

HOME WITH A PURPOSE

A HISTORY OF THE SAFE RETURN PROJECT



This report looks at the phases of development of a participatory action research and organizing project run by and for formerly incarcerated individuals in Richmond, California. It highlights how this project has impacted the individuals involved as well as the larger community and its success in pushing for broader systems change.

by Saneta devuono-powell, LaVern Vaughn, Tamisha Walker, Eli Moore, Meredith Minkler

PUBLISHED BY

The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California, Berkeley brings together researchers, community stakeholders, policymakers, and communicators to identify and challenge the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society and create transformative change. The Haas Institute serves as a national hub of a vibrant network of researchers and community partners. The Haas Institute takes a leadership role in translating, communicating, and facilitating research, policy, and strategic engagement. The Haas Institute advances research and policy related to marginalized people while essentially touching all who benefit from a truly diverse, fair, and inclusive society.

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**This work is generously supported by
The California Endowment.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

ONE THURSDAY MORNING in 2012, a nondescript county hearing room in Martinez, California was unexpectedly filled with over 100 residents holding signs that read **Invest in People, Not Prisons**. This group of formerly incarcerated people, faith leaders, and other community members were responding to the county sheriff's plan to expand the county jail. Jeff Rutland, who had been incarcerated for seven years, offered testimony on what it was like to come home with nothing more than a paper bag and \$120, and the many barriers and stigmas he faced.

Rutland was part of the **Safe Return Project** team, a group of eight formerly incarcerated residents that had spearheaded months of organizing, research, and advocacy leading up to the contentious hearing. As a result of their efforts, the sheriff announced he would withdraw the proposed jail expansion, marking a historic shift. County officials decided to dedicate the \$5.2 million toward transitional employment, bail reform, housing, and community services. How did this group of formerly incarcerated people develop the power and capacity to lead an effort that made Contra Costa County the only county in California to reject a proposed jail expansion? This report answers that and other questions by analyzing the formation, development and impact of the Safe Return Project.



Graduates of the Safe Return Collective Impact Institute, a 10-week leadership development training series

CONTEXT

[Currently] there is a willingness to question gross investments in criminal justice and I think that as part of continuing to push that questioning, we need formerly incarcerated individuals involved... because at the end of the day, as long as they are not seen and not heard, it is easier to deny their humanity. - DIANE ARANDA, THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

Recent shifts at the national, state and local level indicate that the American appetite for punitive and expensive criminal justice policies may have some limits.¹ As the human and fiscal costs of mass incarceration and the myriad detrimental impacts of these policies are

1 Goode, Erica U.S. Prison Populations Decline, Reflecting New Approach to Crime New York Times, July 2013

more widely understood, the country is re-evaluating criminal justice priorities. While policies that restructure federal drug sentencing, eliminate lifetime sentences for minors and move inmates out of state facilities are important, they do little to address the lives of millions of Americans who have already experienced incarceration. Ninety-five percent of the incarcerated are released,² with most of them returning to the communities in which they lived prior to incarceration. Many of them will confront severe challenges to finding stable housing and work while coping with the residual trauma and stigma associated with incarceration. In too many communities, the services available to help individuals acclimate to coming home are few and far between. Where services do exist, the people providing them often have no personal experience with incarceration.

Given that 68 million Americans have a criminal record and that 76.7 percent of people who serve a prison sentence are arrested within five years of release, there is a desperate need to develop new strategies and tools to help those who have been incarcerated.³ In many ways, it is the people who have been directly impacted by incarceration who most understand what is needed. Yet they are very often excluded from participating in, let alone leading efforts around reentry. This report examines a small organization founded in Richmond, California five years ago that is based on the idea that those directly impacted by incarceration are best suited to addressing the concerns of those coming home from jail or prison.

The **Safe Return Project** is comprised of Richmond residents who are working to study and address the needs of the formerly incarcerated. The goal of Safe Return is to identify strategies that respond to community needs, while developing the capacity for the formerly incarcerated to take the lead on the issues that impact them. Since the program started, it has hired formerly incarcerated people to engage in participatory action research (PAR), community organizing, and policy advocacy on issues impacting individuals coming home from jail and prison. The work of the Safe Return team has not only transformed the lives of many individuals, but it has also impacted the broader community in Richmond, as well as the national narrative around incarceration and reentry.

Reentry refers to the transition back into the community for those who have been incarcerated and are released from confinement. Reentry programs are generally understood to involve direct services provided to people coming out of prison and jail. Most reentry programs attempt to address specific barriers individuals face, such as gaining access to housing, services or job training, etc. The founders of and participants in the Safe Return Project reject the notion that Safe Return is a reentry program. However, what they are articulating is that Safe Return was not designed to provide direct services for the formerly



Safe Return members and supporters speak at a press conference about the proposed jail expansion in Contra Costa County in 2012

2 U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Reentry Trends in the United States, 2004

3 U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Federal Justice Statistics, 2011-201.

incarcerated. It is a program engaged in community advocacy that is driven *by* the needs of its members and constituents. In this way it could be argued that Safe Return *is* a reentry program, with a broader notion of **what reentry requires.**

This report tracks the genesis and evolution of the Safe Return Project, beginning with the history and context that led to the formation of such an unusual organization. The rest of the report examines some of the processes and practices utilized by the Safe Return team to understand its success as well as the challenges the program faced. The goal of this report is to help others think differently about how communities can support leadership by formerly incarcerated people and facilitate more effective reintegration policies.

METHODS

This report is based on data that was gathered using a multi-method approach. A review of organizational documents, media coverage, and training materials was undertaken to help provide history and context. Twenty formal interviews were conducted with program participants, community members, and agency actors whose work was thought to have impacted, or been impacted by, the Safe Return Project. Of the 20 formal interviews conducted, 10 were with current and former participants in the project and 10 with agency personnel or community partners. Finally, participant observations at Safe Return meetings, hearings at which members testified, community forums, and other events were also used as part of the evaluative process.

Because of the small scale of the project and the difficulty in quantifying many of its key benefits and challenges, qualitative methods such as interviews proved essential to understanding and explaining this multifaceted project and its processes and outcomes. Much of this report, therefore, is organized around the themes that emerged from our interviews (See Appendix A for copy of interview instrument). Fictitious names or other identifiers are used when direct quotes or stories are used, except in the case of public officials or team members who wished to be identified by their real names.

BACKGROUND

I don't believe those who have built the structural apparatus of mass incarceration get to oversee its dismantlement... I think we should be in deep relationship with formerly incarcerated people, we should be following their leadership and listening to their wisdom and ideas, we need their perspectives and voices and leadership... They are able to, with precision, articulate the barriers that are there and it becomes a lifelong quest for them because they are fighting for their lives. - MICHAEL MCBRIDE, PICO

RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA IS A SMALL CITY

north of Berkeley that once had the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous city in the country. Located in Contra Costa County, which is characterized by deep racial/ethnic health and social disparities, Richmond has approximately 100,000 residents, over 3,000 of whom are on active probation or parole. Estimates suggest that of the roughly one million residents in Contra Costa County, a third of those on parole or probation, reside in Richmond, which had an official unemployment rate of over 17 percent when Safe Return was launched in 2010. Even today, 39 percent of Richmond residents are living in poverty.⁴ While the unemployment rate has fallen to under seven percent, a survey by Safe Return found that among formerly incarcerated people, the unemployment rate is 78 percent. Whether despite or because of its high rates of poverty and violent crime, Richmond also has a reputation as a city that is willing to experiment and try new things. In particular, **the city has shown a willingness to counter conventional wisdom in the realm of criminal justice**, through practices such as split sentencing, or its adoption of the CeaseFire program (see sidebar).



Transit station in Richmond, California, the small California city where the Safe Return Project was born

In 2009, Contra Costa County created the Contra Costa County Reentry Collaborative, a multiagency collaboration that formulated what realignment would look like and what the funding goals and priorities should be for people moving from state facilities into local jails and probation programs. Two Richmond community members, who were active in outreach and advocacy in Richmond, began attending meetings. Noticing that the very people who would be most impacted by these decisions were absent from the discussion, the two began talking about how they could bring formerly incarcerated people into the

4 US Census 2009-2013 ACS

conversation. This led to the formation of a small but ambitious program that would eventually be named the Safe Return Project.

Safe Return had the following three goals:

- 1) Build the capacity of formerly incarcerated people to engage in planning processes affecting their lives,
- 2) Develop a critical body of knowledge about access to and quality of services and employment needed by people re-entering the greater Richmond area and,
- 3) Support the leadership of formerly incarcerated individuals to elevate their voices and increase participation in community safety initiatives.

PROJECT CEASEFIRE

Ceasefire was brought to Richmond in 2011 in an effort to reduce gun violence. The program reaches out to individuals who are thought to be likely to commit violence with the message we want you to be “Alive & Free.” Alive by agreeing to NOT engage (participate in or instigate) any acts of gun violence, and free from incarceration as a result of refusing to do so. Ceasefire relies on community volunteers to reach out to individuals identified as susceptible to committing acts of violence through its ‘night walks.’ For four years, a member of Safe Return participated in these night walks, reaching out to individuals with this message. However, while all the members of Safe Return agreed with the message, some were ambivalent about joining a project where they were partnering with police officers, parole and probation agents, and district attorneys. Most felt that the presence of any type of law enforcement was unnecessary. Some felt that this collaboration with law enforcement was potentially dangerous and could compromise the integrity of the Safe Return team.

PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

SINCE ITS INCEPTION in the spring of 2010, the Safe Return Project has been envisioned as a Richmond-based participatory research and action initiative that would allow formerly incarcerated individuals to engage in research, organizing, and community advocacy on the issues directly impacting them. The project sought to place formerly incarcerated individuals into leadership positions and was driven by their interests and research, as opposed to providing a set menu of services.

In the six years since it began, Safe Return has engaged in three overlapping phases of work that impacted both the participants and the larger community. This document is organized by those phases, despite some overlap between them. The first phase, team development, focused on creating a team that was equipped to engage in research and was able to work together. The second phase, community assessment and organizing, involved interviews and group meetings to engage the broader community, and an intensive survey of other formerly incarcerated residents. This resulted in the release of a report titled *Speaking Truth on Coming Home*, which informed the focus of the team's advocacy work. The third phase, policy development and advocacy, describes many of the efforts to change public policy and institutional practices to remove barriers to community reintegration. Finally, this report provides an assessment of the current status of the Safe Return Project and its future.

PHASE 1: 2010-2011 TEAM DEVELOPMENT

The Safe Return project is a group of formerly incarcerated people, not just that but a family. For me, it wasn't just a job, it became what I am here for, gave me an advantage. It really helped me find myself and helped me find my purpose.

– CLARENCE, FORMER SAFE RETURN TEAM MEMBER

The Safe Return Project was initially co-sponsored by the Pacific Institute, (a nonprofit research organization specializing in participatory action research with communities), the Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), and the city of Richmond's Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS). The sponsors anticipated needing approximately \$100,000 over one year and raised the money through grants and in-kind contributions. After putting together a program, and creating an internal work plan and project goals, the sponsors began advertising in probation centers and other appropriate venues to hire a group of Community Researchers. The primary requirement for the Community Researcher position was that the individual be formerly incarcerated and able to commit 10-20 hours per week over a ten-month period. The

LaVern



When LaVern first heard about the Safe Return Project she thought it was a joke or that there was a typing error in the job description. The only requirement was that you must have been released from prison within the last 18 months. No college, no high school diploma, absolutely nothing else. In the 45 days since her release from a Federal Correctional Institution and return to Richmond, she had been desperately trying to find a decent job, without success. LaVern knew that her difficulty was not because she wasn't qualified, but because having a criminal record is something no employer looks for in applicants. But apparently the Safe Return Team did. She went to the interview slightly nervous because she knew getting this job could mean everything. This job could make everything she spent her entire sentence thinking about a reality. A steady income, providing an example to her son when he was released, and a sense of purpose.

Initially skeptical, over the course of her involvement with the project, LaVern began to feel like she was making a difference and giving something back to the community she felt she had betrayed. She had resolved to set a positive example for her only child, who was her co-defendant in the criminal case that sent them both to prison. She knew that if she didn't change the course of her life, she would end up back in prison and worried her son would follow in her footsteps after his release. She felt a strong obligation to do everything she could to prevent anyone else from going through what she experienced during and after her incarceration. She wanted to convey the message that the experience was not one they want for themselves. She wanted others to learn from her mistakes. She always said that if she was only able to prevent one person from ending up in prison by sharing her experience and telling her story, that would be enough for her. In reality, in partnership with all of the other members of the Safe Return Team, she has far exceeded her humble expectations. She is forever grateful for the experiences, the friendships, and the team members who have touched her life throughout her time with the Safe Return project. LaVern describes the Safe Return Project as one of the most important and rewarding jobs she has ever had.

researchers would be paid \$20 per hour. By the fall of 2010, eight individuals (three women and five men) who had served sentences in federal, state, and local facilities were hired, and the first team was created.

The focus of the first phase was on team development and capacity building. The creators felt that in order for the team to be effective, its members needed to heal from the trauma of incarceration and develop connections with each other. The team met on a weekly basis for four hours, engaging in exercises designed to build trust and create a cohesive team. Participants described how over the first few months they learned to work together and received training in research and organizing skills, as well as basic life skills related to reintegration. A key prerequisite to this was paying the participants a living wage. Ensuring that participants had a means of survival was key to creating space for other types of work and engagement.

IMPACTS

Within the first year, members began to develop a sense of trust in each other and a stronger sense of their own capacity. As this happened, individuals who initially saw Safe Return as just a job became impassioned about what they could accomplish. The team-building led the group to create strong relationships, many of which continue to this day. At the same time the collective capacity of the team was developed. Guest trainers provided workshops on trauma reduction, conflict mediation, and life mapping. In addition, the participants received 75 hours of training during the first year on research skills, which allowed them to develop a research plan and survey instrument.

Seven months after their first meeting, the team began conducting surveys and ultimately drafted and released a report of their findings. The process of working on the report and its distribution led the team to develop relationships with community partners, such as the City Manager, members of the City Council, and non-profit service providers. The team was learning how to advocate on its own behalf, and on behalf of other incarcerated people. This happened both as members engaged in conversations about issues that impacted them, as well as a result of their just showing up at relevant events and telling their stories. The team members began to see the power of telling their stories and worked on how to do that effectively. Every member of Safe Return has talked about the power of seeing the impact of sharing their stories, and being invigorated by the possibilities provided by that sharing.



Original members of the Safe Return Team Jeff Rutland, Orlena Foy, LaVern Vaughn, Tamisha Walker, and Andres Abarra

Jeff



Jeff Rutland joined the Safe Return Team as a self-professed career criminal. His primary motivation was to find work to keep his parole officer off his back. He'd been home less than 45 days after doing an eight year bid, and was being threatened with a parole violation if he didn't get a job right away. At the outset he had no other goals other than a steady income. However, as time progressed and the team started to come together and form deep personal bonds a shift happened. A shift began in his perspective about the project, as well as about life after incarceration. He became much more invested in the work, and in his resolve to stay free. He believed that if someone who had spent over half of his entire life-time in and out of penal institutions could become employed, and maintain his freedom, and give something back to the community he had terrorized for so long could do it, then anybody else could too.

Jeff transformed into someone the team came to love, someone who couldn't hide the personal joy he felt about the impact he was having in the community he loved so much, and proud of the fact that his time with the team was the longest stretch he'd ever been free from incarceration. His transformation was inspirational and cathartic. Not only for him, but for those around him. He realized that he could, and was making a difference.

Due to budgeting constraints for the Safe Return work he found himself in need of more income and began working with the youth in the community on a local gardening project at Urban Tilth. Again, he thrived and continued to exceed even his own expectations of being a positive force in the community, and being an example of what is possible after incarceration. Given the opportunity, people can and will change. Sometimes all that's needed is a second chance.

Unfortunately due to a very personal trauma regarding the death of his Mother, as well as the unforeseen diagnosis of his own life threatening health issues, his enthusiasm and participation for the work was compromised. He took a minimal leave of absence but when he returned, things were just not the same. He was not the same either, he'd lost that spark and joy he once had for the work. He pulled away, slowly but surely, from the project and from the team. This truly had a negative impact on him and the team. Eventually he gave up on the team, and on himself, which was traumatic for everyone.

EARLY CHALLENGES

Many of the challenges in the initial phase had to do with interpersonal conflicts and the residual trauma and culture shock for people who have been incarcerated. Most of the participants had been home for a very short period of time, and described how critical and difficult it was for them to learn to trust each other and to practice non-violent conflict resolution. Most of the participants came to the project because they were looking for a job and this job turned out to be demanding, both logistically and emotionally. Although many members reported that the rewards were great, the emotional commitment required was very high and there were multiple forms of conflict. Another challenge was team continuity as some members left to pursue other opportunities.

Within the first year, three members of the original eight had left. One member found a full-time job, one went back to college, and one chose to work for a relative.

The team also struggled with agreeing on where to focus. Because the interests of the team were divergent, disagreements arose about where Safe Return should focus its efforts. In particular, there were strong disagreements about the team's involvement in Ceasefire, a gun violence prevention project in Richmond and other major cities around the country (www.ceasefire.org). As discussed in the sidebar, the Ceasefire work was controversial within the team because it meant working with law enforcement. Some members of the team felt that this was not the best way to serve the formerly incarcerated, while others felt it was an important way to give back to a community where violence was all too prevalent. Although “giving back” was an agreed upon agenda within the group, the method for doing so was an ongoing source of debate.



Safe Return team members and supporting staff Tamisha Walker, Eli Moore, Alvin Herring, LaVern Vaughn, Jeff Rutland, and Richard Body

PHASE 2: 2011-2012

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AND ORGANIZING

Prior to the Safe Return team getting organized and doing their initial research project, I had very little knowledge of issues associated with reentry. I kind of knew they were there but I saw it as part of a different function of government, you know counties deal with that or the police deal with that, but over time dealing effectively and appropriately with issues of reentry became part of my job description and an important one

– **BILL LINDSAY, RICHMOND CITY MANAGER**

As part of their research and organizing, the team began engaging with the community through two different types of interviews: “relational interviews” and formal surveys. The team started with informal relational interviews, with each team member required to do

Speaking Truth on Coming Home

- Less than 30 percent of the people coming home to Richmond benefited from a single training or support program while they were incarcerated.
- In the first three days after release, one out of five people could not find a safe place to sleep and more than half could not access needed medical services.
- 33 percent had a health condition a doctor had diagnosed. 70 percent said they had wanted to see a doctor but could not because of the cost.
- Seven out of ten individuals did not have stable housing. This included 34 percent who were staying with friends or family, 11 percent in short-term shelters, and 25 percent in halfway houses or residential programs.
- An astounding 78 percent of the formerly incarcerated residents surveyed were unemployed. This rate of unemployment was more than four times the rate for Richmond as a whole, and seven times the rate for California.

two to three per week with another formerly incarcerated person. These conversational interviews were meant to help people find shared values and interests, and build relationships based on these commonalities. For example, while community members might have different views of police tactics, they might share a concern about violence and job opportunities in their neighborhood. This discovery can make a relationship possible. In addition to its use with other formerly incarcerated people, the approach was also used with people who had never seen the inside of a jail or prison. In the first year of the project, each team member conducted relational interviews with approximately 100 individuals. Through team discussions about what they were hearing in these interviews, and what they had experienced themselves, they began to identify community needs and strengths, and decide what issues they should focus on.

In this second phase, the team also engaged in more formal interviews using a survey instrument the team created in consultation with its partners at the Pacific Institute. The goal of the survey was to use a rigorous methodology to gather information on the issues facing formerly incarcerated people coming home to Richmond. The team designed the survey questions to focus on community needs and issues they had identified through internal work and in the relational interviews. The Safe Return staff provided trainings on how to design and conduct a survey. The team drafted, pilot-tested and refined the survey to make sure it would gather relevant information in a respectful and accurate way. The final survey had 151 questions and took about 45 minutes to complete. The surveys were conducted by the Safe Return Team outside of local probation and parole offices and participants were offered a gift card as compensation.

After three months of data collection using the surveys, staff compiled the responses and created charts and graphs for the full team to analyze. Ultimately, 101 valid surveys were completed. Utilizing the findings from this process, the team wrote its report, which was presented at a community meeting to an audience of 150, including many public and city officials who were in a position to support the goals and recommendations of Safe Return. The data presented by the team covered areas ranging from access to housing and Medi-Cal (California's version of Medicaid) upon release to employment and family connections (see Appendix B), and raised issues about how the city would respond to the needs of residents. It also was the first time many officials had heard firsthand accounts of life after incarceration from those who were living through the experience.

IMPACTS

By the end of Phase 2, the Safe Return members had become a team, confident in their skills. They knew how to facilitate meetings and give effective presentations, and they began working in earnest on community organizing. Members developed relationships with key partners and established their own roles as important voices and allies on issues of incarceration and reentry.

The team became involved in several outreach efforts that established connections with other agencies in the city. They began to speak at events on their own experiences as well as on the findings of their research. Reflecting their finding that lack of stable housing was reported by 70 percent of the incarcerated persons interviewed, for example, they spoke about the need for the city to address barriers to housing.

Through this work, they also saw the connection between their situation and others and felt a responsibility to advocate on behalf of all formerly incarcerated individuals. What had initially been a job became a source of pride and empowerment. Telling personal stories about their experiences with issues like dealing with family relationships or finding jobs sometimes provided a catalyst to action for more recently released individuals who were currently struggling with these same issues.

As the project progressed, Safe Return chose to focus on some specific issues chosen on the basis of both personal experience and what team members had learned through their surveys and interviews. For example 78 percent of the formerly incarcerated individuals surveyed were unemployed for reasons including the requirement on most applications to report felony convictions or criminal history. These barriers to employment led Safe Return to lead a campaign to “Ban the Box” on job applications that ask a question about a prospective employee’s criminal history.



Guest trainer Andre Aikins presents a certificate at the graduation ceremony for the Safe Return Collective Impact Institute

Johnny



Johnny Valdepena came to the Safe Return Project in a sort of roundabout way through another team member. From the very beginning his passion for the work was evident and tangible. Johnny was involved in the criminal justice system from a very young age, and had also had previous gang affiliations and a lifelong history of addiction. Johnny came to Safe Return soon after his release and was determined to make an impact, wanting to change his life and the lives of others. His determination was rooted in his strong faith, and his belief that because of it he had been saved. He initially volunteered countless hours because he believed in what the team stood for. He also didn't know of any other group or organization aside from his church that cared about or were doing what Safe Return was attempting to do.

He devoted his every free moment to helping the team in any way he could, doing anything from setting up meeting places, to passing out fliers, to speaking about his experiences in and out of prison, always maintaining his belief that God could pull anyone through. He worked on all of the campaigns with the same vigor and dedication as every paid member of the team did. When the team was in the financial position to expand, Johnny was the obvious first choice. He was passionate about making a difference for those that were coming home from incarceration, yet his heart leaned heavily toward focusing on the youth of the community. He wanted to do what he could to spare the young people in our community from taking the same path of criminality and gang violence that he'd traveled. He also brought an impressive amount of experience in that area because of his outreach and street evangelism with his church family. Johnny's faith was a continual driving force in his quest to remain alive and free.

Johnny's addition to the team was an important one because he had a story that needed to be heard. His powerful testimony was essential to the transformation in the lives of the young people he shared it with. His work on the Ceasefire campaign served to be the catalyst that propelled him into the life he wanted for himself and his family. Since joining the team, Johnny has gotten married, was released from Parole, voted in an election for the very first time in his life, moved his family to a safe environment that they love where his children are flourishing, and is only a small step away from becoming an Ordained Minister to further serve what he believes to be his life's calling. Johnny was an integral part of helping Safe Return achieve many important milestones, and Safe Return helped him achieve some of the goals he talked about when he joined.

CHALLENGES

While the process of engaging in successful campaigns was empowering, creating the broad range of collaborations necessary for these campaigns strained the capacity of the team and provided a host of interpersonal and strategic challenges. Organizing increased the need for greater capacity to match the growing agenda of the group. What was unclear, however, was how to best bring more people in, or whether the team should grow or find some other way to engage with other members of the formerly incarcerated community. Additionally, there were challenges in finding ways to community organize that were unique to the formerly incarcerated community. The intense level of instability in people's lives after incarceration meant that people were often moving, homeless, or in critical need of gaining employment and meeting other basic needs. This made it more challenging for the team to build and sustain relationships with these individuals, and to involve them in research and advocacy when they still had not resolved their immediate individual needs. Incarceration also traumatizes and breaks down interpersonal trust among people in profound ways that make establishing new relationships difficult and slow. These dynamics made it difficult for Safe Return to build a large network of other formerly incarcerated people who would participate in campaigns. Funding constraints also made it challenging to sustain the type of efforts that campaigns required.



Community members speak out against a proposed jail expansion at a Contra Costa County public meeting in 2012

PHASE 3: 2012-2013

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND ADVOCACY

As time went on, talking to more and more people, traveling to different cities and states to tell my story and watching a whole room of people be incredibly moved, most to tears, it really was the catalyst for me to keep pushing harder and harder. It became my mission to make sure that the voices of the formerly incarcerated were heard, that my voice was heard. I absolutely refused to give up, and I refused to go away! Working in this fashion made me feel that I was using my talent and abilities in the most useful way that would create an effective and positive impact. – LAVERN, SAFE RETURN TEAM

The findings from the relational interviews and surveys helped inform and shape the direction of the team's policy development and advocacy in Phase 3. The team identified four recommendations based on their findings. These were:

1. Establish a supportive housing program in Richmond that provides medium term

- housing and connections to services for residents recently released from incarceration,
2. Remove barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated people and improve employer practices in recruiting and hiring this community,
 3. Create a one-stop referral service for people coming home, and
 4. Form a regular meeting of formerly incarcerated people in Richmond for mutual support in developing and implementing a personal plan for success.

After determining that the City of Richmond was the third largest employer in the community, the team members decided they should focus on city hiring practices, arguing that if the city was truly committed to reducing recidivism, it should lead by example. As part of their campaign, the Safe Return Project spent many hours and much effort cultivating relationships and telling personal stories about the negative impact of being unable to obtain employment can have. After enlisting the help of N.E.L.P. (National Employment Law Project) to draft policy language, the team worked with a variety of partners including city officials and community groups to get Richmond to pass and implement legislation prohibiting the city from asking job applicants about their criminal history.



A detailed article in the Wall Street Journal on the city of Richmond's efforts to "Ban the Box" in California

Nine months later, after the city had successfully applied ban the box to its own hiring, the Team approached the city about requiring companies contracting with the city to do the same. After getting support from local business as well as the police department, the city voted 6-1 to pass an ordinance expanding the ban to all business that had contracts with the city. Ultimately, in 2013 the Safe Return team and its allies were able to convince the City Council to pass one of the most progressive and widely discussed "Ban the Box" policies in the state of California.⁵ In addition to helping countless formerly incarcerated residents of Richmond, this victory also allowed one of the Safe Return team's own members to successfully become a city employee. Finally, a detailed article in the *Wall Street Journal* in August 2013⁶ was among the substantial local and national media coverage received, which helped spark more discussion of what a strong and creative Ban the Box measure on the local level could look like.

Phase 3 also saw the Safe Return Team's active engagement in "realignment," a new state law intending to decrease state prison population by giving local counties more responsibility for criminal justice decisions and substantial new funding. Team members had started attending meetings on realignment in the spring of 2012. It was then that they learned that the county sheriff was proposing to use the new funds to expand the county jail. In one of these meetings they also heard the District Attorney say that he would never

5 "Ban the Box' Laws Make Criminal Pasts Off-Limits; Richmond, Calif., Becomes Latest to Prohibit Inquiries Into Job Applicants' Prior Misdeeds", <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578640623464096406>

work with a felon. The collective outrage at hearing such a statement and the notion that more money might be used to perpetuate an unjust and failed system, galvanized the Safe Return team to spearhead a campaign to prevent the jail expansion. The team saw the opportunity realignment could offer, and how a jail expansion would squander this opportunity. A campaign, **Invest in People, Not Prisons** was launched to defeat the proposed jail expansion and redirect funding towards resources and services for people coming home from prisons and jails.

The Invest in People, Not Prisons campaign was run by a coalition that included many allies from the successful ban the box campaign and expanded to engage new partners. In addition to the Safe Return team, the coalition included members of the Reentry Solutions Group, the League of Women Voters, Richmond Progressive Alliance, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization and others. One of the early and critical collaborations was with the Latino immigrant community. Undocumented immigrants were being incarcerated at the county jail under contracts with ICE, breaking up families and communities in a manner similar to, and sometimes worse than, the incarceration that other residents had experienced. Safe Return members believed that resources should be redirected to the community to help prevent incarceration and recidivism rather than continuing to use arrests as their way out of the County's problems. The Coalition proposed a Community Advisory Board to advise the executive committee on decision-making and developed its own proposal for how realignment money should be spent. Thanks in the part to these effective collaborations between Safe Return and its allies, in late 2012, Contra Costa County became the first county in the state to successfully prevent a proposed jail expansion. As a result, \$5.2 million of the county's AB109 funding was earmarked for community-based services and programs for the formerly incarcerated, including transitional employment, bail reform, and a one-stop reentry service center.

IMPACTS

As the team grew in size and reputation, two team members were promoted to team leaders, responsible for managing the work of other members. Initially this arrangement was ideal both because after 2013 the Pacific Institute was no longer actively involved, and also because it offered team members an opportunity to develop new skills and have more input into the direction of Safe Return's work. It had always been a goal to have Safe Return run by formerly incarcerated people and this restructuring moved the program in that direction. As the five initial members who'd remained active with Safe Return had grown personally and become strong advocates, they became interested in determining how to expand their reach and provide others with a similarly powerful experience through the program. Two of the team members began working on youth outreach, and all were committed to replicating and expanding the positive impact they now knew they were capable of.

Two years into a project that was intended to last a single year, the Safe Return team was beginning to gain recognition for its success. Both the **Ban the Box** and the **Invest in People, not Prisons** campaigns helped city and local agencies gain exposure to Safe Return. Many people who had never talked to a formerly incarcerated person were now working with members of the team on a regular basis. Many of the team members were

now well-known and respected for their advocacy skills. The organization was leading some crucial campaigns that affected those who were incarcerated while also raising broader questions about criminalization and equity.

CHALLENGES

In 2013, both the Pacific Institute and Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS) separated from Safe Return. These separations were amicable and understandable. The Pacific Institute staff member that had carried the Institute's work with Safe Return had left, and Pacific Institute wanted to return to its primary focus on air quality and environmental concerns. Shortly after the Pacific Institute left, ONS also departed due to a desire to focus more on gun violence prevention and fallout from its Ceasefire involvement. At the time, the Safe Return team was getting more involved in Ceasefire work, despite some members' reservations, and ONS was no longer involved in this work.

The departure of both the Pacific Institute and ONS left Contra Costa Interfaith (CCISCO) as Safe Return's only remaining official sponsor, a challenge to viability discussed further below. The change in leadership and organizational structure created anxiety among the team members. As much as they wanted to have increased responsibility, the loss of two of the three founding agencies made the future direction of Safe Return seem unsure. This was really felt after a key staff member left, and given his focus on team development and the high level of trust he had built, his departure was particularly hard on team morale. This individual's replacement was more focused on political strategy than team rapport, which meant that the project became more explicitly focused on campaign development.

2014-PRESENT

CURRENT STATUS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We changed a lot of policy, changed community, we might think people know what barriers are but really people don't know the injustices that people with criminal justice records face. - TAMISHA WALKER, SAFE RETURN DIRECTOR

Tamisha Walker, who joined the team at its founding in 2010, currently guides the mission and vision of the Safe Return program and its **Collective Impact Leadership Institute**, an annual 10-week leadership development training that launched in July 2014. The training is open to formerly incarcerated individuals and emphasizes community organizing, media and communications strategies, and personal transformation. Each cohort includes up to 25 formerly incarcerated individuals, who meet mid-July through early October. Of the 25 persons who participated in the last Institute, 19 graduated. Many of the graduates continue to stay involved with Safe Return work and all of them gain skills and tools that will assist their transitions to life outside. Each institute begins with roughly 30-40 attendees, including family members and allies that want to access the trainings as well. Safe Return prioritizes the voices of the formerly incarcerated in this space but doesn't exclude anyone from participating. The institute is only one of Safe Return's base-building strategies. Over

100 formerly incarcerated residents, their family members and allies have gone through the trainings. Additionally, Safe Return is currently working with People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) to develop a curriculum that will be used to train formerly incarcerated leaders and staff on community organizing and policy change.

Despite these recent achievements and the impressive track record documented in this report, the Safe Return program faces challenges in its efforts to raise the funds and other resources needed to thrive and grow in today's fiscal climate. The loss of its two former organizational partners and the tendency of most funders to emphasize direct services, rather than organizing, advocacy, and personal transformation, have been particularly challenging.

Considering this, it is impressive that several team members continue to volunteer with Safe Return, or to work extra hours out of a deep commitment to the work and a desire to give back to this program that has done so much for them personally. Recently, one individual who has been volunteering for the past several years and one graduate of Safe Return's leadership Institute were hired on a part-time basis. They have already participated in a substantial amount of tool building and are engaged in several advocacy efforts of Safe Return. Formalizing their involvement is allowing them to be even more effective in their efforts and may also signal a potential for new cohorts of Safe Return teams in the months and years ahead.

Finally, Safe Return team members continue to speak to communities and organizations locally and around the country, about both the program and the policy and other system level changes it is working to realize *with* and *for* those coming out of incarceration.



Tamisha Walker, Safe Return Project Director

KEY LESSONS

Safe Return is a quintessential model for how formerly incarcerated people, directly-impacted individuals, take their lives into their hands, redeem the worst things that have happened in their life, try to create pathways of opportunity and return and restoration. I think it is one of the greatest acts of self-determination I have seen.

– MICHAEL MCBRIDE, PICO

The non-profit sector could redirect resources towards work that is led by people affected, that is so much more transformative. People would tell their story, there is nothing people could say to refute their story – ELI MOORE, SAFE RETURN CO-FOUNDER

Safe Return laid the groundwork for criminal justice reform. In the midst of one of the largest prison expansions, Contra Costa was the first county to defeat a jail expansion. Now realignment money goes to community services. – ADAM KRUGEL, PICO/CCISCO

THE FOLLOWING SECTION explores four key components of the Safe Return program that this research suggests for anyone considering a similar project.

Although Safe Return is uniquely grounded in the community of Richmond, many of the issues it has grappled with and lessons learned may be applied more generally to projects elsewhere that work with formerly incarcerated communities. Based on the information gathered about Safe Return, we have identified four key components. While every community and every person coming home has a unique story, there are barriers, traumas, and challenges that many have in common. Paying attention to the components below may help individuals face and work towards dismantling these challenges. The four components are Meaningful Engagement, Sustainable Planning, Focusing on Broader Systems Change, and Appropriate Fiscal and other Support. The following pages offer some examples and strategies for incorporating these components.

- **Meaningful Engagement** refers to how formerly incarcerated individuals are engaged, are given room to grow and are key drivers in defining and evaluating the success of the work.
- **Sustainable Planning** means anticipating how much time and effort it takes for individuals to reintegrate into their community, being prepared for a variety of challenges and cultivating the types of partnerships that will enhance the trust and success of formerly incarcerated individuals.
- **Focusing on Broader Systems Change** means complementing work on individual transformation with attention to addressing the broader policy and other barriers that can prevent even the most motivated formerly incarcerated persons from achieving their goals.

- **Appropriate Fiscal and other Support** is having the institutional support to ensure that any efforts are adequately funded and resourced, and that the sources of fiscal and other support do not compromise the integrity of the work.

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

We carry a lot of baggage and the thing that had to be drilled into us was that we are worthy. –TAMISHA WALKER

I think we should and could have done a better job of creating a more intentional development process, life mapping, paying attention to the trauma of incarceration.
– ADAM KRUGGEL

I think a lot of these things are sort of intangible, we tend to focus on the tangible result but I think that a lot of the work that the Safe Return team has done are achieving these intangible kinds of things. – BILL LINDSAY, RICHMOND CITY MANAGER

Meaningful engagement requires acknowledging the residual trauma caused by incarceration, helping people deal with that trauma and allowing them to set their own personal and programmatic goals. Success should be measured, in part, by how well these goals are met. Much of what makes Safe Return unique is its focus on personal transformation. It began by providing trainings that gave participants a sense of confidence and tools for individual growth. The internal work they did helped to highlight needs that were specific to their community and drove future work. Engaging in relational interviews created a bridge between them and others who were facing similar situations. Every member of the team set personal and public goals that were used both to evaluate individual and collective progress as well as to inform the strategic planning for the following year. Making sure that the individual's goals were central to evaluating past success and setting future goals is key to meaningful engagement. This can be challenging when organizations are oriented towards achieving easily quantifiable outcomes. But it is not impossible, and it helps ensure participants' ongoing investment.

Finally, meaningful engagement means fostering opportunities to participate in collective efforts to help change the harmful practices and policies that can stand in way of successful re-entry, and contribute to making the return from prison or jail “a round trip” (Freudenberg et. al.)

Strategies for meaningful engagement include:

- **Facilitating growth:** Creating a safe space for personal development and providing ongoing trainings allows participants to continue to grow.
- **Empowering participants:** Linking the individual experience to collective and systemic

issues allows individuals to understand how their personal experience is connected to the broader community.

- Engaging members in participatory action research and advocacy, based on their insider knowledge and the findings of their research, enhances collective empowerment and achieving systems level change.
- Rethinking outcomes by engaging participants to define personal and institutional goals: Involving members in individual and group processes of reflection can help them look more deeply at what it is they want to see and help bring about for themselves, and for the broader community of currently or formerly incarcerated people and their families and neighborhoods.

SUSTAINABLE PLANNING

We didn't think about how long people would be involved, we didn't have an end plan and I think that was a mistake. -RICHARD BOYD, SAFE RETURN CO-FOUNDER

How do we take seriously the real challenges that formerly incarcerated people have given the trauma they have experienced? How do we give folks the opportunity to fail without it destroying them? What tools do formerly incarcerated people need to have added to the tools they currently have? -MICHAEL MCBRIDE, PICO

I think Safe Return should have become its own organization, I don't know if it would have gone better because there would be other challenges, but the work is big enough and unique enough to merit its own organization. – ELI MOORE, SAFE RETURN CO-FOUNDER

One other thing that I remember is that people thought the Safe Return Project was a service provider, and they let it be known that they would not be going into services because it would compromise their advocacy, and I thought that was an excellent move. – RHODY MCCOY, CONTRA COSTA COUNTY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT, RUBICON PROGRAMS

One of the issues raised by the founders was their underestimation of how long Safe Return would last and the consequent failure to build in sufficient mechanisms for growth. Another issue raised was lack of enough planning for the institutional future of the organization, including building appropriate partnerships. Fortunately, the program was able to adapt its time frame but it did not have formal mechanisms in place to respond to the growth of the team. Creating ways for participants to either be promoted or graduate out of the program is critical. This does not mean that participants who are thriving within the program be forced out at the end of the time period. If the institutional capacity exists, the program would offer ways for participants to continue to move forward, either by providing more permanent positions, or placements with partners. Partnerships need to be carefully entered into because while they can facilitate the longevity of the work, they can also undermine or derail the credibility of efforts. For example, having buy-in from law enforce-

ment and government agencies can help ensure the long-term sustainability of a reentry program. Safe Return's involvement with the Ceasefire work, which involved working with law enforcement, may have helped gain support for its ban the box campaign but some felt it compromised the autonomy of the program and delegitimized it in the eyes of potential and actual participants.

Strategies for sustainable planning include:

- **Creating Realistic Timelines:** Based on the interviews conducted, this time frame should be no shorter than 18 months and likely no longer than 3 years. This time frame may be best done in phases.
- **Facilitating participant growth:** The experiences of Safe Return in its first five years underscore the importance of creating empowering conditions where participants' own assets can be tapped and new skills and capacities built, both for the individual and the team. Building individual self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as trust and a sense of cohesiveness as a group, are critical pre-requisites to working for broader change. Both intensive initial trainings and ongoing follow up sessions also are important as members continue to hone and draw on their own skills and transformation, both individually and as a group.
- **Fostering partnerships:** Maintaining independence while working with appropriate community partners will support the work over time. These partnerships may be time-limited or ongoing but the relationships established through these partnerships help ensure ongoing sustainability.



The Safe Return Team and supporters in 2013, sporting tshirts with the new Safe Return logo

FOCUSING ON BROADER SYSTEMS CHANGE

From Safe Return I have learned what can be done with information and effective advocacy. This was the first time that I saw formerly incarcerated individuals and people who care about that population organize effectively because I think it has traditionally been an ignored concern. And I'm specifically speaking about organizing for AB109 funding and how that what was done. I thought that was, you know, that should be a case study for how to organize ones voices for positive change. - BILL LINDSAY

Things are much better than they were before AB109...there is much better understanding of what the needs are, but we are not where we need to be. - ROBIN LIPETZKY, CONTRA COSTA PUBLIC DEFENDERS OFFICE

The stories of personal transformation shared by many participants in the Safe Return Project, and the strong sense of purpose and collectivity achieved by the team itself, are foundational outcomes of the project's work over its first five years. At the same time, creat-

ing changes in the systems and policies that stand in the way of successful reentry remain a priority. Whether through its leadership role on Richmond's strong ban the box measure, or the Invest in People, not Prisons Campaign that successfully ensured that money for reentry programs and services not go to jail expansion, the success of Safe Return Project is in part a result its victories in creating broader systems change.

Strategies for Focusing on Broader Systems Change

- 1) Engage the formerly incarcerated in understanding and sharing their insider knowledge of the links between barriers to housing, jobs, and health care, and release and successful reentry.
- 2) Provide experiential and other trainings enabling participants to conduct surveys and other data collection to engage more of the formerly incarcerated in broadening and deepening understanding of the systematic barriers to successful reentry and their relationship to outcomes
- 3) Provide participants multiple opportunities to share their understanding in helping to develop improved policies and engage in organizing and advocacy to help effect change on the policy level.
- 4) Monitor the success of systems-level changes in which participants contributed in order to show longer-term impacts, and to provide information about challenges to be overcome.

FUNDING

I think that the only thing that would make the Safe Return Project better would be if they had focused more on its own funding and becoming its own entity. –JOHNNY, FORMER SAFE RETURN TEAM MEMBER

Safe Return confirmed my belief that the talent pool of formerly and currently incarcerated citizens is wide and vast. With the right resources and opportunities they can be a part of changing systems and the narrative of who they represent. - SAM VAUGHN, SAFE RETURN CO-FOUNDER

The Safe Return Project began by providing a living wage to individuals. A key component of budgeting is ensuring that funding is available to pay participants for their work. Most people do better when they are engaged in meaningful work that allows them to meet their needs. The multiple barriers that the formerly incarcerated face in seeking any employment does not mean that they should be treated any differently. This payment needs to be secure and should provide a living wage. For some team members, the unsure funding base of Safe Return over the long term led them to look elsewhere for work and weakened their ability to sustain engagement. At a minimum the project needs to be funded for the timeframe of the project but would ideally be funded for a few cycles of participants and to allow them to move on. At the end of the three-year period, some successful participants will be ready to take over much of the organizational operation and they should be able to

move into positions of leadership and management. Due to budgeting issues, Safe Return was folded into one of the organizations that was its fiscal sponsor and in the process, lost some of the project's autonomy. While this has allowed Safe Return to continue to operate, the project currently cannot provide the type of intense employment and training opportunities that it formerly did. Finally, as is true with choosing partners, where funding and sponsorship comes from is a critical consideration.

Strategies for funding include:

- 1) Funding participant work: Providing a living wage conveys the value of the work and allows participants the capacity to engage without worrying about basic survival.
- 2) Ensuring funding for length of the project: Based on the interviews conducted, this time frame should be no shorter than 18 months and likely no longer than 3 years. This time frame may be best done in phases.
- 3) Choosing funding streams carefully: Ensure that potential sponsors or funders will be supportive of projects goals, and have a mission that is consistent with, and in no way contradicts, the work of the project.

CONCLUSION

Safe Return helped to heighten the city's awareness of the unique needs for the re-entry population and the potential consequences of not meeting these needs... If the purpose of Safe Return is to ensure that the formerly incarcerated are involved in solutions, they have remained steadfast, they continue to have a consistent voice and speak out against power structures, they remain steadfast in their mission.

-RHODY MCCOY, CONTRA COSTA COUNTY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT, RUBICON PROGRAMS

AS OUR NATION EXPERIMENTS with new policies on crime and incarceration, there continues to be a pressing need for communities to find better ways of helping individuals coming out of prison and jail. This has created an opportunity for re-imagining and restructuring the justice system. Yet too often, people who have directly experienced incarceration are left out. How are the voices of people who have seen the inside included in this historic opportunity for change? Over the past five years, the Safe Return project has remained true to its goal of including those with experience inside in helping create the programs and policies that can ensure formerly incarcerated individuals receive the supports they need to succeed.

While most of the individuals involved noted that the work was more challenging than they had anticipated, and while the project has struggled with funding challenges, no one expressed any regrets about getting involved. Safe Return taught leadership and advocacy skills to its members, and continues to provide Richmond with a committed and skilled group of activists who are passionate about contributing to their community and working on issues that they have a stake in. Most participants stress the importance of the project for the broader community. Many of those outside the project echo this sentiment. Sincere efforts to reform the criminal justice system in cities like Richmond, California, and the kind of visionary leadership the Safe Return Project has demonstrated in this process, offer real hope for both current residents and generations to come.

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APPENDICES

- A. Safe Return Survey Instrument**
Survey questions and prompts used by Safe Return to gather data on the experiences and insights of people coming home from incarceration.
- B. Safe Return guides for survey interviews, applicant interviews, and relational interviews**
Five tools used by the Safe Return Project, including 1. The Check-list for community researchers carrying out survey interviews, 2. Consent form used to get permission to conduct a survey interview of someone, 3. Job applicant interview questions used to screen applicants to the Safe Return Community Researcher position, 4. The goals and principles behind the relational interviews that Safe Return carried out to build their community network, and 5. The evaluation form used to document relational interviews.
- C. Safe Return Survey Findings Final Presentation**
Presentation slides covering all data gathered through the Safe Return survey.
- D. “Speaking Truth on Coming Home” Report**
The report on key research findings and recommendations published by Safe Return in July, 2011.
- E. “Community Reintegration and Employment” Report**
A report on employment issues facing people returning from incarceration, and recommended solutions.
- F. “Housing and Community Reintegration” Report**
- G. A report on housing issues facing people returning from incarceration, and recommended solutions.**
- H. “Invest in People, Not Prisons” Campaign Strategy Report**
A report published by Safe Return and CCISCO on the key strategies and lessons learned during the successful campaign to prevent a jail expansions and invest in reentry resources, “Invest in People, Not Prisons”.
- I. Summary of Safe Return Media Coverage**
A list of media articles and clippings covering the work of the Safe Return Project.

