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BEYOND THE BIG HOUSE

Beyond the Big House: Making the Transition to Life After Prison

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Abstract

As the cost of imprisonment climbs, overcrowding in correctional facilities proves to be a major concern. The Virginia Department of Corrections spends an average of \$24,380 per inmate annually (VADOC, 2013). The burden of recidivism puts strain on the state budget due to the steady increase in inmate population. Without proper resources and support, released inmates will likely face health, financial, and social barriers, forcing many to revert back to criminal behavior. There is ample evidence to suggest pre- and post-release programs can reduce criminal behavior and aid offenders in their transition back into society. This article summarizes the current evidence of the burden of recidivism on society and proposes a multifaceted solution that may be adapted for a small or large prison system. "*Beyond the Big House: Making the Transition to Life After Prison*," is proposed as a comprehensive program that combines pre-release vocational training as well as post-release case management in order to break the cycle of recidivism, improve community wellbeing, and save millions in government spending.

Keywords: Recidivism, rearrests, reconviction, transition program, inmate assistance, case management, prison education

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Worldwide, there were more than 10.2 million people incarcerated in 2012, and of that population, more than 25% were held in the United States (Hopper, 2013, p. 213). According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, the United States has the world's highest per capita incarceration rate of 737 per 100,000 residents, which is almost ten times the rate of most democratic nations (Sentencing Project, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2012, p. 10), more than 2 million adults were incarcerated in U.S. Federal, State, and County jails and prisons by the year-end 2011. In addition, a total of 6 million adults were under correctional supervision in the year 2011. It is plausible that many of these cases can be attributed to high rates of recidivism.

Recidivism is any criminal act resulting in rearrest, reconviction, or reentry to prison within three years of a prisoner's release (Department of Justice, 2012, p. 4). If the issues that lead to recidivism can be identified and understood, it is possible to tackle those issues directly so that community reintegration can be successful. Newly released inmates are leaving penitentiaries with very little preparation for life outside of prison, no money, and no place to go. These issues pose a series of challenges, all of which may determine whether or not the individual returns to prison.

Of the 2 million adults incarcerated today in the United States, 95% will face challenges when transitioning back to civilian life (Woods, Lanza, Dyson, & Gordon, 2013, p. 831). Since 1983, approximately 60% of United States prisoners have been rearrested within three years of release. Without a successful transition, there can be major harm done to health, finances, and social stability of both the individual and the community in which they live (Hopper, 2013, p.

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214).

It can be argued that the economic stress of reintegration, for instance being unable to pay for basic necessities, gives individuals little option but to relapse into illegal behaviors (Wikoff, Linhorst, & Morani, 2012, p. 290). When released without personal improvement, marketable skills, or education, these individuals cannot escape the label of “former criminal”. This title hinders their ability to achieve a normal life and the chances of returning to criminal behavior may be higher than prior to their arrest.

It has long been theorized that gaining employment soon after release and having a good support system will lay the foundation for an individual’s rehabilitation. In spite of this, many find themselves jobless and in some cases homeless shortly after their release (Skardhamar & Telle, 2012, p. 630). In a time with high unemployment rates where it is difficult for highly educated law abiding citizens to find employment, the idea of job programs for former criminals becomes a major topic of debate among taxpayers and lawmakers. The general population must understand the costs and benefits of educating inmates as compared to the costs of housing released prisoners, so that long-term savings can be realized. The focus of debate can then shift to which rehabilitation program to use as a universal model in programs around the nation.

Although studies tend to look at the costs that offenders have on society, there are significant costs to those individuals, including significant health disparities among the national population of released prisoners. Often lacking the proper resources to achieve successful reintegration, the economic and social challenges can intensify medical conditions. The needs of prisoners with mental disorders are often unmet, and untreated medical problems can evolve into costly chronic conditions. Based on the National Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities performed by the Department of Justice (2012, p. 6), 44% of state inmates

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and 39% of federal inmates had at least one chronic medical condition. Additionally, past offenders are less likely than the general population to seek treatment, due to economic struggle, stigma, and mistrust of the health system (Woods, et.al, 2013, p. 832). Thus, a program that would decrease recidivism rates would in turn reduce the occurrence and exacerbation of health problems in this target population.

In addition to the economic, social, and health barriers throughout the transition process, there is a criminogenic effect that prisons have on the incarcerated. The social experience of imprisonment has been shown to deepen illegal involvement once released (Cullen, Jonson, & Nagin, 2011, p. 51). Former inmates are likely to return to urban communities, where stressors such as high unemployment, active drug markets, limited social services, high crime, endangered public health, and homelessness are more common. Most ex-offenders do not receive pre-release or post-release assistance, and less than one-third receives education or job training (Hopper, 2013, p. 217).

Although assistance programs have been shown to be an effective means to reduce recidivism, many correctional facilities lack basic education and vocational training programs (Wikoff et al., 2012, p. 290). Even in facilities with a budget set aside for this type of program, many lack direction and have low completion rates, so the overall impact on recidivism is minimized. For instance, a local adult detention center was used as a representative sample of recidivism rates for the state of Virginia (VADOC, 2013). In 2012, out of 6,984 people committed, there were 135 participants in the Offender Reentry Training Program. In addition, 51 inmates completed an educational program. With an annual budget of \$1,029,735 going toward inmate programs, there must exist a more cost-effective solution that will produce a greater impact on facility-wide recidivism rates (NRADC, 2013, p. 23).

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According to the U.S. Department of Justice, expenditures on incarceration have increased by \$40 billion since 1982 (Kyckelhahn, 2012, p. 9). These additional costs are unnecessary, especially if the funds are not going toward reducing crime. With escalating economic costs, decreasing or even delaying return to prison will significantly reduce costs to the justice system. When prisons are being used for “warehousing” rather than improving the behavior of the offenders, the system is molding costly criminals rather than law-abiding citizens who can contribute to the welfare of society (Cullen et. all., 2011, p. 53).

Given the overwhelming data analyzing the cost of imprisonment, we have developed a program to be used as a model for addressing high recidivism rates, particularly in the state of Virginia. Although the program was developed with state prisons and county jails in mind, the program model is straightforward and could be implemented in a range of correctional facilities around the nation, from a local adult detention center to a larger state prison. Our program is a culmination of exceptional programs offered throughout the country, each offering a unique element that contributed to the development of our program design and proposal.

Current Programs

In order to demonstrate the potential success of our proposed program, three similar programs were analyzed: Making the Connections, Project Re-Connect, and The Way Home. Each program was carefully chosen based on their successful components. While researching several programs, we found that these three programs had stronger foundations than some of the others that were considered. In our opinion, these programs were not without weaknesses, which made them good candidates for further evaluation. We wanted to further analyze the elements that made these programs successful but at the same time devise a course of action to propose a program that would improve on their weaknesses.

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Making the Connections is a program funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization established to help former prisoners transition in a stable and safe manner. The services provided by *Making the Connections* start at the point of incarceration and continue on to prepare participants for release. The program is especially unique because participants have the chance to develop comprehensive pre-release discharge plans, which will be a step-by-step guide for transition. In addition to helping participants follow through with this plan, a variety of post-release transitional services are offered including stable living arrangements, medication, transportation, emergency funds, outreach to families, and linkage to community or faith-based organizations (Gaynes, 2005, p. 11). *Making the Connections* also works toward reducing legal and practical barriers, such as gaining meaningful employment, accessing public benefits, and restoring voting rights.

Making the Connections is not without limitations. This program focuses heavily on the effects imprisonment has on families and community members whereas the other programs analyzed mainly focus on ways to alter the behavior of former inmates. *Making the Connections* does not address the risks and barriers associated with criminal behavior and how those factors play a major role in recidivism. While it is important to lessen the impact imprisonment has on families and community members, altering the behaviors of inmates must take precedence if current rates of recidivism are to be modified. As far as a program having a wide reach, the foundation is currently working in 22 cities across the country to promote neighborhood scale programs, policies, and activities that contribute to stable families (Gaynes, 2005, p. 3).

Project Re-Connect is a voluntary prisoner reentry program that focuses on addressing offender needs and creating a smooth transition from prison into the community. The program participants receive case management and direct monetary support for up to six months post-

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release. The program looked at a number of risk factors for reentry, including age, gender, race, gang membership, substance abuse, antisocial behavior, low social achievement, negative peers, length of prior criminal history, and the number of years incarcerated before release. Up to \$5,000 was provided for each client, with \$2,000 going toward reimbursing agencies for case management, and \$3,000 given to each client in the form of bus passes, gift cards to grocery and clothing stores, payments for subsidized or transitional housing, substance abuse treatment, and job and skills training programs (Wikoff et al., 2012, p. 292).

The program was analyzed for 122 participants and 158 nonparticipants over the course of one year following their February 2008 release. By the end of this time period, 20.3% of nonparticipants and 7.4% of participants had been convicted of new charges. Participation in the program was associated with a 42.2% reduction in overall conviction hazard rate. The analysis found that personalized case management and cash assistance contributed to reducing recidivism among participants by helping them navigate the reentry process (Wikoff et al., 2012). The weakness in this program is the lack of contact with the inmates before they are released from prison. There is no pre-release outreach, which if added, could broaden their participation and create a greater impact on the individuals already involved. Extending contact with the participant, especially while giving them a chance to plan for the future while still in prison, is an important part of minimizing recidivism outcomes (Woods, et.al, 2013, p. 835).

The Way Home is a nonprofit, faith-based program to assist transitioning inmates reenter society. Their primary focus is to provide spiritual support as well as an array of case management services including job searching, housing, transportation, and numerous other support services. This program has been successful for many years due to the fact that they offer multi-level support to their participants. Once inmates are released, they have continued support

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and immediately begin building a rapport with community members. In 2006, the University of Delaware released the results from a 5-year study looking at the rates of recidivism among participants of *The Way Home* program and compared them to nonparticipants. The rate of recidivism for nonparticipants was 22%, whereas the rate for participants was only 10%. This suggests that multi-level support services have a profound impact on the risk of recidivating (The Way Home, 2013).

This program could have an even greater impact if steps were taken to improve the means by which participants are recruited. To our knowledge, there is no active engagement in local correctional facilities to encourage or educate inmates on the resources available to them through this program. By building strong relationships within the facilities, the program could potentially alter the way society is impacted by the current rates of recidivism. However, the only way to recruit new participants into the program is spread by word of mouth. Generally speaking, other participants are the main hub of communication about the program. We are not clear whether or not the program intentionally avoids active recruiting due to budget constraints.

Program	Making the Connections	Project Re-Connect	The Way Home
Funding Source	Funded by private charitable organization and federal grants	Granted \$1mil annually from Missouri Department of Corrections	Independent non-profit organization 501(c)(3)
Type of Program	Pre-release discharge plans and post-release transitional services	Case management and direct monetary support to self-identified needs	Faith based program assisting inmates in their transition back into society
Unique Elements	Engages community voices and resources; Reaches out to family members	Fund of \$3000 for each participant to use, based on individual risks and barriers related to recidivism; Outsources case management and reimburses up to \$2000	Provides participants with case management services and assists them with finding stable housing

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Missing Components	Lacks focus on individual risk factors, rather than just family influences	No contact with inmates before release	No outreach or recruitment for participants, only spread by word of mouth
Results	Helped find meaningful employment for 1,500 formerly incarcerated individuals from 2008-2013	7.4% of participants and 20.3% of nonparticipants returned to prison after one year	Only 10% of participants return to prison within 5 years

Table 1. Comparison of Previous Successful Programs

The program we propose combines the successful elements of these three past programs. We found that one of the most valuable components was having contact with the participant before they were released from prison. Additionally, the more support an individual has outside of prison, the less likely they are to participate in criminal activity (Woods, et.al, 2013, p. 835). This can be accomplished by having frequent contact with a case manager, connecting with family members, or engaging community members and organizations to get involved in the process. While all the programs are focused on improving the transition from prison to civilian life, each one has a different method for reducing recidivism that has contributed to the design of our program.

Program Proposal

The above rationale supports the need for the proposed program, “*Beyond the Big House: Making the Transition to Life After Prison*,” suggesting that this type of program may be an effective means to address recidivism in those released from United States correctional facilities. A program with both pre-release and post-release components will make it possible for ex-offenders to effectively adjust to civilian life, while saving the local community from excessive costs of criminal activity. With the help of the local law enforcement and community members, this program will not only better the lives of released offenders, but will help to build a safer and healthier community. *Beyond the Big House* is a proposed program that offers a solution to

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reduce recidivism rates among newly released criminals. The program will be fully comprehensive and could be implemented at detention centers around Virginia and beyond.

Beyond the Big House would target inmates who have one year remaining on their sentence and extend for a period of up to 3-years post release. The program will focus on the impact made by combining both pre-release vocational training and post-release case management services.

Program Components

Social-Ecological Model

Beyond the Big House is a proposed program aimed at helping prisoners transition to civilian life and reduce the chance of future involvement in criminal activity. This program is strongly grounded in the public health framework of the social-ecological model, which posits that health behavior change must be influenced at multiple levels (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002, p. 286). Behavioral change can often times be challenging and discouraging to individuals, especially those who have failed in the past. Among those that face the biggest challenges are those that come from populations where resources are lacking and there is little to no connection to society to support an individual's change. In order for an inmate to cease repetitive criminal behavior, a change must not only come from the individual; it needs to be positively influenced from familial and peer relationships, communities, institutions, and through public policy (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002, p. 287). Our program proposal seeks to engage families and peers, community members and local businesses, as well as work to influence in-house prison programs to include more effective transition programs. All of the literature reviewed to this point suggests that the use of multiple levels of influence is likely to have a greater impact on reducing recidivism rates in local communities.

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Intervention Plan

Goals	Objectives
To reduce recidivism in inmates released from Virginia correctional facilities.	Objective 1. Provision of pre-release educational or vocational training, substance abuse, and recovery education for six months to one year before release.
	Objective 2. Reaching out to families of inmates, local churches, and community members to involve them with the inmate's release process. Developing a link to life outside of prison will help them prepare for change, help them develop trust with others, and build confidence in themselves.
	Objective 3. At three years after release, less than 40% of participants will be re-arrested.
To lessen the impact of high volume prison release on the local community by providing post-release services and transitional case management.	Objective 1. A case manager will help each individual transition by providing transportation, volunteer work, employment, transitional housing, and financial services to inmates starting when they leave the gates of prison.
	Objective 2. By providing post-release transitional case management, ex-offenders will have resources available to become well adjusted, contributing members of society. Within 1 year of release, 90% of participants will be successfully employed, housed, and have access to health care.

Table 2. *Beyond the Big House* Goals and Objectives

Beyond the Big House targets incarcerated individuals who have six months to 1 year remaining on his or her sentence. Upon entry into the program, participants will be required to complete either an educational or vocational training program. Among the prisons currently offering such programs, they are usually completed within 6 or 9-months, once enrolled. These

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programs will fit well within the timeline of release. The programs will provide skills to prepare the inmates for employment after release. If the inmate has already completed one of these programs, he or she will not need to re-enroll. Additionally, they will be required to participate in substance abuse and mental health programs if deemed necessary by their assigned case manager or correctional staff. Full participation is mandatory for all of the programs in which the inmate is enrolled. Attendance will be taken at each session and each absence will be considered on a case-by-case basis to confirm a valid reason for absence. The target enrollment figure for Year 1 should be determined by the specific prison system's needs, existing resources and its funding for the program. Enrollment in the program will give inmates the opportunity to be assigned to one of three transitional case managers who will meet with the inmates to work on developing a specific post-release plan consistent with the inmate's personal goals.

Case managers will be responsible for a variety of tasks throughout the transition process. Starting at the time of enrollment, case managers will begin reaching out to the families of inmates, local churches, and community members for support throughout the release process. Developing a link to life outside of prison will help the transition process, help develop trust with others, and build confidence within themselves. At the time of the participants' release, case managers will be waiting to greet them and discuss plans for transportation and housing. Case managers will stand as a reliable contact for participants. If at any point the participants have concerns about their transition, the case manager will assist in locating counseling services, support groups, or mentors to provide support. Having open access to their case manager will assist in providing a safe and supportive resource so that these individuals will be less likely to repeat criminal activity, but they will also serve as mentors for future participants. Case managers are responsible for contacting participants on a weekly basis for one year following

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release. After one year, they will be in contact on a monthly basis until the inmate has reached three years post- release without criminal behavior or rearrests. Outside of this record, data will be collected from the Department of Corrections to ensure that any criminal behavior by the participant is closely monitored.

Case managers will act as intermediaries between the participants and various organizations. The program will gradually build connections with employers, landlords, and nonprofit organizations that may help to provide a variety of services to the program. In order to help set up interviews, the case managers will work with local employers to explain how hiring ex-offenders will benefit the local community. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2014), the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) is a Federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain target groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment. WOTC joins other workforce programs that incentivize workplace diversity and facilitate access to good jobs for American workers. WOTC provides a monetary incentive to employers who hire ex-offenders within one year after release.

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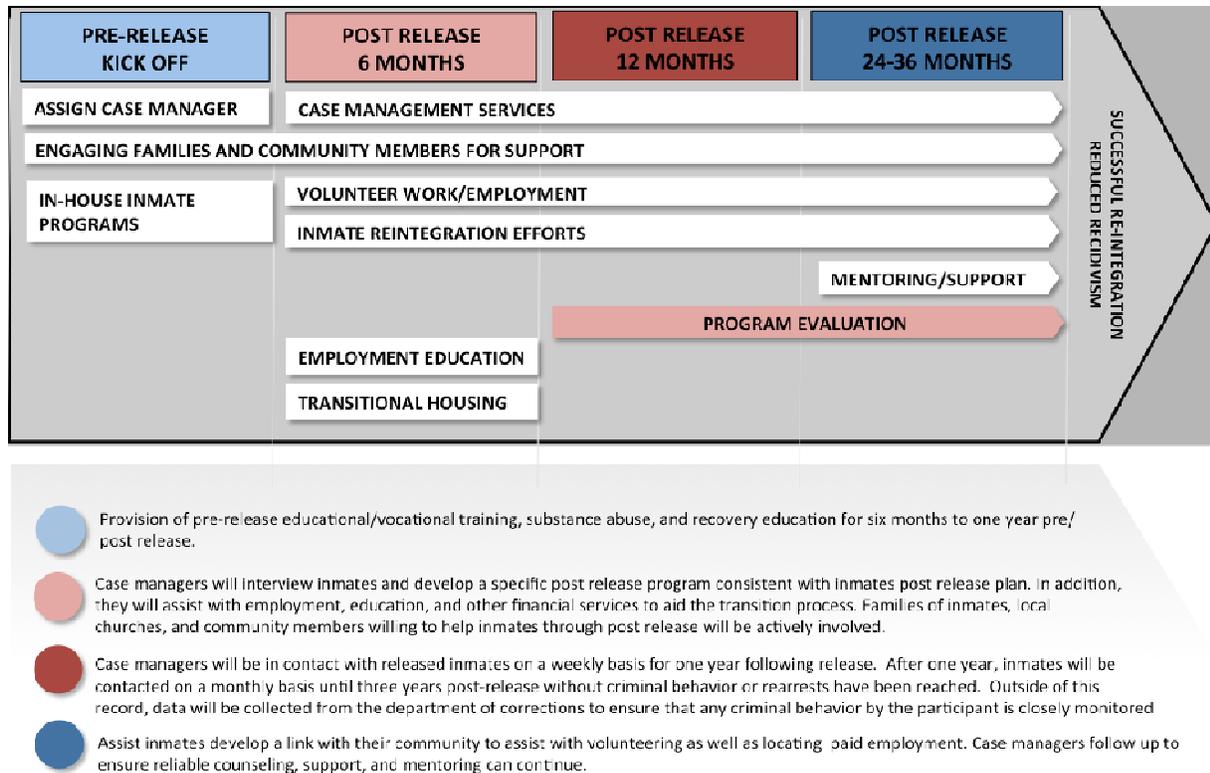


Fig. 1 Timeline of Beyond the Big House

Evaluation Plan

Through careful and thorough evaluation, program coordinators will be able to determine whether or not the program is successful and if objectives are met. Three years following the program start date, the data that has been collected throughout the process will be analyzed and used to determine progress towards goals based on both quantitative and qualitative data.

At the conclusion of the participant's prison term, a survey will be conducted. This survey will help program directors determine the effectiveness of all current in-house services offered through the prison. Participants will be encouraged to assess each of the prison programs in which they were enrolled and provide feedback about the delivery of classes as well as competencies in the material provided. The use of surveys will help to determine areas needing improvement. Additionally, the data from the surveys will be used in a summative evaluation to gauge which prison program contributes most to a successful transition. By determining the

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success of each prison program, program directors are able to recommend necessary adjustments within other penitentiaries.

All surveys will be created by the program directors and implemented within the prison, once the in-house programs come to fruition. As the surveys are handed to each participant, there will be an option for an interviewer-administered version, to assist those who may have literacy difficulties. Following the survey, program staff will input the data into a data analysis program. These programs are designed so that the directors can assess the impact of each facet of the program. The quickest and most effective way to gather raw is through the use of surveys. This data can later have an impact on future services offered throughout correctional facilities.

Data will be compiled at the culmination of the three-year post-release period. Case managers will collect meticulous data about each participant's employment status, housing, and health status. Surveys will be given to each participant, case manager, and employer, evaluating their experience throughout the program. A summative evaluation will later be completed and the data from this evaluation will be the basis for improvements to the program's next cycle.

Case managers, Virginia Department of Corrections, and local police will work closely to keep accurate records of participants' involvement in criminal activity. All program participants will be encouraged to stay in touch with case managers, for support on their continuing efforts at a successful life outside of prison. Each service provided comes at a price; to safeguard the set budget, all services rendered to participants will be detailed and thoroughly tracked.

As a means to reach each goal set forth, we need to ensure that our objectives are met. With each objective that is seen in table 3, you will also see the means to which we intend to measure and interpret how our objectives are met.

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Objective	Measurement Method
Pre-release education or vocational training will be provided to participants.	Survey will be given to participants to assess in-house prison services.
At three years after release, less than 40% of participants will be re-arrested.	Recidivism data will be collected from local department of corrections.
Case managers will offer assistance through various avenues to aid in successful transition.	Detailed records of services will be collected from case managers, as well as the costs.
Within 1 year of release, 90% of participants will be successfully employed, housed, and have access to health care.	Survey will be given to case managers to gauge participant status in regards to work, health care coverage, and living arrangements.

Table 3. Beyond the Big House Evaluation Plan

Discussion

In spite of great need, prison systems across the country have yet to implement a solid solution to address the burden of recidivism. The programs that are in place offer services that fit within the realm of their state's budget, but do not begin to address the issue of recidivism through a proven multi-level approach. There are a few exceptional programs with strong results that are a model for the future; however, the creation of an all-inclusive program will prove most beneficial. The discussion of the three past successes highlights programs that are proactively addressing the burden of recidivism. With these programs in mind, we have developed a program in response to a local need that may be implemented in the future across the country.

In the example of the local adult detention center in Virginia, the implementation of *Beyond the Big House* would result in major cost savings, lower crime rates, and a safer community. If recidivism rates were reduced by even 10%, the correctional facility would save approximately \$5,000,000 over a 3-year period. Participants would be more successful and be

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more able to contribute to society than those who did not participate in the program. Crime rates in local areas would decrease and provide families with an increased sense of security. With tight budgets and our communities' safety in mind, a cost effective program that reduces recidivism must be put into place immediately.

Conclusion

For years, the burden of recidivism has traveled across the globe. The rates of recidivism vary widely with location but the fact that remains consistent around the world is the need for lowering those rates. Understanding the factors that lead released inmates to fall back into similar patterns of criminal activity will allow us to begin helping them to make the necessary changes in order to reintegrate successfully back into society. While there have been some previous successful state programs focusing on more than one level of intervention, to our knowledge, there is no program that currently exists in Virginia that encompasses a variety of options to newly released inmates. *Beyond the Big House* offers a variety of multi-level interventions, both pre- and post-release, that will not only save millions of dollars but also will provide a deeper sense of security and strengthen the local community.

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