A Federal Judge Reflects on Reentry Court

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Reentry court is a means to help individuals, upon their release from federal prison—having served time for felony convictions—successfully transition back to society.
many months to get the first reentry court up and running successfully. The second session, held a year or so later with new participants, was run by U.S. District Judge Thomas Rose and myself. We spoke throughout the city to let community members know about reentry court and its success. One such evening I attended, in a jail setting, was designed to let incarcerated individuals know there is hope following release and that the community cares about each individual’s success. These speeches, in turn, helped the reentry court participants trust the judges more and trust the reentry court process more.

Third, the court carefully put together the reentry court team. At first, the team was made up of court officials and related entities such as the U.S. attorney’s office and the federal public defender’s office. The court then reached out to local community leaders with expertise in recovery, reentry, and restored citizens initiatives. Agency heads asked to speak to the reentry court participants or simply watched a reentry court session. Once they did so, they approached the court and asked to become involved and permitted to attend reentry court each month. This, in turn, led the participants to realize that many in the community wanted them to succeed—and helped the participants trust the team members more. Understandably, it was hard for some participants to reconcile that the very judge who sent them to federal prison years ago was now urging them to succeed as a restored citizen and reentry court participant.

Finally, the success of the reentry court can also be demonstrated by its ancillary efforts, which occurred quickly. Once graduates from the first reentry court session became mentors in the second session and began to have a positive impact on the lives of the second session’s participants, the mentors began speaking in the community on a regular basis. They formed two groups—known as the “Circle of Success” and “There is Help... There is Hope.”

Will the participants who graduated from reentry court succeed? Only time will tell. I certainly hope so. Here in Dayton, Ohio, word about the success of our reentry court has begun to spread, and our FBA chapter voted to award its annual Mona Guerrier Public Service Award not to a lawyer but to Kristin Keyer, the U.S. probation officer in charge of reentry court. Kristin exemplifies the best in government and public service. Although not required to do so, she gave her cell phone number to each of the reentry court participants and received many a late-night phone call asking for guidance. Her dedication and care for the reentry court participants has enabled them to begin the difficult process of change.

With respect to reentry court, there are some who will argue, I am sure, that this is not what federal judges should be doing with their time—that such a program is too time-intensive, that a judge’s role should be limited solely to deciding cases, and that the results or success of such a program are too hard to measure. I take no position on these issues and leave that debate to others. I know I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in reentry court. I also know I work with wonderful federal judges in the Southern District of Ohio who take their responsibilities seriously and who care about society—particularly the underprivileged and those restored citizens returning from federal prison. (U.S. District Judge Walter Rice, who created the reentry court program in Dayton, and U.S. District Judge Thomas Rose, who designed the point system and supervised the second reentry court session, deserve special praise for their hard work in making the program so successful.) Additionally, I know I witnessed first-hand something rather remarkable: an opportunity being given to individuals who had fallen, and those individuals accepting the kind offer of a helping hand and taking the opportunity—a second chance, if you will—to put their life and their family back together and start over. Hopefully, the reentry court participants were each given the tools and resources to succeed.

If this program works, and I strongly hope it does, the impact will be felt not only by the reentry court participants but by their children and families as well. Via this reentry court, we may save future generations from committing crimes and going to prison in the first place. That is justice indeed.


Endnotes

1See, e.g., Coming Home: The C.A.R.E. Program (Bucknell University video regarding reentry court in the Middle District of Pennsylvania), available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uhmqk66nPTk.

2Probation reviewed each applicant’s criminal history and also considered issues relating to an individual’s barriers to successfully reintegrate into the community, such as child support, a driver’s license, substance abuse, lack of education, unemployment, and housing. Once an individual agreed to participate in reentry court, he/she signed a program acknowledgement form and also agreed to transfer his/her felony criminal case to the district judge presiding over reentry court.

3To better develop that trust, and to assist those on supervised release and their family members, the Dayton seat of court—under Judge Rice’s leadership—has now embarked on a second reentry court-related effort, the Restored Citizens Initiative. One Saturday per month, judges and community leaders meet—not at the federal courthouse, but in the neighborhood where those on supervised release live—to discuss their needs and assist in the process of linking them to the services they need to move forward, e.g., child support concerns, driver’s license issues, securing a job, and obtaining health insurance for themselves and their family members.