



# MAKING AN IMPACT ► JAIL COLLABORATIVE

*The phrase, “It takes a community to...” can be completed in so many ways. At the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, we have found great value in being active participants in collaborative efforts to solve some of the County’s most pressing challenges.*

*In 2000, DHS joined with the Allegheny County Jail and Health Department to create the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative. The Jail Collaborative, joined more recently by the President Judge and Administrative Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, Criminal Division, meets monthly to address two primary goals: increasing public safety and reducing recidivism below the staggering highs of the 1990s. We are pleased to report progress toward our goals has been achieved by working with our community partners to create a system of services, during incarceration and upon release, that can strengthen and support successful reentry and reintegration for offenders into their families and community and help them to sustain a productive way of living.*

*As a recipient of a Federal Second Chance Act grant, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, the Jail Collaborative is aggressively moving forward with a strategic plan that will reach more inmates with more services that aim to drive down recidivism even further. In the following stories, you will read how tapping into the support of their families and their communities, peer ex-offenders, government agencies, court officials, service providers, and faith-based community organizations, has helped former inmates reshape their futures by taking advantage of family reunification, treatment and services in the jail and intensive supports upon their return home.*

*For more information about the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, visit the DHS web site at [www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/jail.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/jail.aspx).*

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*“But I decided I want to live. I want my kids to have different options. I still go back to the program. I still know they’re there for me if I need them.”*

Looking at John, you’d never believe he was a drug dealer.

“Really, you take one look at me and you’d be willing to leave your kids in my care.”

Talking with John, you’d immediately think he’s smart enough to do better than a life of crime.

“I got straight A’s all through school and I almost graduated college.”

Although his mother was determined that he and his siblings would have more opportunities than she did, according to John “growing up in a high-risk neighborhood takes away free will and limits your choices.”

John used his appearance and intelligence to rise through the drug dealing hierarchy, reaching a comfortable level by age 18.

“If you’re smart, you see what the drugs do to people, so I never used,” John said. “But you get addicted anyhow, to the lifestyle. I was the one with the money and the power. I was the only one in my neighborhood with a functioning passport. I had so much good luck; I thought I’d never get caught.”

As luck does, it ran out on John and he was eventually caught and incarcerated at the Allegheny County Jail. As John realized, bad luck is sometimes the first step to great opportunities. Illustrative of this outlook, the last five months of his sentence happened to coincide with the first five months of the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative’s new jail rehabilitation program.

“The group was diverse, so some of the conversations were about things I already knew, how to write a check, life skills stuff,” John recalled. “Other parts were about being honest with yourself. That’s the part that I needed. They asked us questions that don’t usually get asked and everyone kept it real. They tried to get us to see how things might have worked out if we had made different choices...what the alternatives would be when we got out. The program leader invested time in us because he thought it would make a difference.”

Once John was released from jail, the job-search phase of the rehab program started. With the help of an occupational therapist, John found a good, out-of state job where he put his sales talents to work for a legitimate business. He eventually returned to Allegheny County and started his own business and hired “people who really needed a job.”

According to John, “People need viable alternatives to keep them from doing what they really don’t want to do. If you’re not careful, anyone can be sucked into doing something stupid. That’s why I keep it simple now. I used to be over the top. But I decided I want to live. I want my kids to have different options. I still go back to the program. I still know they’re there for me if I need them.”

*“I wrote songs and dance steps and we’d perform for other pods. We wanted to let other women know that this was not the period [at the end] of our life, it was just a comma.”*



At 15 and tired already of a life of parties, drugs and prostitution, Terry confronted her mother about the lifestyle in which she and her siblings blindly participated. Told by her mother that she needed to be loyal to the family or leave, Terry chose the latter.

Over the next 25 years, Terry’s experiences from her formative years haunted her. Her addictions intensified. She paired with men for love and shelter, giving birth to three sons by three husbands.

Whenever her addictions overcame her ability to raise her boys, they moved in with their respective fathers.

In April 2007, defending herself against an attack by her then boyfriend’s angry drug customer, she sliced the hand of her assailant. The incident led to Terry’s conviction for drug possession and one-year sentence in the Allegheny County Jail.

Feeling like life had at last bested her, Terry found hope from a reverend who visited the jail for weekly services.

“She got me thinking of alternatives. I started going to AA and NA (Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous) meetings. Hearing other women open up gave me strength to talk about my life...I was always amazed watching women get released only to be back within days. I couldn’t understand why they would keep repeating the behaviors.”

It was then that Terry reached an epiphany: “If you keep using, you’ll either spend the rest of your life in jail or an institution, or die.” It marked the turning point in her life. She knew she had a decision to make, and she chose to live. She started taking advantage of many programs initiated by the Jail Collaborative.

She grew increasingly positive, and she and others on her jail pod formed a group that spread the idea of alternatives to negativity and negative behaviors.

“I wrote songs and dance steps and we’d perform for other pods. We wanted to let other women know that this was not the period [at the end] of our life, it was just a comma.”

Taking notice of Terry’s positive efforts, the judge allowed her to finish her sentence in the jail’s work release program, where she was required to fulfill certain goals. She earned her GED, improved her job skills, and found a full-time job within 60 days of being in the program.

Thankful for the second chance, she adhered to strict rules that accompanied newly granted freedoms – home visits, afternoons out with her mentor from the jail reintegration program, AA and NA meetings and support groups, job interviews, and religious service. She got in the rhythm of making positive choices and taking responsibility for her actions.

Having been released and living free from her past influences, Terry now has a home and car of her own, and with the help of parenting classes from another of DHS’ contracted providers, she has regained custody of her 13-year-old boy.

Terry knows the progress she made is closely tied to the honesty of the other members of her support groups. Her candor is her commitment to help the next in line.

“I always kept secretive,” Terry recalled. “Then I found out, the only way to help others is to be honest. I need to tell my messy details to let other women know that they are not alone; they can let their secrets out. It’s a powerful thing to know that I can help someone not use today, just by sharing my story.”