

How a faith-based network helps people return to their communities after incarceration

by [Amanda Page](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue



John Sylvia is pastor at St. Paul AME Church and chair of the Charleston-Kanawha reentry council. (Marcus Constantino/100 Days in Appalachia)

After a two-year prison sentence, Amber Bjornsson moved into a recovery home. She took a minimum wage job at a restaurant within walking distance of her transitional housing. But she still faced the substantial court fines she'd accumulated prior to her prison term.

"Everything in front of me was burnt by kerosene, and I had to get across it," Bjornsson said. "I had \$7,000 of fines to pay off, and I worked at a pizza place. How am I supposed to pay those off? I needed help."

Help came in the form of a coach from Jobs and Hope West Virginia.

Jobs and Hope, a statewide collaboration between government agencies and community service organizations, works hand in hand with community reentry councils—a group of organizations that help individuals access basic needs. The state’s 20 community reentry councils were established by the West Virginia Council of Churches.

The issues that returning citizens may face in their communities are vast, explained Beverly Sharp, director of reentry initiatives for the WV Council of Churches. They can include access to adequate housing, job training, help signing up for food benefits or Medicaid, and access to transportation to get to their jobs or parole meetings.

Bjornsson’s coach helped negotiate a two-year extension on her court fines, giving her more time to earn and save to repay them. He then helped her get her driver’s license back and obtain a car.

“The car was a game changer for me,” she said. It made it possible for her to find better-paying work and then to volunteer with organizations that counted toward the 500 hours she needed to get her certificate as a peer recovery support specialist. She is now in a position to help returning citizens address their own barriers, as a peer employment support specialist employed jointly by the WV Council of Churches and another organization.

John Sylvia, chair of the Charleston-Kanawha Reentry Council and pastor of St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, explained that the success of the community reentry councils lies in community connections, including the connections council chairs have within the state’s Department of Corrections.

It’s the department and its staff that help returning citizens begin to create a housing plan, search for employment, or plan for continued education or recovery as their sentences near their end. But there’s not yet a sustained direct link between the prison population, DOC workers, and community reentry councils.

“There’s really no way to measure the success, because you have so many community partners involved in making other partners aware,” Sharp said. “The councils are really aimed at [coordinating] community partners more than directly serving people coming out of prison.”

Sharp and her team hope to soon provide training to the DOC reentry coordinators, a fairly new role within the state agency that is specifically tasked with helping people who are leaving incarceration prepare for the transition.

Before moving to West Virginia, Sharp worked for the Federal Bureau of Prisons for 30 years in Kentucky. That's where she first encountered community reentry councils.

In 2015, the WV Council of Churches asked her to sit on their prison and jail ministry committee. When Sharp suggested a reentry council program similar to the one in Kentucky, the WV Council of Churches took it up immediately.

They began with one community-based program in 2016 in Kanawha County. Four years later, they've grown to the 20 that exist across the state today—16 of them started since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funding from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative allowed Sharp to create two salaried positions through the WV Council of Churches. A Benedum Foundation grant provided the means to hire a third.

Community reentry councils help address immediate needs, but their success in this is dependent on the individual coaches and their local networks. Then there are the collateral consequences: additional penalties attached to a criminal conviction in addition to serving time.

According to the National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, people with any kind of criminal record experience 851 such consequences in West Virginia. These include mandatory background checks that bar formerly incarcerated people from certain types of employment, licensing, and housing.

These barriers often intersect across more than one state law and regulation, making it difficult to identify one policy to change. It would take comprehensive change to the state's criminal justice system, Sharp says—and this was attempted in the state legislature this year. Ultimately the bill didn't pass; lawmakers noted its complexity and the limited time they had to consider it.

Sharp, however, does find hope in a more modest bill that was enacted this year. It creates an expanded work release pilot program in five locations in the state, offering incarcerated people the opportunity to serve the last six months of their

sentences in transitional housing.

Sharp says it's a start. "The biggest inhibitor for a lot of people is a lack of hope. The biggest contributor to recidivism is giving up hope." —100 Days in Appalachia. This story is part of the SoJo Exchange from the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rigorous reporting about responses to social problems.