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Nebraska pairs prison staff and peers to expand reentry efforts

March 9, 2022 (Omaha, Neb.) – The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) is launching a significant three-year initiative in partnership with the Florida State University (FSU) faculty and Well-Being and Equity Innovations, Inc. to provide reentry support services to all incarcerated individuals, using both staff and peer-led delivery.

“Reentry starts at intake and is the focus throughout incarceration,” said Dawn-Renee Smith, deputy director for programs. “As we infuse the principles of this initiative into our case management services and engage peers in the delivery, it will allow us to significantly expand reentry support and make those services even more meaningful for those who participate.”

“Extensive research on peer-delivered programming has been conducted in medical, mental health, and substance use disorder treatment settings. Data shows that when peers are involved, outcomes for patients substantially improves,” said Carrie Pettus, Associate Professor at Florida State University College of Social Work,

Reentry programs are designed to help individuals in their transition from incarceration back to the community. Nationally, reentry services are usually facilitated by correctional staff.

“NDCS has embraced the peer-led concept as we currently have peers delivering several programs, to include Intentional Peer Support, Thinking for a Change, 7 Habits on the Inside and Inner Circle,” noted Deputy Director Smith. “With this program, we continue to lead the charge in utilizing peer relationships to better deliver rehabilitative programming.”

“This data-driven program is known as the 5-Key Model for Reentry,” explained Pettus. “Around the country, reentry service delivery is hampered by the sheer volume of incarcerated individuals compared to the number of reentry specialists available to serve them. But this innovative model supports delivery by peer support specialists, in a way that ensures every incarcerated individual receives the support they need to thrive in the community after release.”

Pettus' team has already worked with correctional departments to implement the 5-Key Model in seven states with thousands of participants, primarily in the community. Early findings indicate that participants experience increased overall well-being and reduced reincarceration at eight and 15-months post-release. Although the amount of engagement in the program varied, individuals who took part in more programming sessions also reported higher levels of employment, overall well-being, and less substance use at 15 months post-release.

"We are excited by the potential of this program and the impact it could have on our population," said Deputy Director Smith. "The model is one that can be tailored to work with each individual. It has the potential to be a game-changer, because it focuses not only on what tasks need to be accomplished to achieve reentry, but also on relationships, mental health, well-being, creating stability and other facets that contribute greatly to success upon release."

The three-year initiative, funded through a grant of nearly \$900,000, began recently with meetings to orient staff members to the program and its various components. The project team will include researchers, practitioners and incarcerated peers. Over the first year, the team will work to translate the evidence-driven program to be jointly delivered by peers and professionals.

The partnership will result in expanded service delivery across Nebraska facilities, the creation of toolkits and protocols to ensure sustainability of service delivery, and an evaluation of the peer-led 5-Key Model program. Generating evidence to support peer-led reentry service delivery during incarceration is the first step to expanding these models to other states and ensuring that every incarcerated individual is prepared for success when they return home to their communities.

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NDCS Mission: Keep people safe.

NDCS Vision: Safe Prisons – Transformed Lives – Safe Communities

NDCS Values: Integrity – Respect – Compassion – Growth – Excellence