

SUPPORT 4 FAMILIES

A Proposed Program Model to Support Families of Individuals Returning Home from Incarceration

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Abstract

Leaving incarceration and returning home affects individuals and their families; 90% of individuals releasing from prison rely on family for emotional, informational, instrumental, and tangible supports. Although positive family support during this reentry period is empirically linked to success, providing support takes a substantial emotional, social, and fiscal toll. Without intervention, positive family support may deteriorate or become negative. This paper presents the theoretical and empirical grounding for creating reentry interventions which target the family members of individuals leaving incarceration. This paper describes the evidence base for *Support4Families*, an intervention developed using preliminary social support research and feedback from family members of formerly incarcerated individuals. Current testing and future research agenda of family support interventions in reentry are also explored.

Keywords: Family support, Reentry, Intervention development, Formerly incarcerated individuals

Leaving incarceration and returning home - otherwise known as the reentry period - is a stressful and disruptive experience for the families of individuals with incarceration histories (Grieb et al., 2014). Research suggests that the reentry experience leads to negative mental health and physical health outcomes for family members when their loved ones return home (Grieb et al., 2014). Yet, relatively little attention has been devoted to developing effective interventions to support the families who have loved ones with incarceration histories. However, creating support programs for families could allow for both the family members and the individuals with incarceration histories to have the opportunity to achieve immediate and long-term well-being.

Nearly 625,000 people release from prison each year which averages to around 12,000 people per week (Bronson & Carson, 2019). Upwards of 90% of these individuals rely heavily on family members for support when they return home (Arditti, 2005; Arditti & Kennington, 2017; Pettus-Davis, 2014; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017; Pettus-Davis, Scheyett & Lewis 2014; Scheyett & Pettus-Davis, 2013; Visser & O'Connell, 2012; Visser & Travis, 2011). These same families often suffer from financial, emotional, and other caregiving burdens (Arditti, Lambert-Shute & Joest, 2003; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Denver & Rossman, 2012; Shollenberger, 2009; Western, Braga, & Kohl, 2017; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Western & Stone, 2018; Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman & Western, 2010). This paper proposes a unique program model designed specifically for families with loved ones who return home from incarceration. This program, entitled *Support4Families*, aims to reduce family stress, increase family stability, and promote well-being for both individuals with incarceration histories and their families. The program model was developed as a result of pilot and feasibility study of the social support intervention, *Support Matters*, (Pettus-Davis et al., 2015; Pettus-Davis, 2017; Pettus-Davis, Howard, Roberts-Lewis, & Scheyett, 2011) and builds on a rich body of empirical and theoretical guidance for how to most effectively support families with caregiving responsibilities. Support4Families is 12 session program that begins prior to the

incarcerated loved ones' release from incarceration. Booster sessions are offered after the loved one has released from incarceration. This sequencing allows family members to learn, practice, and integrate the skills and tools into their lives prior to the loved ones' release and then to refine and problem solve the application of the tools with the help of a counselor after the loved one has been out in the community. Support4Families is currently undergoing pilot testing in two different jurisdictions.

Background

Over the past decade, research has primarily explored three aspects of the social support provided by families to their loved ones as they leave incarceration and return home during the reentry period: 1) The various types of support provided by families to individuals with incarceration histories; 2) The role of family support in reducing recidivism, or return to incarceration after release; and 3) The availability of family support and circumstances under which support from family is being provided to reentering individuals. Many scholars define family broadly to encompass the biological and adoptive relatives, intimate partners, close friends, faith leaders, mentors, and sponsors of individuals with incarceration histories individuals (Arditti & Kensington, 2017; diZerega, 2010; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Denver, & Rossman, 2012; Shanahan & Agudelo, 2011).

The majority of individuals with incarceration histories - between 66 and 92% - are reliant upon family immediately after the leave incarceration (Adams, 2018; Berg & Huebner, 2010; Naser & LaVigne, 2006; Visher & Courtney, 2006). Family members provide instrumental forms of support necessary to successful reentry including housing, clothing, food, childcare, transportation, financial assistance, and help securing employment (Adams, 2018; Berg & Huebner, 2010; Naser & LaVigne, 2006; Visher & Courtney, 2006). Families also provide emotional support (Fontaine et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2016; Martinez & Abrams, 2013; Naser &

Lavigne, 2006; Nelson, Deess & Allen, 1999) and assistance helping their loved one manage mental health or substance use disorder symptoms (Lemieux, 2002; O'Connell, 2005; Skeem et al., 2009; Pettus-Davis et al., 2009; Shollenberger, 2009; Wallace et al., 2016). Individuals with incarceration histories report that this affective support from families is critical to their optimism for positive and permanent reentry (Hlavka, Wheelock & Jones, 2015; Muentner & Charles, 2019; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999; Visser & Travis, 2003).

Positive family support is empirically and theoretically linked to promoting desistance, improving general reentry outcomes, and reducing recidivism (Colvin, Cullen & VanderVen, 2002; Cullen, 1994; Hlavka et al., 2015; Hochstetler, DeLisi & Pratt, 2010; La Vigne, Visser & Castro, 2004; Lee et al., 2018; Martinex & Abrams, 2013). Scholars Laub and Sampson (2001; 2003) contributed to seminal work on the desistance process which drew attention to the key role of positive marriages (Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006). Ullrich and Coid (2011) identified five protective aspects of social support that reduced post-release violence such as spending time with, feeling close to, and being encouraged by family and friends. Individuals with incarceration histories with positive support report improved reentry outcomes such as better father-child relationships (Adams, 2018; Swanson, Lee, Sasone & Tatum, 2011; McKay et al., 2018), greater quality of life, decreased psychiatric symptoms (Draine & Solomon, 2000; Wallace et al., 2016), improved physical health (Fahmy & Wallace, 2019), and reduced stress (Garrity et. al., 2006). Social support promotes substance use disorder treatment access (Thoits, 2011), retention (Dobkin, De Civita, Paraherakis & Gill, 2002) and sustained recovery (McGaffin, Deane, Kelly, & Blackman, 2018; White, 2009).

Complexities of Support from Families

Yet, social support from well-intended family members is complicated and can result in negative outcomes as well (Breese, Ra'el & Grant, 2000; Slaght, 1999; Strauss & Falkin, 2001;

Thoits, 1995; Travis, Solomon & Waul, 2001; Wallace et al., 2016; Western, Braga, Davis, & Sirois, 2015). Families may push too hard or too soon for evidence of change, or become so overprotective that individuals with incarceration histories resent being so dependent on their family members (Breese et al., 2000; Comfort et al., 2018; Martinez & Abrams, 2013; Sullivan, Mino & Nelson, 2002; Thoits, 2011). In some cases, individuals with incarceration histories may experience significant stress associated with otherwise positive family support, leading them to return to old social networks and potentially re-engage in criminal behavior. Individuals with incarceration histories have described this pressure as worrying that they could not meet the goals that their family had set for them, feeling as though they were not worthy of their family's support, and that family members simply did not understand what it was like to re-enter the home after having been incarcerated (Breese, Ra'el & Grant, 2000; Charles, Muentner & Kjellstrand, 2019; Fontaine et al., 2012; Martinez & Abrams, 2013; McCay et al., 2018; Muentner & Charles, 2019). These differences in expectations were especially pronounced when the primary family member supporter and the individuals with incarceration histories loved one were different genders (often the case with male individuals with incarceration histories loved ones and their female family members) (Fontaine et al., 2012; Naser & Visher, 2006; Pettus-Davis et al., 2015; Shollenberger, 2009) and when that supporter was an intimate partner (Kazura, 2018; Thoits, 1995; Naser & Visher, 2006; McKay et al., 2018; Zamble & Quinsey, 1997). Family members and their loved ones with incarceration histories often have different perceptions of what can be realistically accomplished and in what timeframe during the reentry period which may explain some variation in recidivism among those who have social support.

Just as receiving support from families may be complex for individuals with incarceration histories, there are also complexities for families who provide support to their loved ones with incarceration histories. From the first day of incarceration, families may be eager to one day

receive their loved one back home. Family members feel the burden of incarceration acutely as their loved one is absent and many families spend significant sums of money to support their loved one during incarceration (e.g., visiting far away prison locations, sending money for toiletries and food). While many families may expect that these burdens will lighten once their loved one returns home, the reality often differs from this expectation. Providing support to loved ones with incarceration histories during the reentry period also leads to financial and emotional burdens, some of them extreme (Arditti & Kennington, 2017; diZerega, 2010; Fontaine et al., 2012; Green, Ensinger, Robertson & Juon 2006; Hairston & Oliver, 2006; Shollenberger, 2009; Wallace et al., 2016) . Many families provide support to their loved ones with incarceration histories under considerably strained circumstances. Families of individuals who have experienced incarceration often report limited income and educational attainment, unemployment or under-employment, histories of criminal involvement, mental and physical health concerns, and/or competing caregiving responsibilities (Arditti, Lambert-Shute & Joest, 2003; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Denver & Rossman, 2012; Shollenberger, 2009; Western, Braga, & Kohl, 2017; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Westen & Stone, 2018; Wildeman, 2009; Wildeman & Western, 2010) . Some families also experience substantial frustration and resentment related to their loved ones' incarceration (Adams, 2018; Comfort et al., 2018; diZerega, 2010; Hairston & Oliver, 2006; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009; Farkas & Miller, 2007; McCann, McKeown & Porter, 1996) which may result in families placing unrealistic demands on their loved ones with incarceration histories to make up for missed time (Breese et al., 2000; Fishman, 1981; Martinez & Abrams, 2012) .

Research has shown that social support from families will atrophy over time – especially within the first 10 months after release from incarceration - due to the burden experienced by family members, (Fontaine et al., 2012; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott & Denver, 2011; Naser & Visser, 2006; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017; Sullivan, Mino & Nelson, 2002). The deterioration effect of social

support during reentry is attributed to the stress of reentry endured by both families and their loved ones with incarceration histories, the intensity of dependence of individuals with incarceration histories on their families, and differences in expectations about what should be accomplished shortly after incarceration between families and their loved ones with incarceration histories (Denver & Rossman, 2012; Fishman, 1981; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Shollenberger, 2009; Hairston & Oliver, 2006; McCay et al., 2018). As support from family dissipates, individuals with incarceration histories may turn to criminally-involved social network members who are better able to meet their social support needs (e.g., money, housing, social acceptance), thus facilitating their return to crime (Breese, Ra'el & Grant, 2000; Martinex & Abrams, 2013; Pettus-Davis et. al., 2009; Schneider, 2018). Taken together, it appears that individuals with incarceration histories are likely to experience strained, maladaptive, and/or short-term family support during their transition from incarceration back into the community. This suggests that there is ample need and opportunity to intervene on support from families. Intervening may help to generate short-term and long-term outcomes for the entire family unit, including the individual with the incarceration history.

Existing Family-Oriented Correctional/Reentry Interventions

Practitioners and researchers increasingly recognize that corrections and reentry professionals need to identify strategies to better engage families in standard practices (e.g., Comfort et al., 2018; Muentner & Charles, 2019; Western, Braga & Kohl, 2017). Traditionally, attention on family engagement has concentrated on increasing “family friendly” visitation policies and implementing parenting programs in prisons (Bales & Mears, 2008; Duwe & Clark, 2012; Hairston, 1997). More recently, research has explored the important role that parole officers’ play in engaging the families of individuals during the reentry period. Two examples of parole officer-focused family engagement curriculum include the “Engaging Offenders’ Families in Reentry

Coaching Packet” (diZerega, 2010) and “Implementing the Family Support Approach for Community Supervision” (Mullins & Toner, 2008). These interventions include strategies for parole officers to work collaboratively with the families of the parolees on their caseload. While these strategies may improve the working relationship between parole officers and those they supervise, they do not seek to improve family members’ communication, problem solving, or supportive skills.

Since 2000, of programs that directly intervene with family, two well-known family-inclusive demonstration projects - La Bodega De La Familia (Sullivan, Mino, Nelson, & Pope, 2002) and Safer Return (Fontaine et al., 2011) - have been evaluated with individuals returning from incarceration to assess the effects of family engagement on recidivism and a range of other outcomes. The La Bodega de La Familia program both provided services directly to individuals with incarceration histories and offered supplemental case management, support groups, and counseling to their families (Sullivan et al., 2002). La Bodega clients with incarceration histories reported significantly less substance abuse and fewer re-arrests than comparison participants at 6-months post-intervention (Sullivan et al., 2002). The Safer Return Demonstration Project evaluated a family case management model in which individuals returning from incarceration were the focus, but families were invited to participate (Fontaine et al., 2011). In the preliminary evaluation, Safer Return participants had significantly lower re-incarceration rates than comparison group offenders at 10 months post-release. The La Bodega and Safer Return family case management models demonstrate the potential for family-focused interventions to improve outcomes and decrease re-incarceration for individuals during the reentry period. However, both models are resource intensive and are not integrated with existing reentry systems. These models focus on case management rather than preparing families to negotiate the reentry process, building family resources, or focusing attention on establishing mutually beneficial and healthy social support

during this transition phase. Thus, while there is certainly need for providing technical assistance to parole officers on how to engage families and for resource-intensive programming that focuses on the individuals with incarceration histories, working directly with the family unit remains a critical gap.

As criminal justice reforms are enacted and the numbers of individuals who are released from incarceration more quickly and in greater volume than ever before, programs to support families, who then can in turn, support these individuals are urgently needed. Our existing reentry service systems simply do not have the human capacity to meet the need and families are an underutilized mechanism to help individuals succeed as they leave incarceration. We know that the overwhelming majority of incarcerated individuals return to families and we also know that families will likely be in an individual's life much longer than any formal service system. Thus, it is imperative that the future generation of reentry interventions include a parallel set of programs targeting family members of incarcerated loved ones with the aim of increasing family stability and enhancing practical and emotional support to improve both individual and family well-being.

Preliminary Intervention Research Findings Suggesting the Need for Support4Families

The pilot study of the social support intervention called *Support Matters*, an intervention designed for men who recently released from incarceration, provided the impetus to explore the availability of programming to support families during and after a loved one's incarceration. Support Matters is a group-based cognitive and behavioral skills training program for formerly incarcerated males with substance use disorders (Pettus-Davis, Howard, Roberts-Lewis, & Scheyett, 2011). Individuals with incarceration histories who enrolled in Support Matters identified one family member who provides them positive social support and attends 10-weekly post-release group sessions with him. Support Matters targets coping with and recovery from substance use disorders by engaging family members in the change process.

A randomized controlled trial pilot and feasibility evaluation of Support Matters demonstrated individuals with incarceration histories' and families' receptiveness to family-oriented programming (Pettus-Davis et al., 2015). Retention rates were high - 71% of dyads who attended the first Support Matters group session and 100% of those who returned for the second session completed all 10 weekly group sessions in the program, suggesting that individuals with incarceration histories participants and their family members were interested and engaged in attending social support-oriented programming together (Pettus-Davis et. al.,2015). The feasibility study of Support Matters included qualitative investigations into family experiences of the program. Several key themes emerged during these qualitative interviews suggested the need for an intervention that is designed specifically for family members of individuals with incarceration histories. Family members stated that Support Matters addressed the complexity of the reentry process for their individuals with incarceration histories loved ones and themselves as family members in a way that they had not previously understood. Families reported that they wanted a separate "support group" for families beyond the Support Matters meetings conducted with their individuals with incarceration histories loved one. Safer Return families gave similar feedback (Fontaine et al., 2012). Families who participated in Support Matters also said they needed more social support-related reentry skills such as improving their communication with their individuals with incarceration histories loved one, maintaining realistic expectations of what their loved one could accomplish, and understanding the difference between enabling and supportive behaviors. Families wanted "more" of Support Matters despite the fact that they were managing many competing demands on their time. Some families requested incremental booster sessions to help them continually provide support to their individuals with incarceration histories loved one. Families reported enjoying the support of other family members in the group and stated that the

presence of family members going through the same experiences contributed to their engagement in Support Matters.

The Support4Families program was developed to respond to families' expressed desire for group-based, skills oriented, programming designed specifically for them. Support4Families is unique from Support Matters because the intervention is delivered only to the family members of individuals with incarceration histories versus being delivered to both the formerly incarcerated individual and the family member simultaneously. Support4Families program content focuses on identifying resources and support for the families themselves, improving communication with their loved one, contingency planning when goals and progress start to decline, facilitating expectation setting, and increasing conflict management skills that promote healthy, supportive relationships.

Conceptual Framework and Program Components: Support4Families

The conceptual model of Support4Families proposes that outcomes for individuals with incarceration histories and family members can be improved during the reentry period by engaging family members in family support interventions. Broadly, family support interventions in this context are designed to reduce tension and stress in families and prevent instability and the deterioration of positive social support provided from families to their loved ones with incarceration histories. Family support interventions can, in turn, contribute to the well-being of both individuals with incarceration histories and the families they are embedded in.

Support4Families is based on two theoretical models: The Main Effect Model of Social Support and the Family Resilience Framework (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Walsh, 2003). The Main Effect Model of Social Support proposes that social support is the product of an active integration into social networks such as families. Integration into supportive networks is important because positive networks and families expose individuals to informal social controls that influence normative behaviors. In this theory, participation in positive networks and families provides

predictability, purpose, and a sense of belonging which, in turn, contributes to beneficial psychological states for both the individual and the family unit. Being isolated from positive networks and families, on the other hand, may lead to poor outcomes because having access to consistent social support increases the likelihood of an individual receiving needed support when stressors arise. Responding to the concepts of the Main Effects Model, Support4Families aims to enhance individuals with incarceration histories' integration into positive networks and families by directly supporting their family members as a means to increase family stability and the sustainability of positive social support.

The Family Resilience Framework further informs the mechanisms by which families can develop both adaptive and maladaptive support strategies. The Family Resilience Framework draws from research on effective family functioning and identifies key processes that can a) reduce stress and vulnerability in high-risk situations, b) promote growth out of crises, and c) empower families to overcome prolonged adversity and best meet future challenges. Using these two theoretical frameworks as a guide, Support4Families integrates components from four existing evidence-driven family skills training interventions. These interventions were designed for families of other high-risk or high-need individuals who are not criminal-justice involved but who place similar demands and burdens on their families. These interventions target family members experiencing some sort of caregiver burden and/or are designed to provide skillsets to caregivers directly related to the physical or psychological condition of the loved one that they are caring for. Interventions selected for review during the development of Support4Families have undergone rigorous evaluation and testing and have demonstrated positive results. The four interventions include: *Family Intervention for Dual Diagnosis*; *Strengthening Families Program*; *Powerful Tools for Caregivers*; and *Behavioral Couples Therapy*.

The *Family Intervention for Dual Diagnoses* was created for family members of persons with mental health and substance use disorder diagnoses (Mueser & Fox, 2002). This intervention aims to decrease family stress, increase family problem solving skills, promote family collaboration with the treatment team, and enhance the sustainability of family support over time. The *Strengthening Families Program* is a family skills training program designed to reduce behavioral, emotional, and social risk factors in children and adolescents by improving family relations and increasing parents' communication and behavioral skills (Kumpfer, Molgaard, & Spoth, 1996)). *Powerful Tools for Caregivers* is designed for adult caregivers and teaches family members skills including reducing stress, self-care, communication, managing emotions, and dealing with difficult feelings and decisions (Kuhn, Fulton & Edelman, 2003). *Behavioral Couples Therapy* aims to reduce substance abuse by focusing on restructuring dysfunctional interactions between drug abusers and their intimate partners by teaching skills in positive behavioral exchanges, communication, problem solving, and negotiation (O'Farrell & Fals-Stewart, 2000).

Support4Families Program Components

Support4Families is divided across four phases: Connecting, Assessment, Psychoeducation, and Communication Skills. These four phases are delivered prior to an individual releasing from incarceration and returning home. Booster sessions are built in to Support4Families and offered monthly beginning 1-2 months after a loved one has returned home from incarceration. Phase 1 is referred to as "Connecting." The purpose of the connecting phase is to engage families in the utility of family work, decrease stress and tension, introduce problem solving and coping skills, and focus attention on families' experiences as a result of their loved ones' incarceration. Phase 2 is the "Assessment" phase. The goals of the assessment phase are to build rapport with families, learn about families' perspectives on reentry, and identify what changes the family member would like to make in their own life as well as their desired changes for their individuals with

incarceration histories loved one. During Phase 3, the focus is on “Psychoeducation” which concentrates on family members developing realistic reentry expectations and fundamental skills associated with exchanges of social support. By Phase 4, the “Communication Skills” phase, families will be prepared to learn how effective communication strategies can reduce tension and stress in families. Phase 4 will be used to engage families in experiential learning to improve their communication skills. The final phase, “Problem Solving Skills” teaches families to problem solve on their own. The first three phases are designed to be completed prior to the families’ loved on releasing from incarceration. All four phases are designed to be delivered across 12 weeks in a closed group-format with no more than 10 individuals participating in the group.

After the four phases have been completed, booster sessions for family members will occur once their incarcerated loved one has released from prison and has been living in the community for a month or two. This lag time between release and booster sessions allows the loved one with the incarceration histories to integrate into networks and for family participants to have time to practice some of the new skills that they have learned. During the booster sessions, Support4Families facilitators assess the family members’ experience of reentry thus far, practice communication and problem-solving skills, and review and identify additional informal and formal support resources that family members can activate.

Implications for Practice

Support4Families is an intervention that was designed with the future generation of reentry interventions in mind. As research builds, we will likely learn that we must think about reentry from a family systems perspective because reentry does not occur in isolation. Therefore, Support4Families was developed on the premise that families experience reentry as well and that the family is a natural place to enhance support and improve outcomes for individuals with incarceration histories. Building on existing evidence driven practices from other fields of practice,

I have proposed one model of family-oriented reentry intervention. In simplest form, the hypothesis is that as families do better, their loved ones with incarceration histories will do better in the community over time. The goal of Support4Families is therefore to create family stability and individual and family well-being by providing family members with the knowledge, tools, skills, and resources they need.

Support4Families is currently undergoing pilot testing with two community- based organizations in the Midwest and the Southeast who are delivering and monitoring the fidelity of the intervention independent. Independent researchers are currently collecting evaluation data, which will be provided to our research team once the pilot has ended and initial evaluation results explored. The researchers are collecting data on changes in family members' knowledge and skills as well as their reactions to the Support4Families intervention and other descriptive characteristics of family members. Results will provide insight on the extent to which Support4Families is feasible, acceptable, and responsive to the family members' perceived and actual needs. The results may be highly informative about how the intervention is (or is not) responsive to family members' needs and in what ways Support4Families does (or does not) meet those needs. Support4Families is a promising intervention because it deviates from case management approaches that have been tried in existing family-oriented reentry interventions and program content was designed based on feedback from the family members of individuals with incarceration histories. As such, Support4Families seeks to build the resources within the family unit in a way that is manageable, realistic, and creates long term resilience for families and their individuals with incarceration histories loved ones.

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