
PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

EFFECTIVE SUPPORT FOR REINTEGRATION OF RELEASED INMATES - TOWARD SEAMLESS SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING AND MEDICAL CARE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The prison system in Belize has been in existence since the 1800s with the official construction of Her Majesty's prison in 1857. While prisons are seen as a deterrence to crime, it has not always been with rehabilitation in mind, and the focus has not been on preparation for reintegration into society. It can be surmised that a majority of prisoners are released back into their communities but, are they ready? Is the community ready?

Over time, human rights activists have argued for the better treatment of prisoners as it relates to their stay at these facilities; however, there is little to no argument for support after they are released. The country of Belize has seen a consistent rise in criminal activity with the current rate of poverty, and many of these offences require a minimum mandatory sentence before release. Over the past 20 years, there has been significant improvement in creating employability programmes within the prison with the idea of successful reintegration, but this has not been seen to fruition. There continues to be much stigma surrounding convicted felons, and with a lack of support from entities to aid in their reintegration, these individuals face many difficulties. This is particularly more unfavourable in cases of juveniles who come in conflict with the law as they face even more adversity in their stages of development and require more support. There is a pressing need for trained professionals to aid in the development of necessary policies and to implement measures to address the issues faced by these individuals who are integral parts of our communities. In an effort to develop more sustainable communities, there needs to be equity, and this can only be achieved through the implementation of holistic support services.

II. JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

In Belize, the age of criminal responsibility is a mere twelve years old. At this age, juveniles can face legal repercussions for their perceived or alleged crimes. It is for this reason that the juvenile justice system exists in the country. The juvenile justice system is seen as a parallel system to the criminal justice system; however, it is designed to offer special protections to juveniles who come in conflict with the law. This system is guided by several laws, acts and conventions, but it is most considerate of a juvenile's brain development, environmental factors, adverse childhood experiences etc. This system is aimed at protecting the rights of children as they interface with the justice system. As such this paper aims to discuss the current situation in Belize as it relates to reintegration of released inmates, good practice measures of the mandated government offices, challenges in best practice and recommendations for improvement.

A. Current Situation

The Community Rehabilitation Department was enacted with the Penal Reform Alternative Sentences Act in 2001. It exists to promote the use of alternative or noncustodial sentences for juvenile offences. At present, should minors be remanded or sentenced for offences, they are placed in the custody of the certified institution or Residential Care Facility. These institutions are the Wagner's Youth Facility and the New Beginnings Youth Development Center. Although housed separately from adults in both institutions, the

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clients are still managed by the rules that govern offenders in custody. One major exception to these rules is the access to social workers and support provided by the Department that is mandated to provide services to young offenders. These minors that are remanded awaiting adjournment dates or serving sentences are offered a plethora of services geared towards building their capacities for life upon release. The facilities are focused on providing employability skills, independent living skills and basic life skills that are intended to aid in their successful reintegration into society. While these programmes are a step in the right direction, there still exists a gap in the lack of adequate follow-up upon release back into society which has proven to be most detrimental to success. There continues to be much stigma surrounding convicted felons, and with no existing entities to aid in their reintegration, the difficulties persist.

B. Good Practice

The department understands the need for consistent case management, especially for minors within detention facilities. As such, using evidence-based tools and assessments, the social workers are able to determine areas of concern in need of intervention. As a good practice measure, case plans are developed and implemented with each juvenile while at the facility to ensure there is some continuity upon release. These plans often include but are not limited to school enrolment, counselling, employability skills and rehabilitation from substance misuse. Juveniles are also educated on basic life skills to aid them in manoeuvring their daily lives. One of the most fundamental practices to date, has been the implementation of aftercare services which focuses on case management for a minimum span of one year following the release from any institution or facility. This practice has strengthened the continuum of care that effective case management is intended to achieve. These practices, along with other measures, have enhanced the overall quality of services and by extension the lives of the youths that have come in conflict with the law and improved the rate of recidivism.

C. Challenges

On the other hand, many challenges exist in the system which present difficulties for effective aftercare service to take place. Some of these challenges include gang affiliations, lack of parental support and supervision, high crime rates within the community, mental health issues in adolescents, poverty etc. To further explain the impact of these challenges I present the following case that highlights both good practice and the challenges faced.

The case focuses on clients C.L. and G.T. who both came in contact with the department due to being charged for committing offences and presenting as at-risk youths. C.L., being a low-risk offender and positively engaged youth, was granted an opportunity by the Family Court to enrol in the National Diversion Program after pleading guilty to a misdemeanour charge.

Interventions were put in place for the client which included enrolment into a trade programme, an entrepreneurship venture funded by the department and continued case management. This opportunity was the turning point for C.L. as his basic needs were being met due to the monies being earned and he was obtaining an education. The client was progressing greatly; however, this all changed when he allegedly encountered G.T. in his area one night when returning home. C.L. was attacked by a group of individuals and was murdered.

G.T. was later charged with this murder and remanded to the Wagner's Youth Facility. There the client started to suffer from deterioration in his mental health and was later placed on suicide watch. While at the facility, several interventions were put in place inclusive of Counselling and Social Work support. G.T. began showing progress and eventually returned to his usual self with the additional support. The client was later released given that the matter was withdrawn at the stage of Preliminary Inquiry. Upon his release, the client refused further services from the department, his parent failed to provide adequate supervision and support, there was no positive engagement and no interest in interventions set out by the department. G.T. was later murdered a few months after his release in June 2023.

D. Possible Solutions

In conclusion, there is an imperative need to bridge the gap to achieve seamless reintegration for offenders. There have been significant strides in rehabilitating offenders and preparing them for reintegration; however, much support does not exist outside the gates of facilities. In an effort to provide effective support for felons, the following solutions are proposed:

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- i. More structured programmes aimed at providing aftercare support to released inmates;
- ii. Community support programmes inclusive of parenting and capacity-building;
- iii. Education campaigns geared at community empowerment, resiliency and building more sustainable communities.