

Research has shown that children of incarcerated parents often struggle with emotional and behavioral issues that can hinder their personal growth and success, particularly when they have to endure the release and re-arrest of their mom or dad. When parents finally walk out of jail, nothing is as important to their children as having them stay out.

This is a goal of the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, a partnership of the Allegheny County Jail, Department of Human Services, Health Department, Court of Common Pleas, and community agencies that aims to reduce recidivism. Starting in 2010, the Jail Collaborative was able to build on its earlier successful model by securing funding for an expanded Reentry Program. This program has more than doubled the amount of treatment, education, employment and other services in the Jail and gets inmates prepared for release. In addition, skilled service coordinators and family support specialists assist inmates for up to 12 months after release. It was thanks to funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, local foundations, and a federal grant that family support became a core service of the Reentry Program.

Family Support begins in the jail by helping incarcerated parents develop the skills they need to establish stable lives for themselves and their children. It also works with families handling the incarcerated parent's absence, and prepares them for the parent's release. Participants meet regularly with a support specialist and attend parenting classes when they are in the jail, all the while developing their educational, employment, and life skills. Meanwhile, family support specialists connect families to concrete services – such as food, housing, clothing or transportation – and assist with building the parent-child relationship through coordinating visits to the jail, calls home to the family, and through community activities and connections to a network of family support centers throughout Allegheny County.

In its first year, 232 inmates and 204 children participated in the family support services that are part of the Reentry Program. A.P. and Derrick, whose stories follow, are just two program participants who have noticed enormous changes in both their family and personal lives.



Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services



Rich Fitzgerald, Allegheny County Executive



Ready for Reentry

A.P. does not fit

the conventional idea of an inmate.

“I grew up in a nice area, with loving, supportive parents. I have a college degree, and, until recently, didn’t have a record. I was, by all accounts, living a successful life.”

After his arrest in 2010, though, A.P. knew he had to prepare for a new future.

“Realistically, I’m going to be facing a lot of new issues when I am released. I can’t just return to the corporate world and be a businessman. A lot is going to change. It’s really important for me to use my time in here wisely.”

When A.P. was interviewed for the Reentry Program and its family support services, he knew it was exactly what he needed.

“Through the program, I’ve been able to learn job readiness, life skills and parenting in group sessions. On top of being able to discuss issues with other inmates, I meet with my reentry specialist once a week to discuss my needs. Family support has given me help with day-to-day life as an inmate, and I know I will continue to be supported when I am released.”

While A.P. is grateful for all he has learned through family support, the greatest benefit has been the monthly contact visits with his 6-year-old daughter.

“My daughter and I have such a strong bond, and it’s painful to be away from her. The family visits have given us a chance to reconnect and have fun. We spend the entire visit playing, goofing off and dancing. She definitely knows that her dad loves her. I know that our relationship will continue to grow after I am released.”



At only 26,

Derrick was already on his third stay at the Allegheny County Jail. This time, though, he made the decision that he wanted his life to go in a different direction.

“I have two young children, and knowing that they were growing up without their dad was extremely hard. When my incarceration caused me to miss my daughter’s first birthday, I knew something had to change.”

Change came in the form of the Reentry Program.

“An officer approached me and said I would be a good fit for the program and that it could help me turn my life around. I knew that I wanted to be involved in my kids’ lives as much as possible, and the best way for me to do that was to learn as much as I could about how to succeed when I was released.”

A.P.’s release date is coming soon, and he can’t say enough about how the program has affected his life.

“I think that this is going to be the program that helps people to stay out of jail. The Reentry Program forced me to be held accountable for my actions, which gave me even more motivation to do well. Everything I’ve learned has equipped me for my future, and I can’t wait to see what is out there waiting for me.”

Through the Reentry Program, Derrick took classes on changing negative feelings to positive feelings, job readiness and parenting. He also had monthly visits with his children, and it was during these family visits that Derrick first began to see exactly how his life was changing.

“That first visit was intimidating; I wasn’t sure how my kids would react to me. A few minutes into the visit, my son started veering off into other families’ visits. I tried to correct him, but he wasn’t responsive. He wasn’t used to having me as an authority figure. Before I had a chance to get frustrated, the reentry staff was right there to support and guide me. I put the information I learned in my parenting classes to use and found a way to gently correct my son’s behavior.”

By the second visit, things had improved dramatically: Derrick’s children were excited to see him and were responsive to his role as a parent.

“The second visit was fantastic. The program staff took a picture of me and my kids. The kids were able to keep a copy of the photo, and I could post a copy on a wall in my pod. Seeing my kids’ faces every day was a great motivator to get my life in order because jail isn’t the place for me.”

Derrick spent nearly a year in the program while in prison, but it didn’t simply end with his release. When he left the jail, he received a bus pass and clothing and food allowances to get his new life off to a good start. He also received aftercare services for two months and continues to see his caseworker for support.

“My life has changed for the better. I have been maintaining a job. I am the primary caregiver for my kids, and our relationship is much stronger. I’m not running in the street, and when I run into situations that could get me in trouble, I know how to walk away and choose to do good things instead. My life is full of new possibilities.”

For more information about the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, visit the DHS web site at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/jail.aspx.