



GEORGIA

Healing Communities:

A faith-based reentry program for the reintegration of the formerly-incarcerated (“Returning Citizens”)

Healing Communities is a framework for a distinct form of ministry to men, women and youth returning from or at risk of incarceration, their families and the larger community. Healing Communities challenges congregations to become Stations of Hope for those persons affected by the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems through the mobilization of existing resources within the congregation, specifically the formal and informal networks characteristic of congregational life, and the spiritual tenets of forgiveness, healing, redemption, restoration and reconciliation. Healing Communities identifies eight basic components of action for congregations, each built upon existing strengths, all performed within the existing ministry structure of the church. One church official noted, in reviewing the concept: “Any church can do this; every church should do this.”

The Healing Communities framework responds to the key criminogenic needs of persons returning from incarceration: pro-social thinking/attitudes; social support/families and friends; and impulsivity/decision-making. By building relationships with men, women and youth returning from incarceration (“Returning Citizens”), as well as helping families to be a support system for the family member who’s coming home, Healing Communities congregations gain the trust necessary to impart new values, and the accountability necessary for making good decisions.

The eight components are:

1. Stigma Reduction and Welcoming Supportive Atmosphere

Through the development of educational and inspirational materials, Healing Communities offers assistance in bringing the issue of incarceration and recovery to new visibility in congregations. The aim is to heighten awareness surrounding reentry, help families reduce the sense of stigma and shame over having incarcerated loved ones and create a welcoming environment for Returning Citizens. Specific resources within the religious tradition (such as the narratives about the criminal behavior or incarceration of Biblical figures) provide content for discussion.

2. Family Identification

With heightened awareness and reduced stigma, enlightened members of the congregation will identify a family or families within the congregation, who have incarcerated relatives, to participate in the ministry. The families can be presented during an altar call, an invitation for prayer or a welcome circle ceremony; or the faith leader may choose to disclose his or her relationship to an incarcerated person(s); or the congregation may visit the correctional facility and have inmates identify their

individual or family church, masjid, synagogue, temple or other house of worship that they wish to have contacted to participate as a “Healing Community.”

3. Formal and Informal Support

Congregations will be encouraged to provide support for the family of the incarcerated and/or persons at risk through pastoral counseling and providing a formal or informal support group to support (“walk with”) the family and the returning citizen through the period of reentry. Special emphasis will be given to supporting children of the incarcerated through mentoring and supportive services to grandparents and other elderly relatives serving as care givers. Preparation should be made for the return of the incarcerated members and the shift in family dynamics.

4. Visitation and Family Connectivity

Congregations will be trained to both assist the family visiting their incarcerated members, as well as keep in touch themselves, through letter writing and visitations. Sometimes families have trouble visiting because of distance. Congregational support can range from something as simple as providing transportation, or even some benevolent support if long distance travel is involved. In addition, congregations can assist families by accompanying them on the trip required in order to visit. Letter writing and sending cards, bulletins, sermon notes and other forms of written communication assist in family and congregational connectivity, which reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Clergy visits and visits from fathers have been documented as the types of visits most likely to reduce recidivism. Finally, congregations can assist in keeping lines of communication open via telephone through financial support for the family.

5. Volunteering

Congregations will be exposed to life skill development programs in jails and prisons and encouraged to provide volunteers for these efforts. While many jails and prisons have faith communities that come in and provide worship services and Bible studies, their chaplains often cite other needs that are equally as pressing. “I have a long waiting list of churches that want to do worship services,” declared one long time chaplain in Ohio, “What I need are volunteers who will help with life skills – how do you balance a check book, get a driver’s license, read a bus schedule,” he continued. “We need tutors to help with reading and writing, and mentors for good parenting skills.”

6. Mentoring

Mentoring is a valuable component of Healing Communities, where volunteers serve as mentors to both youth and adults. These mentors are dedicated individuals that are willing to walk with and coach youth and even adults, some of whom are returning home to a world very different than the one they left. Our program uses the Amachi model of mentoring, which has been in existence for more than 10 years and is currently operating in 40 states. Amachi Mentoring uses caring volunteers to mentor youth and adults who want and need another positive role model in their lives. Volunteers are asked to spend at least 4 hours a month with their mentee and commit to mentoring for at least one year. We recommend that they correspond with their mentee via email, phone, or text during the times that they don’t meet. These mentors will be screened and trained, and will be expected to listen to, encourage, support and assist their mentees as they go through any difficult times and face certain challenges. The emphasis of the program is that mentors spend time with mentees that have been impacted by

incarceration; whether it be directly, him/herself, one of their parents or another family member; or indirectly, their community or neighborhood has a higher than normal rate of incarceration.

7. Network of referrals

Congregations will be introduced to and connected with resources available in the community for persons impacted by incarceration. Given the needs of these persons coming home, congregations must identify what organizations are providing housing; employment and employment training; health care assistance; other services that support successful reentry; who they are--and be ready to refer. Having a referral network for services allows congregations to concentrate on mobilizing their assets of value and relationships.

8. Public Policy

Congregations will be familiarized with local, state and federal policies that affect the lives of the incarcerated and returning citizens and their families. This includes legislation and policies at all levels of government concerning such issues as the conditions of prisons, jails and detention centers; sentencing and available alternatives to incarceration; services and structures related to reentry; and disproportionate confinement of minority persons and persons with mental health issues.

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