Insights and Recommendations from Community Engagement
March - May 2021

By Reverend Dr. Michelle Simmons and the Sisters With A Goal (SWAG) Team

Cover Art by Mary Archer
Overview
Like a top-heavy stool, criminal justice-involvement destabilizes and breaks people down. Women on probation and parole need the strong foundation of healing for mental health, substance abuse, and trauma to maintain stability under the heavy burden of probation and parole.

The use of probation and parole has increased dramatically alongside mass incarceration. In Philadelphia, 1 in 23 adults in Philadelphia are under supervision. Harsh supervision, burdensome violations, and lack of resources, particularly unmet health needs, cause people to violate often and become reincarcerated. Black and brown people are both disproportionately subjected to supervision and incarcerated for violations. To understand the challenges they face and what they need from the community, we conducted three community engagement projects with individuals who have been on probation and parole: an online and in-person survey, a focus group we call a “Sister Circle” and a public town hall on parole reform. We describe findings in detail below, describe our detailed policy recommendations, and close with next steps.

We found that women are retraumatized by parole and probation officers, making it more difficult to rehabilitate and successfully reintegrate into the community. Fines and fees are a barrier to leaving probation/parole and getting a pardon. Lastly, most people who have violated have mental health issues and need mental health and substance use treatment, not incarceration.

Insights from Community Engagement
*Sister Circle, March 18, 2021*
Beginning with a full breakfast, we had 47 total attendees at our Sister Circle on March 18, 2021 at Why Not Prosper. The goal of the discussion was to understand what challenges formerly incarcerated women experience on probation and parole, what they need to thrive in reentry, and what they think should change within the probation and parole system. Guided by six questions, Sister With a Goal (SWAG) members helped facilitate the discussion while volunteers took notes.

Participants reported different stages of their reentry journey: some completed probation or parole, some had 1 to 6 years left on parole, to one individual was serving life on parole. There were 6 organizations represented: Empowerment Center USA, Empowerment Now, Helping

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1 Melamed and Purcell, “The Probation Trap.”
Hands, Sisters Returning Home, Opportunity Inc., Un-Incarcerated Minds, and Why Not Prosper (WNP). We began by honoring Ann Schwarzman for her service to WNP and policy work. Two Art Therapists led activities for the participants and created a canvas with the group’s art pieces. The following counties and facilities were represented: Philadelphia (Riverside), Bucks, Montgomery, Lancaster, York, Los Angeles (CA). State facilities included Fort, Chester, Muncy, and Cambridge.

What does a successful reentry, forward-moving life look like?
For some, this meant accessing higher education, sobriety, mental wellness, and therapy. Others shared how community-based organizations like Why Not Prosper and Sisters Returning Home changed their lives and gave the support they needed to be successful in reentry. People returning home need tangible, concrete resources (i.e. food, identification) pre-release so they don’t have to make phone calls, paperwork, red tape, have to know people to get the resource.

What would you tell the Parole and Probation Board?
POs are inadequately trained to meet the need of women returning to the community. Some experienced triggers that set them up for failure and struggled to pay expensive probation/parole fees. One participant noted: “Treat us like humans, we have our whole lives ahead of us.” The group agreed that probation and parole officers (POs) need to be trained in trauma-informed, gender-sensitive, and mental health responsive services to better support women. People need better support in knowing their rights while on probation and parole.
What do we need to thrive and survive?
People need understanding, forgiveness, and a strong support network in their journey. On a structural level, “Shift the culture”: Policymakers need to come from a human rights perspective to prevent collateral consequences to ensure people thrive, not just survive.

What resources do we need?
Employment and housing were first. One participant mentioned “They won’t rent to us”, and some suggested to be prudent and self-advocate: property owners should not be doing background checks, just credit check. Everyone agreed that resources are out there, and shared organizations that meet the needs of women, such as CareerLink, City health clinics, Community Development Corporations (CDCS), Inside-Out, Community Legal Services (CLS), and Career Wardrobe. The rich discussion included policy recommendations described in detail in the last section of this report. We closed by reflecting on the guiding principles of honesty, integrity, and growth.
Town Hall, April 8, 2021

Our Virtual Town Hall: Moving Beyond Probation and Parole had 48 total attendees on April 8, 2021. Eric Marsh Sr., Community Organizer for WHYY and The Fathering Circle, facilitated the interactive conversation with:

- Brandon Flood, Secretary of the Board of Pardons
- Ramona Harris, Vice President of Unincarcerated Minds
- Bobby Harris, Found and President of Unincarcerated Minds, Organizer with Dignity & Power NOW
- Vincent Motto, Former Defense Lawyer, Early Termination Specialist
- Ronald Cuie, Special Advisor to the Empowerment Center USA

The conversation was rich and diverse in terms of experiences and perspectives. To make the discussion interactive, the organizers posted 4 polls throughout the discussion for the audience to answer.
**Survey, March through May 2021**

We distributed an 11-question survey online and in-person with the help of the SWAG team and volunteers and received 29 total responses. We first went to homeless shelters and solicited people on parole and probation, offering them $10 to complete the survey. We then posted the survey online and distributed it at the Sister Circle. We analyzed the data by inputting the responses in a spreadsheets and counting totals. For the open-ended questions, we identified common themes across responses, quantified responses per theme, and selected quotes that convey themes for each question.

A total of 17 respondents were currently on probation or parole. The same number had been incarcerated in county jail while eleven were incarcerated in state prison. Eleven reported having violated at some point, and nine had never violated their requirements. Of those violating, seven had a technical violation, six had a new case, and some experienced both. Most people agreed a parole sentence should be no longer than one year.

The biggest challenge was dealing with fines and costs and financially stability. About 50 percent reported COVID-19 made these challenges more difficult.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long should a parole sentence be?</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No more than 1 year</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 year</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What are your biggest challenges since returning to the community while on probation or parole?

- **Probation/Parole Requirements**: 8 responses
- **Family Reunification**: 4 responses
- **Accessing Recovery Treatment**: 4 responses
- **Accessing Education/Training**: 3 responses
- **Accessing Mental Health Treatment**: 6 responses
- **Finding Affordable Housing**: 12 responses
- **Fines and Costs**: 13 responses
- **Financial Stability**: 16 responses
- **Finding a Job**: 12 responses
- **Feeling Safe**: 6 responses
Respondents most frequently used social services related to job placement, wellness and healing, and education. Most accesses services online, by phone, or through an organization, including government offices like parole and welfare. Transportation and more visibility would make it easier to access these resources. One respondent wrote that “Street outreach, nonprofit agencies helping folks access resources with buses and tokens” would improve access. The most important resources for reentry were housing, employment or job training, and mental health treatment.

**What resources are most important for reentry and/or the success of people on probation or parole?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment &amp; job training</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health treatment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery treatment</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What organizations helped you?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hub</th>
<th>Project HOME</th>
<th>The Last Stop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why Not Prosper</td>
<td>Prevention Point</td>
<td>AOS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters Returning Home</td>
<td>CareerLink</td>
<td>Bridgeway Housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Start</td>
<td>Probation/parole officers</td>
<td>Shelters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents suggested these services could be improved by providing food, help accessing housing and jobs, and free phone and computer access. We also asked what services, existing or nonexistent, or policy changes would make it easier to exit probation or parole. Overwhelmingly, respondents suggested easing guidelines, such as drug testing and fines and fees. This was followed by early termination, shorter sentences, and help finding jobs. One response summarized the themes among responses, “The court cost, fines and fees. Probation officer should be more flexible around employment and education.”
What services or policy change would make it easier to exit probation or parole?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORE HELPFUL OFFICERS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFORM FINES AND FEES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADDICTION RESOURCES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HELP WITH JOBS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HELP WITH HOUSING</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HELP WITH TRANSPORTATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EARLY TERMINATION/SHORTER SENTENCES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORE RESOURCES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFORM STRINGENT GUIDELINES</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What would you tell the Parole Board?

"Better program and resources"

"Keeping people on probation/parole doesn't help"

"Probation shouldn't be easy to end up back in jail"

"It would be nice to be able to have people that understand what it's like to be in our shoes... When we have a problem with our parole officer...we should be able to talk to somebody about it and not just brushed off...these are our lives that you have in your hands."

What is your vision for your probation and parole?

"I would redesign the whole structure. It is broken from the inside out."

"Let people see their children and don't lock them up"

"Just want them to focus more on helping people oppose to sending them back to jail...for little stuff"

"You should not have to pay for supervision"

Responses to the last question, “What do you need from your community?” are displayed in the word cloud below. The sentences have been deconstructed and organized by word frequency. Respondents reported needing more help and support, less judgement, and jobs.
Demographic Data

### Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete high school/GED</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed high school/GED</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed college degree</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete high school/GED</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Age Ranges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56+</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gender

- **Women**: 93% (7% Men)

### Race/Ethnicity

- **Black**: 46%
- **Latinx**: 3%
- **Multiple**: 21%
- **White**: 3%
- **American Indian**: 3%
- **Asian**: 3%

- **Race/Ethnicity n=29**

- **American Indian**: 3%
- **Asian**: 3%
- **White**: 24%
- **Multiple**: 21%
- **Latinx**: 3%

Policy Recommendations
Based on collected data, themes, and previous work, we propose policy recommendations for the following groups: Office of Reentry Partnerships, Parole Board and Adult Probation and Parole, and the community of returning citizen clients. We felt it was important to collect data for those on state parole. A dual county offender has requirements in both city and state affairs as it relates to criminal justice. Our recommendations address the needs of this community to be representative of the reentry community in Philadelphia.

Recommendations for the Parole Board and Adult Probation and Parole (APPD)

1. Review probation or parole after 1 year by working with POs to create an individual “roadmap to early termination”.

Rationale: Probation and parole sentences should be shortened to reduce recidivism and encourage rehabilitation. Stringent rules cause people to violate often for minor offenses, destabilizing them further and preventing opportunities for life in the community. There are also few opportunities for review to let someone off probation and parole for good behavior and demonstrated commitment to accessing education, employment, and treatment. Furthermore, if someone violates, it is likely they will violate within the first year. The probation or parole officer, who knows the client the best, should work with client to create this roadmap and make a yearly assessment for early termination.

Action: Parole officers should work with parolees on an individual roadmap to early termination. The roadmap includes individual plans and experiences as grounds for early termination, including education and employment goals, payment plan or method to reduce fines and costs, and mental, behavioral, and physical health treatment. Annually, Parole, probation, DOC officers can recommend names for people doing well to get off probation or parole early.

2. Train probation and parole officers in trauma, mental health, de-escalation, gender-responsive services.

Rationale: In the Town Hall, Ramona Harris explained that one of the biggest hindrances to probation and parole is that they do not take cases individually. Parole just looks like policing instead of helping people transition into society in a respectful fashion. Through our community engagement efforts, we learned that probation and parole officers can retraumatize women, which hinders reentry success and leads to violation and/or recidivism. Justice-involved women have already been traumatized by incarceration and life experiences. Research shows that
formerly incarcerated women suffer higher rates of trauma and are poorer than men. The vast majority of incarcerated women have experienced trauma and physical or sexual victimization in their lives.

Gender-responsive criminal justice approaches consider women’s unique pathways into and out of the system. They address complexities of poverty, race, class, gender inequality, and culture, which contribute to women’s marginalization and exacerbate reentry challenges. Trauma-informed care acknowledges trauma’s impact, symptoms, and how correctional institutions can reenact trauma. The goal is to minimize harm and re-traumatization. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) guide to help women reenter the community recommends the considerations necessary for reentry services:

- “Identify Critical Reentry Needs
- Address Substance Use Disorders
- Build Links to Mental Health Care
- Address Physical and Reproductive Health Care
- Provide Culturally Competent Services
- Provide Trauma-informed Services
- Build Healthy, Trusting Relationships
- Reestablish Family Relationships
- Facilitate Payment of Justice System Fines and Fees
- Increase Self-efficacy Through Certified Peer Specialists”

**Action:** All POs need to successfully complete mandatory, gender-responsive, de-escalation, trauma and mental health-informed training before they get the badge. A good start is considering how the above considerations from SAMHSA are implemented into trainings and what gaps exist in training officers to deal with traumatized clients. To best determine what

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2 Cowan, “Incarcerated Women: Poverty, Trauma and Unmet Need America Is in the Midst of an Epidemic of Mass Incarceration.”
3 National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, “Fact Sheet on Justice Involved Women 2016.”
4 To assess the unique needs of women, see this report: [Risk-needs Assessments Appropriate for Women Offenders.](https://www.samhsa.gov/gains-center/trauma-training-criminal-justice-professionals)
5 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), *After Incarceration: A Guide to Helping Women Reenter the Community.*
6 Miller and Najavits, “Creating Trauma-Informed Correctional Care: A Balance of Goals and Environment.”
7 Ibid.
8 See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) GAINS Center for trauma training for criminal justice professionals: [https://www.samhsa.gov/gains-center/trauma-training-criminal-justice-professionals](https://www.samhsa.gov/gains-center/trauma-training-criminal-justice-professionals)
training is needed, communities and reentry service providers need to collect data on current APPD practices, including: How many POs are on payroll? What’s training like before the badge? How is training developed? How does APPD stay up to date with effective, data-informed, and evidence-based supervision training and practices? How can we ensure POs are held accountable?

In addition to determining the correct training for trauma and mental health-informed, de-escalation, and gender-responsive services, we suggest service providers present to current POs in monthly trainings. This is a chance for POs to learn about and build relationships with service providers to better care for the population under supervision. Lastly, APPD should make in-service training for POs to complete on a regular basis.

3. **Establish a reentry office at APPD that houses resources, manages training, and ensures accountability among officers.**

**Rationale:** There is little accountability for POs once policies are in place. Communities and policymakers need to keep law enforcement accountable, especially those managing new training. Ensure POs are properly trained and communities are receiving adequate resources. A team of social workers and reentry specialists would help with access to resources, rights, and overall wellness. The office could serve as a liaison between service providers and POs. The more information POs have about available resources in the community and conditions of returning citizens, the more they can support individuals to get off probation and parole. They need to build relationship with CBOs and recovery housing, not just make individuals rely on themselves. Broad awareness of resources available and relationships with service providers smooths the transition, reduces risk of recidivism, and is better for safety of clients and the public.

**Action:** Partner with the Office of Reentry Partnerships or a third-party service provider to establish this office. Create a resource book for women pre-release, created with returning citizens. Collaborate with Office of Reentry Partnership to make sure POs have Why Not Prosper’s Reentry and Recovery Resource App on their phone so they can easily search for resources. The office would promote a soft handoff from PO to service provider, such as GED, housing, etc.
4. Allow agencies and colleges to go into correctional institutions to help apply for pardons and early termination.

**Rationale:** Individuals in need help applying for early termination and commutation but lack resources while in prison.

**Action:** DOC or Board of Pardons should allow nonprofit and educational organizations into institutions to provide hands-on support for pardons and commutation applications.

5. Review sunset legislation and advocacy to end parole.

**Rationale:** As Bobby Harris, stated in the Town Hall, “The sun is setting on Parole/Probation in Pennsylvania.” In her *Inquirer* op-ed, Ramona Harris said would allow for the automatic termination of parole, but public officials are not considering this legislation.\(^9\)

**Action:** The state needs to listen to advocates and pass sunset legislation on parole. Similar to early termination process, the Parole Board and POs can create roadmaps to automatic termination after a certain timeframe. Agencies and community-based organizations can help implement a roadmap and operationalize process for state and county offices.

6. Eliminate or minimize fines and costs as a condition of parole.

**Rationale:** Fines, costs, and restitution are another barrier to completing parole and obtaining a pardon. We know reducing costs and terminating parole helps people successfully reenter the community. Christine B. was on parole in Phila and Montgomery counties. She was on the street for two years and couldn’t get off of parole without paying her fines and costs. After writing a letter to the judge and her parole officer demonstrating her hardship and submitting requests for waiving costs, the judge waived her outstanding fines and costs and let her off parole. This motivated her to continue her reentry journey, establish stability, and thrive. She is now working, reunited with her child, opened savings accounts, and got her certification in flower arrangements as a second job. Additionally, according to Secretary Flood, individuals with outstanding fines, costs, restitutions can apply for a pardon, but it will have adverse effects on the outcome.

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\(^9\) Harris, “Lifetime Parole Forces Families to Live with Invisible Shackles | Opinion.”
Action: Offer community service alternatives or reduce costs based on an ability-to-pay assessments.

Recommendation for the Office of Reentry Partnerships

7. “Know Your Rights” guide for people on probation and parole, glossary for legal jargon

Rationale: APPD and the courts do not properly inform communities of their rights while on probation and parole. Communities need a single accessible, plain language resource guide to help understand their rights, access resources, and self-advocate in the courtroom and under supervision. This knowledge is critical to both succeeding in reentry and improving supervision systems.

Action: The Office should fund another initiative where community-based organizations, legal service providers, and researchers can put a ‘Know your Rights’ manual together for communities on probation and parole. This would include roles of probations, policies for early termination, a glossary for legal jargon, and a local resource directory.

8. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis study to see how much DOC, Parole and APPD can save by releasing people early.

Rationale: Research has shown that pardons\(^{10}\) and reentry services\(^{11}\) economically benefit the rest of society. How reentry Incarceration and parole are expensive services paid for by tax dollars and revenue from fines and fees. Conducting a cost-benefit analysis internally would demonstrate how the cost of excessive parole and prison sentences negatively affected the state government finances and the overall economy.

Action: Office of Reentry Partnerships can conduct this study internally or contract it to a research team and present findings to the City’s and state’s fiscal and criminal justice offices.

Recommendation for Clients

\(^{10}\) Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, “Pardons as an Economic Investment Strategy: Evaluating a Decade of Data in Pennsylvania.”

\(^{11}\) Roman and Chalfin, “Jail Reentry Roundtable Initiative Does It Pay to Invest in Reentry Programs for Jail Inmates?”
9. Self-advocacy and Client Responsibility

Rationale: Clients need to let people know when they need support to help exit probation and parole. They need to identify what their rights are, when their rights are being violated, when they are behind on fines and costs, have no housing, etc. To be successful on probation/parole, POs and APPD need to be accessible, understanding, and knowledgeable of resources. Client self-advocacy, coupled with POs empathy and resource capital, could reduce violations and recidivism. POs will be more informed of client needs to send information timely and accurately. If there is a reentry services office or team within APPD, clients will have a second access point for resources.

Action: Clients should have know-your-rights education and become confident in their ability to ask for help. They should be able to ask and receive written guidance on the rules of probation and parole, pardons, early termination, and fines and fees.

Next Steps
Thank you to the Office of Reentry Partnerships and our community partners. After the grant period ends June 1, we are open to continue working to implement recommendations. We will continue to work with community partners listed below to pursue justice for people on probation and parole.

At the conclusion of this engagement process, we are concerned about the barrier to accessing APPD data to better understand why people violate. As part of the MacArthur Community Advisory Committee (CAC), eleven agencies all submit their data to the CAC, except for APPD, who will not release risk assessment form and other data. This data reveals how the agency drops detainers and assesses risk, which could be a reason why so many people keep going to jail and prison. We have Judge Clemens’ support getting Black and Brown folks released, but we need to work with APPD to understand drivers of parole and probation violations. This is an immediate area where the Office of Reentry Partnerships could step in.

Community Partners

- Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration (CADBI)
- ACLU-Pennsylvania
- Empowerment Now
- Unincarcerated Minds
Dignity and Power Now
Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity
Free the Ballot
Reform Alliance
Economy League
Abolitionist Law Center

Works Cited


