

A network diagram consisting of numerous circular icons, each containing a stylized human silhouette. These icons are interconnected by thin white lines, forming a complex web. The background is dark gray with a subtle pattern of diagonal lines.

PEER MENTORING A REENTRY MODEL

TOOLKIT

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Peer Mentoring



What is peer mentoring? There are at least 13 different definitions of mentoring found in a review of the literature on the topic. In the world of reentry, it is commonly defined as “people with the same shared experiences that provide practical support and guidance around specific, multiple or complex needs.”

This toolkit uses this working definition to lay out an overview of the best and promising practices of peer mentoring according to the research with hopes of helping programs identify their own emerging practices and innovations to further advance this promising field.

Peer mentoring is already a well-established practice used by behavioral health recovery models.¹ Models like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) were among the first to argue that **no one is in a better position to provide empathic, prosocial recovery support than a recovering person.** These approaches share a common focus on care that destigmatize services and enhance support systems. Peer mentors provide a blueprint between the person one used to be and the person they envision in the future. This strength-based approach has many advantages which include:

- Instilling hope
- Promoting positive self-identity
- Reducing stigma
- Being a role model of strength, survival and growth
- Decreasing isolation and promoting connection with others
- Providing person-centered services, and
- Engaging in mutual learning—the peer support relationship is a relationship of equals²

These unique strengths that peer mentors bring to behavioral health and recovery models provide a powerful roadmap for reentry peer mentoring models with justice-involved youth and adults.³

In recent years, peer mentoring, also known as “lived experience mentoring,” has become a common practice in prisons and reentry programs across the country. There is growing evidence that the model is effective and that mentoring has a positive effect across a broad range of programs outcomes. Lived experience mentoring is mentoring, so we should expect it to have a positive impact as well.

Peer mentors, especially those with lived experience, are seen as credible messengers and can approach participants from a “been there, done that” perspective.

This can translate into a non-judgmental approach that helps mentees realize that change and success is possible.

Peer Mentoring



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Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is an impactful way to enhance services that address other critical reentry needs, such as housing, health care, substance use treatment, and employment.⁴

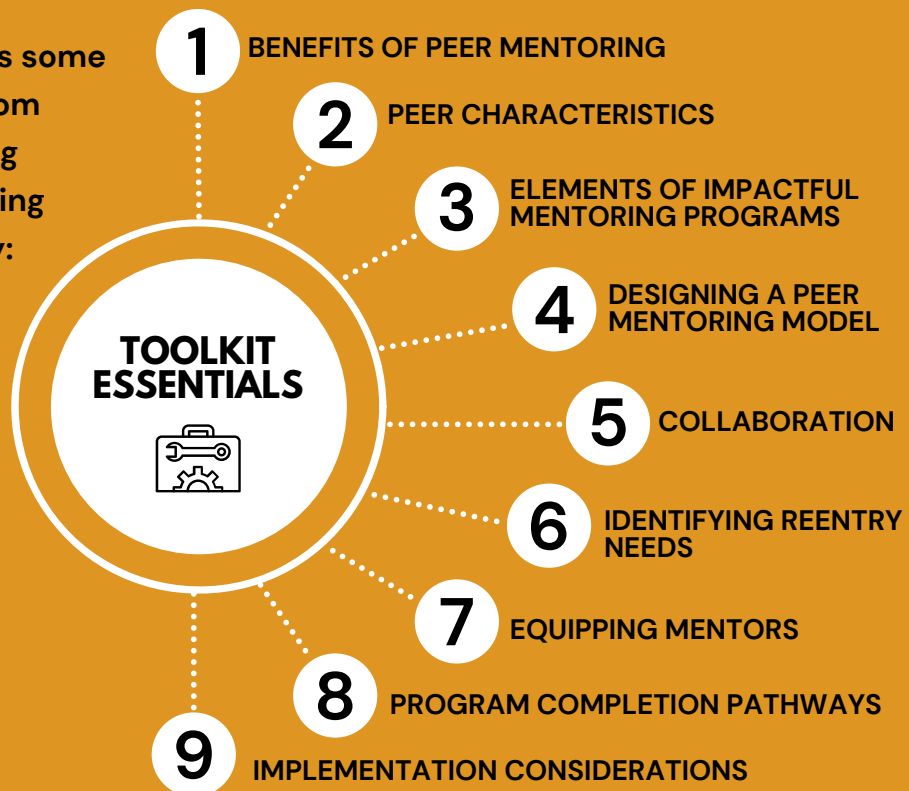


Additionally, informal social bonds and connections to faith-based organizations, community volunteers, mentors, neighbors, and community organizations are the strongest predictor of whether a person will refrain from committing crime.⁵

Research demonstrates the "intensity and quality of the mentor-mentee bond" is crucial.⁶ Highly effective connections between the mentor and the mentee share common themes such as clear roles and expectations, regular engagement over the course of a program, and a clear purpose for the mentoring relationship.

Drawing from the body of research around supportive alliance, a meaningful relationship is vitally important – and far more important than the application of any given theory, technique or program model. Things like perceived empathy, acceptance, warmth, trust, autonomy and self expression strengthen partnership and actually strengthen neural networks in the brain to regulate sense of self, feelings and capacity to think and make decisions. So essentially, a mentee's perception of their relationship with their mentor may be more predictive of their success and outcomes than any particular program, curriculum or methodology you apply.⁷

This toolkit provides some essentials drawn from research for building strong peer mentoring programs in reentry:



1 BENEFITS OF PEER MENTORING

Research on the use of peer mentoring in reentry continues to be somewhat limited. **Most evidence points overwhelmingly to the benefits of peer mentoring for the mentor** with less evidence of the impacts for the mentee. However, peer mentoring has demonstrated significant impacts on:⁸



Sobriety



Post Release Housing



Post Incarceration Employment



Treatment Adherence



Reduced Feelings of Fear and Anxiety



Increased Feelings of Hope

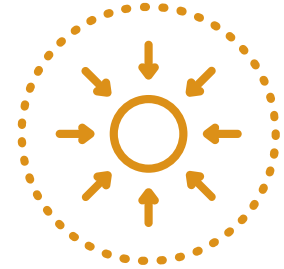


Resource Connection

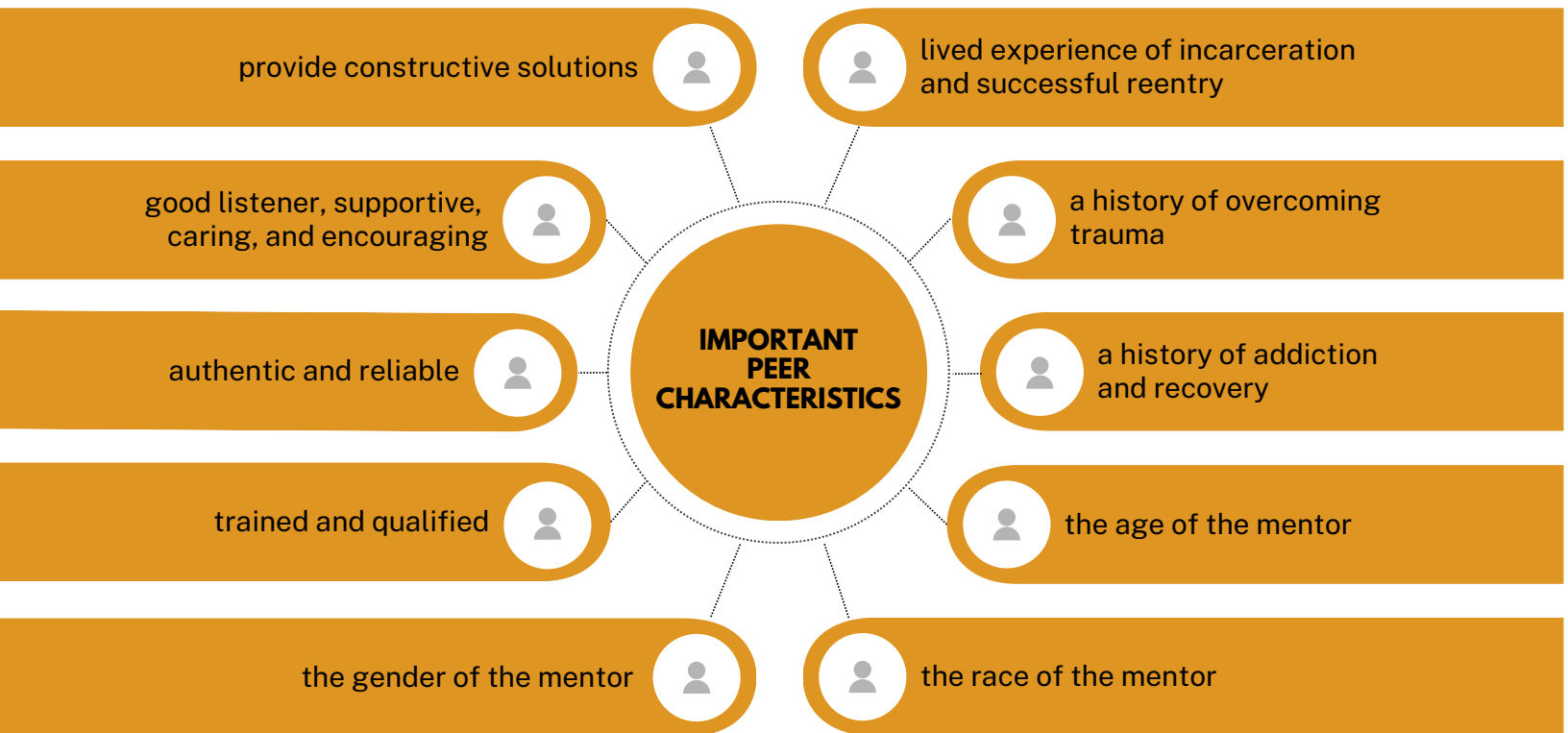
2 PEER CHARACTERISTICS

Because peer support is relatively new in criminal justice settings, **there is no set definition on “what makes a peer a peer”**.⁹ When it comes to which characteristics make mentors most effective, most scholars agree that lived experience is an important part of the peer relationship,¹⁰ however, exactly which components of a person’s lived experience matter is still widely undefined.

In one study of a prison peer mentoring program, mentees identified a history of incarceration as the most important characteristic, as they need to be perceived as credible to be effective role models for reentry. Inauthenticity can present challenges if the mentee doesn't believe their mentor has really changed, so it is important that the mentors selected are seen as credible messengers.



Peer mentorship is a strong option for improving reentry outcomes, particularly in prison settings that lack effective programming, but selecting the appropriate, credible peers is essential for effective implementation. There is strong indication that the following peer characteristics are important,¹¹ including:



3 ELEMENTS OF AN IMPACTFUL PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

There are many kinds of mentoring programs. Even with such diversity and range in scope, multiple studies show that mentoring does have a positive impact, even if just small or moderate. Additionally, peer mentoring is a relatively low-cost intervention that can have a good return on investment for programs trying to strengthen their reentry practices.¹²

The National Re-Entry Resource Center’s report “Mentoring as a Component of Reentry: Practical Considerations from the Field” outlines the key components of peer mentoring in a reentry program, including program integration/design, collaboration, reentry needs, equipping mentors, and program evaluation.¹³ It is also important to consider several aspects of program implementation.



Program Integration/Design

First, peer mentoring should be integrated into the reentry program by clearly establishing the roles of mentors, participants/mentees, and other staff such as case managers. Establishing protocols for participant engagement, matching, relationship maintenance and conclusion of the mentoring relationship are critical steps to integrating mentoring as a component of a larger reentry program. For instance, what does it mean to successfully complete a peer mentoring program? And, what pathways exist for mentees following program completion?

Successful models build in processes to identify and select suitable mentors for the program, make intentional matches, and incorporate mentoring services into the broader reentry service-delivery model. Mentors should be recruited, selected, trained and evaluated based on a policy that outlines the roles and expectations for mentors in the programs.

The following worksheet can help design a peer reentry model or determine an organization's status of integrating peer mentoring into their existing program. The worksheet outlines elements identified as best practice related to designing, collaboration, identifying reentry needs, equipping mentors, program completion pathways, and implementation considerations.

4 DESIGNING A PEER REENTRY MODEL

Define the vision, purpose, and goals of the program through early planning and involvement of multiple stakeholders

Establish the role and expectations of peer mentors, including role clarity and a consistent definition of who is considered a "peer"

Define a recruitment and selection process for suitable mentors with skills and characteristics in alignment with the program vision and purpose

Define a structured interview process for mentors including selection of interview questions

Create diverse interview panels that include peer mentors, staff, and program leaders

Match participants to the appropriate mentor

Utilize decision-making structures that are inclusive of high need participants

Define the most important elements and services in the program model

Train mentors on the principles and practices of the program model

Establish policies and protocols for participant engagement and successful completion

Establish peer mentor interventions and activities

Incorporate meaningful incentives for program participants

Define specific goals for the participant connected to working with a peer mentor

Provide supports to mentors to prevent burnout

Develop feedback loops with larger systems to problem solve

Measure impact

Start small and have a solid plan and pilot before scaling the program





Designing a Peer Reentry Model

WORKSHEET

1/2

What are the program's vision, purpose, and goals?

What values drive the program model and activities?

What are the roles and expectations of peer mentors?

What is the recruitment & selection process for suitable mentors?

What criteria will you utilize to match participants to the appropriate mentor?

What goals have been established for the participant? How are they aligned to working with a mentor?



Designing a Peer Reentry Model

WORKSHEET

2/2

What training will you provide to mentors on the principles & practices of the program?

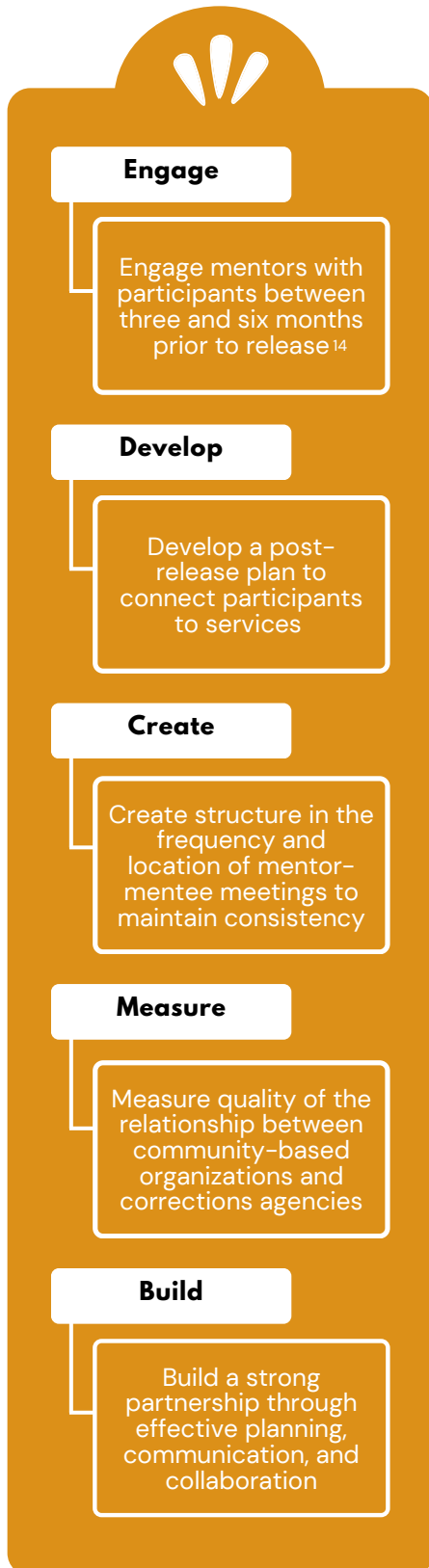
Is there a graduate pathway, and if so, what does that transition entail?

What ongoing support & additional training will mentors need to prevent burnout?

What are the feedback loops? What will you need to share and with who? What will you want to learn and who will you ask?

How will you measure impact and quality of service? How will you know you've made a successful match? How will you know your program is working the way you intended it?

5 COLLABORATION



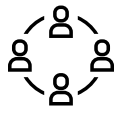
Second, program success often relies heavily on the quality of the relationship between community based organizations and formal corrections agencies, such as jails, prisons, probation and parole. Bringing mentoring into prisons can be difficult for community-based organizations without an established partnership with corrections leadership.

Entrance into correctional facilities usually requires thoughtful planning and adherence to strict regulations. In addition, organizational policy and culture differences may cause corrections agencies and community-based organizations to have different priorities for the partnership.

Despite their differences, however, corrections agencies and community-based organizations can build a strong partnership by bringing the right stakeholders to the table to have honest conversations about planning, communication, coordination, and problem solving. Partners should agree on the methods, frequency, and content of cross-organizational communication regarding the mentoring component of the reentry program.

The communication plan may involve setting weekly meetings, quarterly phone calls, or frequent email communication to ensure that partners stay apprised of any relevant changes within the reentry program and the corrections agency. Thus, collaboration between the community-based organization and corrections, probation, and parole should focus on program goals and services, obtaining and understanding corrections agencies' clearance and background-check policies, awareness of procedures for volunteers and program staff to enter correctional facilities, and clearly defining the responsibilities of all parties during the pre- and post-release phases of the reentry program.





Collaboration

1/2

WORKSHEET

What is the current partnership and level of collaboration with corrections agencies, prison and parole?

What ideas do you have to establish or strengthen these partnerships?

What will you do to build a strong partnership through effective planning, communication, and collaboration?

What clearance and permissions will you need to be able to gain access into these agencies?

What policies and procedures do you need to follow or be aware of? If you don't know, who will you ask?

What is your communication plan? How often will you plan to communicate through phone, email, meetings, etc.?

Who will you contact when there are issues and problems to solve?



Collaboration

2/2

WORKSHEET

Have you clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all parties involved in the program to include correctional staff? If so, what are the roles?

What is the protocol for participant engagement three to six months prior to release? Does this align with the protocols of the correctional facility?

Have you developed a post release plan to connect participants to services? If so, what is your plan?

Is there a structure to the frequency and location of mentor-mentee meetings? If so, what is this structure?

How do you plan to measure quality of the relationship between community-based organizations and corrections agencies?

6 IDENTIFY REENTRY NEEDS

Identify and address reentry needs by establishing assessment procedures, and identifying and applying approaches that will enhance participant engagement. With proper and consistent implementation, research-based principles can help reentry programs focus their staff time, energy and resources where they will have the greatest impact on meeting the needs of participants and increasing opportunities for successful reentry. To improve the success of the mentoring program, **consider the following:**

Recruiting and selecting participants should focus on people assessed as moderate to high risk and need with a tool (such as the INSIT).

Mentors should receive general training on research-based principles. These core concepts (such as those in *Innovating for Impact*) can help mentors better understand the needs and challenges that a person might face upon reentering the community from incarceration, and help mentors be more aware of and attuned to the risks that might derail a participant's pathway to successful reentry.

Mentors should be trained on relationship-building and communication skills to cultivate a supportive alliance and effective working partnership.



Case plans should list realistic goals directly related to the participant's needs, a timeline for achieving those goals, and the participant's responsibilities in meeting those goals.¹⁵

Programs should ensure that participants understand the role of mentors to support them in achieving the goals in their reentry case plans.

Participants can then manage their expectations of mentoring services when they are clear about the roles mentors will play in helping them achieve their reentry goals.

At the same time, mentors should coordinate with correctional staff to understand the reentry plans of participants with whom they are matched so that they can determine how best to support participants' reentry goals.

- Select participants assessed as moderate or high need
- Train mentors on research based principles
- Provide basic training on navigating corrections and supervision agencies
- Equip mentors with relationship-building and communication skills
- Create realistic goals in case plans
- Ensure that participants understand the role of mentors
- Ensure mentors understand the reentry plans of participants with whom they are matched

7 EQUIPPING MENTORS

Mentors should be equipped to support reentry goals by receiving training on skills that will support case management objectives, address participant engagement, support growth and change goals, and facilitate relationship building. Adequately equipping mentors to support reentry goals involves keeping their skills relevant and up to date through ongoing training and periodic assessment to highlight any training needs or knowledge gaps.

The lived experience of peer mentors is highly valuable and should be utilized in the mentor-mentee relationship. It is also necessary for mentors to receive formal training in evidence-based practices such as cognitive behavioral interventions and Motivational Interviewing (MI). Some programs start training peer mentors while they are still incarcerated, equipping them with long-term skills that they can use after their release, but this may not be available for many programs. Programs may offer specialized training, such as recovery support specialist certification for peer mentors, as well. Regardless of the specific training, the important takeaway is that successful programs intentionally develop and support peer mentors with sound and research-based training and skills.

Incorporate one or more of the following programs and communication techniques:



- Motivational interviewing
- Cognitive behavioral programs, like moral recognition therapy (MRT) and Thinking for a Change (T4C)
- Adult learning styles
- Formal training in correctional evidence-based practices.
- Parents on a Mission
- Reciprocal Learning Model
- Social Learning Theory
- Cultural awareness
- Criminal and Addictive Thinking
- Critical Thinking
- Emotional Intelligence skill building
- Anger management
- Domestic violence
- Conflict resolution
- Gender responsiveness
- Trauma Informed Care
- Individualized optional content (e.g. academic tutoring)





Equipping Mentors

WORKSHEET

1/1

What is your current training and onboarding plan for mentors?

What can you do to promote ongoing skill development and skill practice for mentors?

How will you periodically assess skill levels and identify areas of additional training needs?

Will your program offer specialized certification training programs? If so, which programs?

How will you measure mentor's readiness to serve their mentees?

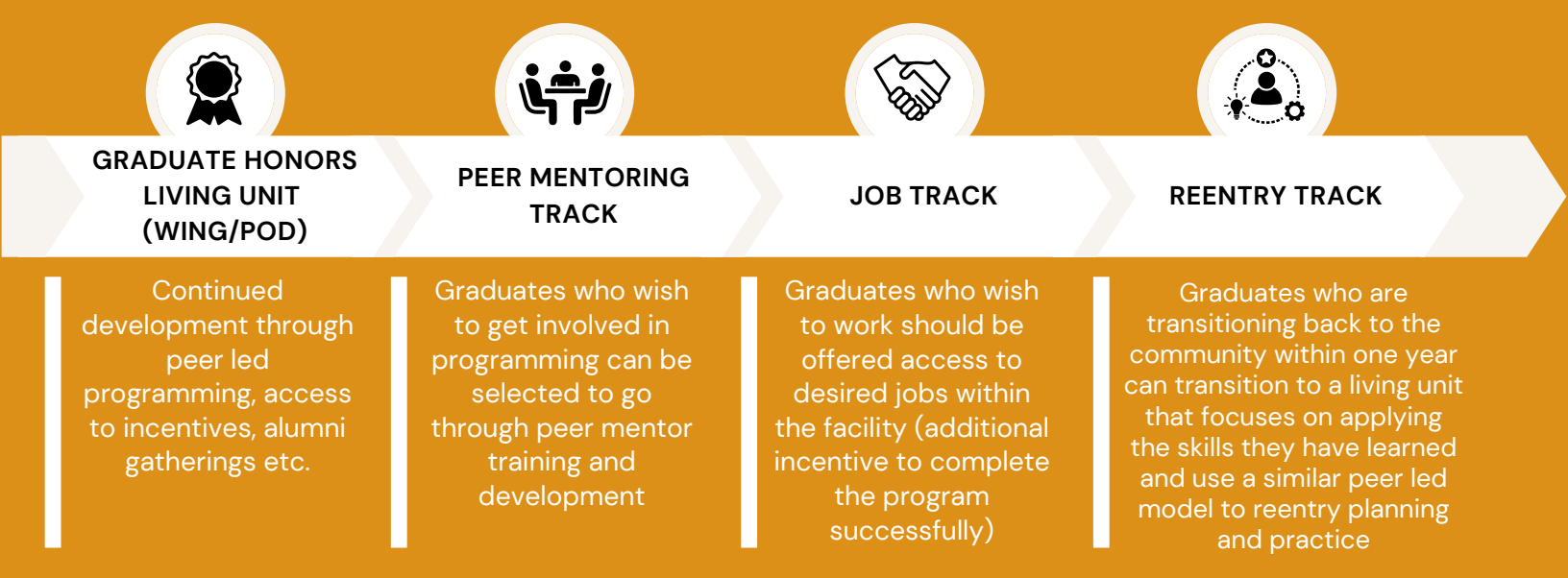
8 PROGRAM COMPLETION PATHWAYS



Depending on the program model, community-based organizations can and should play a large role in the implementation and design of mentoring programs behind the walls. As participants graduate and transition to community, those organizations are best positioned to help graduates continue their growth and development, stay connected to the cause, and provide mentoring and guidance to peers that follow.

Successful program models develop pathways for participants after graduation or completion of the peer mentoring program. This is a strong motivating factor and incentive to encourage engagement and continued growth and development. Incentives generally play an important role in peer mentoring. Inside the walls, this could include transition to incentive living units or "pods," highly sought after work assignments, or access to additional programming and development opportunities. Participants who have experienced the value of mentoring may want to "give back" by leading or co-facilitating peer led programming, continuing their education, and training, or becoming peer mentors themselves.

Programs should consider meaningful pathways for participants who complete programming and may include:



In order for peer mentoring models to expand their impact, program participation should also be recognized and valued by the parole board and other decision makers and considered when setting terms and conditions of supervision. Community organizations and reentry partners can reiterate, advocate, and share their knowledge and ideas about meaningful incentive opportunities that will strengthen and enhance program outcomes.

9 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

As organizations consider how to develop a mentoring program, they must also consider how they will implement the program. There are five implementation essentials to consider, including:

culture, data, feedback, leadership, and people.

Culture is King

First, it is important that community-based organizations understand they are operating within the context of a complex correctional system that has its own norms and culture. Organizational culture refers to the behavioral norms and expectations that exist within an organization,¹⁶ more commonly described as the "way things are done around here." Culture influences, and often constrains, the choices that an organization is willing and able to make to bring people, processes, procedures, and policies in line with strategy. Organizational culture includes people and their habits plus their mindsets, attitudes, and beliefs, all to the power of what we talk about and how we engage and interact with one another.

Organizational cultures that drive implementation success include cultures that value flexibility, innovation, professional development, risk taking and trust. These cultural attributes are not common in correctional agencies and can obstruct successful implementation of peer models. By purposefully embracing characteristics that align with successful implementation, organizations and people can shift their culture to support their vision for the future. Not surprising, the correctional system's culture should align with and support peer mentorship, including allowing for trusting relationships and autonomy to be built between mentors and correctional staff.

Organizational culture of corrections systems can impede successful implementation of peer programs and to proactively address this issue, consider the following.

- Intentionally work with security and programs staff to create buy-in and a transparent understanding of the program model
- Create intentional feedback loops to address barriers to program operations and staff attitudes and beliefs toward peer programming
- If you are working with systems, ensure that there is verbal and written support from the highest level of leadership
- Broaden the network of stakeholders to include community organizations, advocates, policy makers, funders, etc. to raise awareness and support for programs beyond the walls
- Prepare for leadership changes and shifts in priorities by establishing a clear program model and collecting data for reporting

9 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

What you measure, matters

Mentoring services should be evaluated by using a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures to capture the impact of mentoring services on recidivism and other reentry outcomes. The findings will help to improve service delivery, engage stakeholders and funders, and inform decisions to scale up or replicate program models. The reentry program staff, community partners, research partners (if one has been identified) should establish the types of information that need to be collected to determine whether the program has accomplished its projected outcomes and goals.

MEASURE THE QUALITY OF SERVICE BY:

- Engaging mentoring alumni (both mentors and participants for ongoing mentor training and support)
- Collecting data on their mentoring matches
- Tracking program goals
- Establishing set protocols for mentors to follow
- Providing mentors with relationship building resources (e.g. National Mentoring Resource Center: Peer Mentoring Guide)

CREATE FEEDBACK LOOPS:

- Collect feedback from mentees on ways the program can best support them
- Collect feedback from mentors on progress of the mentee relationship
- Collect feedback on what training and support is needed

CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE PRACTICE BASED ON EVIDENCE:

- Collect and learn from data on the implementation of the program itself
- Collect and continuously improve based on data outcomes for mentees
- Remain up to date on the latest research on peer mentoring best practices to incorporate

Reentry program staff should establish the types of information that they need to collect to determine whether the program has accomplished its projected outcomes and goals.¹⁷ **Measuring the impact of your work and improving upon those processes is an important component of organizational capacity building.**

Quality improvement strategies are helpful to use after the initial implementation of any new program or process to check assumptions, get feedback and make improvements. Feedback can come from many places: participants, staff, stakeholders, assessments, surveys, from training and coaching evaluations, fidelity tools, and program data. Feedback provides new knowledge about how the work being done can help participants, staff, leadership and organizations continuously improve. To have an accurate picture on whether your program is achieving its intended outcomes, it's important to define your goals for the feedback you are looking for.

9 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Things to consider:

Mentees

How are mentees experiencing the program? Do they feel supported?

Mentors

What barriers are they experiencing?
What additional training do they need?

Staff

What challenges are staff experiencing? Are they supporting and making referrals to the peer mentoring program?

Stakeholders

What is our impact on the community?
Are services making a difference?



1/3

WORKSHEET

STEP 1: DEFINE YOUR INTENDED IMPACT

Consider what you are trying to accomplish. What is your promise of service or value you are bringing to your community and how will you know if it's being done? And, how will you know if it's being done well? *Fill in the following statement:*

We are _____ and
we exist to _____.



Things to Consider

2/3

WORKSHEET




STEP 2: GET CURIOUS. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO FIND OUT?

Who are my participants? Who are we missing?	Have services been excluding anyone unintentionally?	How can we improve our services?	What processes are staff, mentor's or mentees struggling with?	How are our participants experiencing our program?

STEP 3: PLAN YOUR DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY

How do stakeholders understand our services?	
Are outreach activities succeeding in spreading the right message?	
Are services having a social impact?	
What could we do differently to maximize our footprint in the community?	

What kind of data would you collect to validate or check that promise and value and help get a sense of what is happening on the ground? Consider a survey or a focus group to capture qualitative data. **All questions should be:**

 Actionable:	 Decision-Oriented:	 Short and Quick:
Ask questions you are willing to take action on.	Questions should inform program improvements.	Surveys should be short (5 questions or less) with a quick turnaround. These pulse surveys should be used often and incorporate the learning from previous rounds to continuously improve.



Things to Consider

WORKSHEET

PARTICIPANTS / MENTORS	STAFF / MENTORS	COMMUNITY
<p>Tapping into feedback from the people who use and experience your services can be a very valuable endeavor. Be sure to include former participants, including those that were not successful to get the most well-rounded feedback. Consider asking things like:</p>	<p>Regularly survey staff about their work in meetings or in a formal survey. Take the time to conduct exit interviews when people leave as you can learn a lot that way. Consider asking things like:</p>	<p>While you can create a survey, it might be hard to get it to the right people. Go to places where you feel like people should know about you (partner org's, churches, local hangouts, bus stops, etc.). Consider asking things like:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do they feel in your program? • What was the most helpful? • What was missing? • How has their life changed since engaging with your program? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the best part of this job? • What is working? • What gaps do you see? • What struggles do you experience? • Are there things you wish you could do? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you heard of us? • What do you know about our program? • What are your top concerns about your community? • What service made the biggest impact for you?
<p>Pro Tip</p>	<p>Pro Tip</p>	<p>Pro Tip</p>
<p>Build feedback opportunities into your existing processes so that it's not an "extra" thing. Have a trusted participant or outsider ask for feedback so people can be honest.</p>	<p>If this is your first-time asking staff for formal feedback, take some time to message why you want feedback and how it will be used for quality improvement.</p>	<p>Use staff or mentors who are interested and excited about your program to do this work. It can act like free marketing and can keep staff engaged in soliciting feedback on their own accord.</p>

9 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Leadership

The attitudes and strategies of formal leaders can drive the success of the program, as they are responsible for the important decisions, resources, relationships, and vision for implementation. Leadership focus can create a supportive environment for staff, remove barriers to implement innovations, and create a culture of feedback and process improvement which is important in creating a learning culture that supports intentional, systematic change.

Leaders can support the peer mentoring model in the following ways:

Be visible by actively supporting the program and giving direct feedback to program staff and mentors

Ensure there are resources made available to provide and approve incentive opportunities for participation and address any barriers to those incentives

Be prepared for unexpected challenges to happen and address roadblocks without impulsivity in decision making

Be prepared to address challenges when it comes to power dynamics between staff and mentors/mentees

Stay up to date on program progress, especially the relationship dynamics between mentors and mentees, staff and mentors, mentors and other incarcerated individuals

- Identify staff who can serve as change agents and early adopters,
- Identify and select staff that are aligned with the vision, goals, and purpose of the program,
- Communicate and message to program staff regularly so they understand the “why” behind the peer mentoring effort,
- Select staff and mentors “who care” and are willing to engage with participants in programmatic activities,
- Select staff and mentors who are willing to share power and problem solve together,
- Clarify and communicate the non-negotiables for staff to keep the program going and the door open,
- Provide mentors with the necessary support, guidance, training, feedback, and education,
- Promote skill development that incorporates an understanding of the different learning styles, and
- Create opportunities for mentors to come together and talk about vision values, time, space, and access to support each other.

People

Finally, staff and mentor’s attitudes and beliefs about the work, their commitment to the organizations mission, and their knowledge and experience will play a role in in how services are experienced by people. Consistent ongoing coaching and feedback is the key to keeping staff and mentor’s skills sharp and on track.

Program leaders should consider the following action to support staff and mentors



9 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Scaling Programs

Last, Ideally, peer mentoring programs can transform prison facilities, making them safer and calmer, and shifting staff focus from safety and security to oversight and direction. It is important to implement these programs slowly and methodically. Program leaders often feel a desire to expand programs early on, after witnessing early success or accomplishing programmatic milestones. Many implementation challenges are experienced before a program gets started and then again after about 6–12 months of a program pilot. It is recommended that programs wait a minimum of 2–3 years before scaling the program to address staff challenges, organizational culture issues, to create a group of strong mentors, solidify the curricula and training process, and work out the graduate pathways. These things should be working, in practice, to some measure of fidelity for at least one year before considering scaling the program.

Scaling challenges can include:

- Programs not being stable enough to support important elements of the program including panel interviews and review boards
- Scaling can outpace the number of staff who buy into the program in the first place
- The number of qualified, trained peer mentors is not great enough to sustain scaling



- Scaling can create drift from the primary vision and purpose
- Quality measures not solidified prior to scale (e.g. content and curricula drift)
- Continued messaging and recruitment strategies to create buy in fizzling and fading
- Lack of established implementation teams and feedback loops that withstand scaling efforts
- Incentives not being scaled with the program
- Stray from key practices, process, and acceptance criteria

Conclusion. While the complexity and high levels of customization of peer mentoring programs creates challenges for researchers to understand their effectiveness, there is little doubt that these programs add significant value to the lives of individuals transitioning out of our nation's prisons. Community based organizations in collaboration with staff within corrections are in the best position to administer these programs. This is especially true when peer mentoring is integrated into other reentry programming, reentry needs are identified, mentors are equipped, and the program measures impact.

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