellent question, and really recruitment put simply, described the anticipated referral stream and quote unquote sourcing pool of candidates. Relative to the services provided and the needs identified often thorough assessment for any given program to address the needs of the population served.

This can, this can include governmental agencies, nonprofit partners, DOCs, residential reentry centers, and any number of organizations for the targeted grant Program.

Retention is the rate in which individuals are willing to comply with standards of program participation and maintain program involvement. In other words whether or not, after being presented with the program as an opportunity, does the participant remain engaged beyond the initial acceptance phase of the program.

Retention and recruitment affect outcomes directly. They're really meaningful indicators, indicators to the actual success of the reentry program itself.

If the program design doesn't take into account challenges in recruitment and retention, it could be terminal to the program. Some typical challenges that affect recruitment and retention our assumptions attitudes that view correctional populations as accessible and always in abundance of people. Assumptions towards these particular views could determine your program's ability to succeed or fail.

In my experience working with a myriad of reentry programs nationwide it seems that often the programs underestimate the inner workings of developing a meaningful, viable, and sustainable recruitment and retention strategy throughout the life cycles of the work and the program. and this has a causal relationship to the outcomes of the program and the participants that it serves.

Mark Ferrante

Thank you, Saad I very much agree with your assessment there. The next question is, how are barriers to recruitment and retention overcome.

Saad Soliman

Well, barriers are one of those things it's a fact of life, you have to recognize that conflict and barriers are going to be constant and so, leading in this space expect barriers, expect conflict, and be prepared for it and there really are a variety of ways, you can effectively overcome these challenges.

Innovation is necessary, it's not simply encouraged, by that I mean if a grantee or program is having difficulty sourcing qualified candidates from their local, county, state, federal DOC systems or facilities.

I would suggest reviewing the referral and response systems. are referrals being made at all? If not can the grantee or staff access these systems?

Systems are comprised of people, while people may not control systems, they're certainly the brick and mortar of every operation.

That said, strategic relationship building can be a marvelous innovative solution these relationships immediately generate buy in from an individual representative of a system.

Relationship building in this format is similar to resource development strategies and that you're concentrating on solving a shared problem and offering a viable solution.

To build sustainability in this effort grantees and reentry programs should place significant emphasis on developing and forming close ties with their partners, demonstrating courtesy, responsibility, and accountability through keeping promises for intakes, assessments, workshops, and the delivery of services. Additionally, if the approach just shared doesn't work, you may seek the guidance of experts in the field of reentry and formerly impacted individuals.

Many impacted individuals have become leaders and allies to programs and individuals focused on reentry. These leaders have not only overcome the barriers presented in their own reentry journey but are successful executive level leaders of organizations navigating the terrain and building successful models of reentry. A great example is while I was working with a second chance act grantee.

They're partnering DOC agency was rarely sending referrals, with an average rate of one referral per month. Participants would often elect to leave the program before ever enrolling. Was that an issue of ineffective representation of the program itself or an unwillingness on behalf of the DOC to work with the reentry program or second chance at grantee?

These are questions that need to be asked, sometimes difficult questions. I've seen experts from AIR and Just Leadership address these recruitment and retention issues and assisting programs to craft creative solutions. In this particular instance we're assisting the site, (cough) with methodology that will empower them to have a better initial messaging method and a more logistically sound response to receiving referrals; hoping, improving, and participation and outcomes are effective.

Retention tends to speak to the program itself. A few questions we should always ask ourselves, "Is the program designed to meet the needs of the population that is proposed to serve? Is it data driven, or is it cookie cutter? Does it have a "quote unquote" one intervention fits all approach?" Retention speaks to the pleasantness, relevance, and value of participants places on the program's delivery of care. Humanizing and valuing the participant goes a long way in building the rapport and trust that will aid in retention.

Providing relevant assessment, updated information to meet the dynamic needs of the participant at that moment can't be understated. When a participants file is sent to an agency, the Agency has to demonstrate some level of hospitality and a welcoming approach and policies that guide staff towards human interactions and not just paperwork, or a bed assignment. For example, a great first interaction may be, "I know what the file says about you, now please share with me who you really are." Simply beginning with that question makes people feel like they'll be heard and that the listener feels like he, or she is human.

They will be given a chance, and the information we're asking of the participant will self-motivation. If possible, allow a peer someone with experiential learning who's overcome similar challenges to the ones faced by the one incoming participant to conduct that interview.

Mark Ferrante

Great Thank you again Saad. I'm so glad that you shared that example. I too am working with a grantee that is having difficulty, working with its DOC in getting referrals and some of the suggestions you've made are exactly on point. I have one more question for you, what does it look and feel like for a person going through the reentry process?

Saad Soliman

Hummmm, that's an excellent question.

Well, it really truly takes me back to when I was released in 2010 after having served 15 years of incarceration from the age of 17 until the age of 32. I wasn't presented with any reentry program options. at the time there just weren't any systems in place, I had to navigate myself, and often the engagements with probation would evoke a trauma trigger: anxiety, fear, apprehension. All while knowing that I wasn't doing anything wrong. still the trauma affected me. Had I been offered an open, and accepting space that was supportive, I would have had less anxiety, and the trauma could have been

addressed. Now I was fortunate enough to tap into my internal fortitude to overcome my own barriers.

But many of our returning citizens struggle with this critical point. Humanizing the experience of transition and sharing with the person's journey provides a support that isn't necessarily a quantifiable metric. It was, and still may be, the missing piece of systems.

Restorative justice is a critical component of referral and retention, as it relates to this specific aspect. Formerly incarcerated persons speak to each other and maintain relationships with each other. And those left behind after serving some significant terms of incarceration, in my experience from 17 to 32, one would argue my formative years.

It feels like you're leaving your family behind. I said all that to say this, to be able to say to them as they prepare for their own release: "Hey, this program helped me, and I think you should go there as well" this significantly makes an impression on the person receiving that message, because we their friends, their family, are credible messengers.

Mark Ferrante

Wise words Saad. Thank you so much for sharing your time and expertise with us today and sharing this valuable information and thank you to all who listened to today's podcast.

Disclaimer

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Thank you.