

Welcome to Justice Today, the official podcast of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, where we shine a light on cutting-edge research and practices and offer an in-depth look at what we're doing to meet the biggest public safety challenges of our time. Join us as we explore how funding, science, and technology help us achieve strong communities.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Welcome to Justice Matters. I'm your host Karen Friedman. I am Director of Criminal Justice Innovation, Development, and Engagement here at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, otherwise known as BJA.

As you may know, April is Second Chance Month. In an average month, more than 40,000 Americans are released from state or federal prisons and reenter society. The obstacles they face are a major focus of BJA's work. But in April, we focus special attention on the tremendous challenges associated with reentry from incarceration.

Today, we're joined by a man whose remarkable professional and personal journey has made him an authority on reentry. Chris Poulos is a lawyer, professor, and former White House intern who currently serves as director of Person-Centered Services for the Washington State Department of Corrections. Chris also was formerly incarcerated himself. After serving a drug-related prison sentence as a young man, he is now a senior corrections official who works to break down the barriers on the path to reentry.

Welcome to Justice Matters, Chris. It is such a pleasure to have you here with me today.

CHRIS POULOS: Thank you very much, Karen. I'm excited to be here.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: So I know that you recently joined the Washington State Department of Corrections in an entirely new job, a senior position that didn't exist a year ago. Could you let us know a little bit about what you're doing and what you and the Department of Corrections hope to accomplish?

CHRIS POULOS: Great question. So yes, as you mentioned, my new position is director of Person-Centered Services for the Washington State Department of Corrections. And this is an enterprise position, so I'm not within any particular division.

I'm part of the executive leadership team and executive strategy team. And what my main role is is to go across the state, visit the different prisons, work releases, reentry centers, and talk with both the staff and the currently and formerly incarcerated people to be able to bring their voices, their recommendations, their concerns to the agency

leadership. And as far as we know, this is the first type of position exactly like this in the country, and we also believe it's the first time someone who's been formerly incarcerated themselves in prison is part of a state DOC's executive leadership team.

So it's a, it's an exciting time. And we have a new leadership in the secretary position at Department of Corrections too, with Cheryl Strange joining as the first woman and first LGBT secretary. Also, as far as I know, the first person who's serving a secretary to come from a public health background, as well as having experience in corrections.

So it's an exciting time, and I'm spending a lot of time on the road right now, in visiting with, you know, both staff, and people doing time, and I'm finding that people are really enjoying being listened to, and having somebody there from headquarters who would just sit down and have in-depth conversations, and then bring back that firsthand direct knowledge of their struggles, their recommendations, their challenges to the agency leadership.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: That's fascinating. It sounds amazing. So in these conversations that you've been having, what would you say is, like, you know, the challenges that you've been hearing about? Could you share with us maybe a couple of the top ones that seemed to consistently be talked about?

CHRIS POULOS: Sure. Right now, of course, the elephant in the room has been COVID.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Right.

CHRIS POULOS: For the last 2 years, with programs being shut down, visits being shut down, people suffering illness, and even deaths within the facilities, both staff and incarcerated people. So part of now is as we're hopefully moving beyond the height of this ongoing pandemic is to listen, you know, about how it was, make improvements, but also forge a pathway forward to start reopening facilities, getting programs back going, expanding technology within prisons and jails, and even the work releases, you know, like adding, so people can have their own smartphones, tablets, stuff like that for the work-release side.

And then for the incarcerated side, at least getting tablets available for everyone, and then going further with the tablets so that they're not primarily only for visitation, and for games, and stuff like that, but broadening them to be able to have educational programs, reentry-related programs, community resources. All of those types of things on tablets or laptops within the prisons is something we're working on.

Concerns, really people want to see their families. People want to have access to programs. People want to be treated humanely, and Washington is making a concerted effort to do so.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I, you know, when I served as a judge, the issue of programs always comes up. And, you know, I always felt that day 1 of entering the prison is really the day 1 of reentry and preparing for that reentry. And programs are so important in that, whether it's the substance abuse programs or the, you know, educational programs, all that education that you get while you're inside is so key to a successful reentry in my view. Would you agree with that, Chris?

CHRIS POULOS: Definitely. It's a, you know, and not only is it important for successful reentry. It actually makes the institutions safer and healthier places for everybody when, you know, both for staff and for the people serving time. If there's a pathway forward, a vision for a future, even for people serving long sentences or perhaps people not getting out, if they're able to find meaning and purpose in their days, that creates a safer environment, a healthier environment, and a more productive environment for everyone.

And, you know, one of the big things we're focusing on, it's been challenging because of COVID, but really opening the prisons up to community members and community organizations coming in and removing the onus of reentry from entirely being on the shoulders of government.

And instead having, finding ways to engage community members, community organizations, family members, so that they take ownership of the fact that we do incarcerate people in this country. And what happens when people are leaving, you know, what kind of neighbors do we want? Do we want people who have been warehoused and traumatized for years or decades? Or do we want people who have been prepared for successful reentry and work through the trauma that may have led to their incarceration?

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah, so well said. Your own personal story is just so extraordinary. The *Washington Post* reported that on the night Barack Obama was elected president, you were actually in custody in federal prison. But before his, excuse me, administration ended, you had become an intern in the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. That is extraordinary. Could you talk a bit more about your life experience and how that influences your work on reentry issues?

CHRIS POULOS: Sure. So this, we could probably do quite a conversation on this. It's a lot to unpack. I think a story I'll share is, you know, I can share the story of when I really determined that I wanted to become an attorney, and that was actually when I was in county jail after being arrested on federal charges.

So a key part of my story is that I got sober. I attained sobriety and started living a positive life in recovery prior to being indicted on federal charges. It was several months later that my mom's home was surrounded by federal agents, and I was arrested on drug and gun charges.

And at that point, so what made the big difference for me was I had already done some internal healing and growth and work in a 12-step program at that time. So I went into the criminal legal system with eyes wide open. And it became more than just about me and my outcome.

Immediately, I started seeing differences, you know, privileges, disadvantages of how things went for certain people. And the most poignant experience with was when I was first in county jail and, you know, they had just, I mean my breakfast was still warm at my mom's house. And I was calling my court-appointed attorney, and he told me, "You know, Chris, there's very little chance you're going to get out on bail due to the nature of your charges. You may as well just get the clock ticking on your sentence now. You may as well just accept that you're in county jail, and that's the way it goes. There's no way I'm going to be able to convince the prosecutor or judge to let you out. There's no sense in even having a hearing."

And I got off the phone, and at this point, you know, I'm not a lawyer, but I thought, "This doesn't quite seem right." I mean, we didn't even know the scale of the evidence against me at this point. We didn't have the discovery, and this guy has resigned himself to me just getting the clock ticking on my sentence.

I was able to get the resources together that day to hire private counsel. And I don't even know what they had for dinner that night in jail because 2 hours later I was home. The private attorney called up the U.S. Attorney's Office. He said, "This guy is already in recovery from addiction. He doesn't have any money to flee the country with. He's not a flight risk. He's got a job in the community. He has a stable place to stay. Why not let him out on pretrial release? He's not a threat to anybody. He's no longer engaged in the conduct he was engaged in. Let him keep working on his recovery, saving up money. And then if he needs to go to prison, he will."

And the U.S. Attorney said, "Makes sense to me." We didn't even need a hearing. It went from "Let's not have a hearing because it's so hopeless," to "We don't even need a hearing because they came to an agreement."

And when I left jail that day and saw all of the people that didn't have necessarily the same privilege that I did at that moment, whether that was because of economic privilege, racial privilege, and the combination thereof, it was actually when I left jail that day that I became determined to someday become an attorney myself and work on systemic reform.

And my trajectory changed a bit when I was in law school. I met President Obama's Director of National Drug Control Policy, Michael Botticelli, at a community meeting. And Director Botticelli in Portland, Maine, where I'm from, he opened with "I'm an openly gay married man, and I'm in recovery from addiction, and I've been to jail." And when he said that — at that point, I was in law school already, but I was completely private about my background. The admissions people, lawyers in the community said, "Keep your past a secret. You don't want to ruin your career." There's not like a lot of press because I wasn't a big deal arrest really. It was just a blip, you know?

And so, I kept my past as much secret as I possibly could. I even kept my recovery from addiction secret. And then this guy comes and tells me, tells this whole room of people about his recovery and the fact that he'd been arrested. And I literally, I ran up to him on the steps of city hall in Portland, Maine, after his talk, and I said, "Director Botticelli, my name is Chris. I watched Obama get elected from federal prison. I'm now in recovery just like you. And I'd love to come to Washington."

I have no idea what I was asking for. But fast-forward a year later, I got a call from the United States Secret Service telling me my clearance had been granted and to report to duty. So I spent my last year of law school or a good chunk of it serving in the Administration. And like you said, yeah, I watched Obama get elected from federal prison and happened to actually be the only white incarcerated person in the room of my unit that night when then-Senator Obama got elected. So that history is what shaped my lens for the work I do now.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Well, thank you so much for sharing. I need to say one thing though. There are some very good public defenders. I need to stand up for the public defenders now. I'm sorry that you had a bad experience with one. But I just wanted to give a shout out to the federal and the state public defenders. I've got many, many, many of them that appeared in front of me, and some of them are very dogged and very good and do a great job for their clients.

But you're right, when you get one that doesn't, if you don't have the means to hire your own, you're really, you know, are we allowed to say S.O.L. on a podcast?

But it's really, it's, you know, it's a difficult situation, but most of them are really good. So, yeah, that's an incredible story. Thank you.

Now at BJA, we know that many people who reenter society from incarceration have trouble securing life's basics: housing, employment, education, health care. We have a wide range of programs that address those needs. My understanding is, is that you're particularly concerned about the housing aspect and then have personal experience with this. I was hoping that you would share that with us and let us know a little bit about what Washington State is doing to address this issue.

CHRIS POULOS: Sure, I'd be happy to, and also I'll echo your sentiment about court-appointed attorneys and public defenders. There are amazing ones out there, a lot of them that are committed public servants and do amazing work. So I just did not have that experience personally, but I'm friends with them, and I always like to add that caveat myself. So thank you for bringing it up, so I don't get in trouble with all my public defender friends...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Exactly.

CHRIS POULOS: ...as well. So what we have found is that housing, access to safe and stable housing is the primary external barrier to successful reentry after incarceration. We found that if people are able to work, generally speaking — I can't speak for every town and city across the country — but in many places, people can get a "job." And I put that in quotations because it might not be a sustainable living wage position, but people can often "find work." They can, they can get to work.

But without safe and stable housing, that's not really sustainable, right? You're not able to have a place to change your clothes, to sleep, even sleep safely, you know, to have that secure shelter. How can you make it to appointments? How can you even make it to meet with your probation officer if you don't have safe and stable housing?

And so that is the primary barrier that I've identified and keep working towards. My own experience with it, and this actually circles back to what we were just talking about, my internship at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. So for that position, even though I was an intern — I was, you know, a 3L law student intern — and ONDCP is a pretty, it's considered a sensitive component within the White House because they actually oversee the budgets and some operations of the DEA, also international interdiction. And so I would be, my office would be in the middle of that, international intelligence, all sorts of stuff.

So they had to give me what they considered SF-86 top-secret-eligible national security position clearance. And probably anybody who's at DOJ had to do at least the SF-86 form in order to get employment. And it took longer than usual for me. There were some speed bumps for sure. It wasn't looking good for a while, but it ultimately worked out. And I had people, kind of, going to bat for me and saying, "You know, look, if we're going to preach this, if we're going to say that we want second chances, how are we not going to give this guy a shot who's already been given a conditional offer for the internship?"

And sure enough, they said yes. And then so I got that clearance. And when, what my next task was, I was living in Portland, Maine, at that time. I had to obtain housing, right? And I wasn't able to.

The apartments I was looking at had categorical prohibitions. If you have a drug felony, or any of these other felonies, perhaps even any felony at all, and it's not even an individual analysis. It says it right on the application: "You're ineligible."

And so I thought, "Isn't this ironic that even with all of my both inherent privilege as a white guy and my accumulated privilege as a 3rd-year law student prospective White House intern, even I cannot secure shelter. I cannot rent an apartment."

And I ended up having to go through a kind of like online LISTSERV and rent a room from somebody. And then I had to PayPal somebody money in California. Then they would pay the rent to the person in D.C. And I had to just hope that the security, you know, at the apartment building every night would never, you know, interrogate me about exactly which lease are you on. And I think probably in a degree, again, to white guy, blonde hair, blue eyes, 6 feet tall, walking in a business suit after leaving the White House every night, I didn't get questioned about what I was doing there.

So that's what framed my interest or really encouraged my interest in access to housing. And then I got to Washington, and I realized that Seattle actually has the strongest ordinance in the country prohibiting rental housing discrimination against people with criminal records. And so for the last few years, we've actively been kind of taking a multi-prong approach. But one of the things we're working on at the statewide level — it's still ongoing — is a bill to address, if not eliminate, the arbitrary discrimination that's currently legal against anyone with a criminal record.

So we've introduced a bill twice now. Still working toward, it's still building consensus. We have a coalition working on that. And then at the same time, just looking at the broader issue, like what else can we do?

So Department of Corrections now in the past was able to provide 3 months of housing vouchers for anyone exiting DOC facilities who is on supervision. Now we're able to, under a new law that just passed, provide 6 months of housing vouchers for anyone including people who are not leaving on supervision. So that's a huge thing, to be able

to have somebody have a 6-month runway where then they're able to establish, "Am I living with family? Am I getting a roommate? Am I going to try to rent my own place, which is still so challenging?"

But that's something we're really proud of. And then another thing we're doing related is we're doing direct grant funding to all sorts of different community organizations that provide case managers, employment, training, credible messengers, and housing, as well as even, like, cell phones and bus passes. We're just decided as a state that we'd be willing to directly fund these organizations that are doing those kinds of providing those essential services.

With the goal of everyone having a warm handoff exit from incarceration, our community is entering facilities, introducing themselves, and then, you know, welcoming people home. That's really, if I had to say it in a sentence, we're moving toward welcoming people home instead of being like, "Ooh, this guy's been in prison. What do we do?" Instead it's, "This person served their time. How do we welcome them back now that they've, you know, completed what the courts asked of them?"

KAREN FRIEDMAN: All right. Well, two things, first I could tell you that even though I was a state court judge for 20 years, it took me a very long time to get my clearance, too. So don't feel bad. It's not you. That's A.

And B, it's interesting, you know, we, I actually did another podcast a little while ago actually with also formerly incarcerated people who are now doing reentry work. And when we talked about all the different, you know, issues, housing was their number one issue as well. When I asked them if I could give you a magic wand, you know, what's the one, you know, the first issue you would tackle, and they also said housing, which is really interesting because I think people who are removed from the system really don't, you know, most of them are going to be, "Oh, you know, getting a job, or getting an education, or getting off drugs, those are the number one issues."

But it really seems to be that housing and these issues that you're talking about, you know, about with restrictions of where people could live and, you know, some people can't even live with family because their family is living in housing that restricts them having anyone. So they can't even go live with grandma, or with mom, or with auntie, because then they would lose the, you know, grandma would lose their housing. So I don't think it's an issue that, you know, people in general are aware of, but it really seems to be a major issue. Yeah, so thank you for educating us all on that.

I know that Washington State also launched several initiatives that equip incarcerated people with job skills, including, interestingly, a program in the construction trades that began in the state's only women's facility. Could you tell me about that?

CHRIS POULOS: Yes, definitely. There's a program that's been around for quite a while now. It predated me, and I came to Washington in the fall of 2017, so several years. And the program is called TRAC, and I believe the acronym is Trades-Related

Apprenticeship Course or something similar to that. And what the Trades Related Apprenticeship Course does is, you know, most people know that people who are incarcerated, if they're able to, generally do need to have some kind of job, especially if you're in a prison and you're there for a long time. You have to work.

And what we often find is that these jobs provided don't actually translate into meaningful skills that are applicable to external, meaningful living wage employment upon release. And TRAC is the kind of program that helps address that. And what TRAC does is it has people from the builders union or unions come into the women's facilities and work with them, train the women in these warehouses with full-time DOC staff assigned to the TRAC Program as well. And they do the same type of apprenticeship training that people on the outside would do if they wanted to be, you know, get their union certification in a particular trade, something like that.

And then they get evaluated, and I've been to their evaluations. It's pretty amazing to see the things that they go through, incredibly challenging and intense, and there's a lot of team building, bonding that goes on there. And then afterwards, the women who graduate this program, to my knowledge, are incredibly successful at just going out and meeting with the people at the union upon release. And if they didn't have a job lined up even before they leave, very quickly are able to get into jobs that, you know, are paying \$30, \$40, or more per hour. And that's just such a recipe for success.

So as long as other things are simultaneously being addressed like housing, like, you know, any internal treatment, healthcare, all of that stuff, these women who are doing this program are geared for success. Another cool experience I had with this is we know that a lot of people who are incarcerated in this country are victims of generational poverty and generational trauma, right? And that not everybody, most people, people do not fit into a category of victim or, you know, person causing harm, et cetera, right?

A lot of people in prison have been harmed themselves, and then go on to cause harm. And a lot of the women who are incarcerated have been harmed by men. I'll just be very direct. And some of the experiences and testimonies, I was one of the graduation speakers at last week's TRAC graduation at one of the women's prisons. And one of the women was sharing her testimony, her experience of the program, and she shared that this is the first — some of the TRAC instructors are men. And she shared that this was the first time in her entire life that she had a positive role model, leadership, interactions, and relationship with a man.

And that, you know, what a transformational opportunity that is for everyone involved. And that really speaks to the larger work that I'm hoping to do is recognizing that, you know, in prisons and jails, they exist. They're here. Our prisons and jails are here for the foreseeable future. And how do we start moving them away from being places where people are warehoused, traumatized, and it's a staff is one side and then there's people who are incarcerated — generally not described as people who are incarcerated — described as inmates, convicts, offenders, whatever. How do we move that to recognizing that everyone is a human being?

Staff members are human beings. Correctional officers, counselors are human beings. People serving time are human beings. Family members of people serving time and staff are human beings. And that's what I witnessed at this TRAC graduation last week was seeing, you know, kind of gruff construction worker-type DOC employees getting emotional and acknowledging their own humanity, and these women's humanity, and that's the kind of thing that gives me great hope for our future.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: It really is priceless. And, you know, the old expression, "Hurt people hurt people." You know, it sounds like a meme now, but in reality, it's really true.

And I know that, you know, I once went into a jail for a substance abuse program graduation. And this woman who is probably in her 50s came over to me, and she had tears in her eyes, and she said, "This is the first certificate of completion that I've ever gotten for anything in my life."

And it was just so moving, like, you don't even think about that, you know? And for her, just having that piece of paper saying that she started something and she successfully complete it, was just next level for her. And it's just, it really, it truly is priceless.

So, I mean, I know that these kinds of one-on-one stories that you see and that you witness obviously are success. But I know, like, for a system, an organization, you need to try to quantify results, right? So what's the plan as far as that? How do you know, you know, in the larger sense, if you're making progress and how do you quantify that?

CHRIS POULOS: Sure. So there's a couple different ways that we can, you know, analyze results, especially anecdotally and perhaps even on raw numbers as well. And one of the clearest ways is looking to other states that have implemented these types of reforms.

The organization we're specifically working with around prison culture and improving the relationships between with staff and incarcerated people and family members is called Amend. It's based out of the University of California, San Francisco. And they've already done some work in North Dakota, as well as extensive work in Oregon.

And what Oregon specifically has seen is they, and they started at the penitentiary too in Oregon, the maximum-security prison. They didn't start at a camp or a lower-level security prison. And they taught principles like dynamic security. So how can you be responsive to an individual's need who's incarcerated and training the staff on that? What is a relationship between a correctional officer and an incarcerated person that's appropriate but also healthy and, you know, conducive to healing and just regular, like, you would see somebody in the community? How do you do that?

And, you know, principles are taught involving things like understanding the difference between personal and private. You know, how are you feeling today? That's a personal question. But it's not necessarily private. And so we're training officers to understand

that if, you know, you can ask somebody how they're doing. That's not crossing a line. You can say, "Hey, I saw your family was here. I hope you're going to be able to see them again soon." That's okay.

And then if somebody does respond with something, you know, asking details about where somebody lives or what school their kids go to or something, that's when you could say, "I'm not going to get into that right now. That's private." And just that understanding, "Oh, wow, so you mean we can have conversations. We just need to understand what's OK and what's not." It's not just this wall of "I'm just going to open the door, shut the door, search your cell, and any time you're talking to me is maybe an attempt to compromise me."

And that work is phenomenal. And so by implementing those types of changes in Oregon, what they found is they have actually documented a strong reduction in staff turnover. They've seen a strong increase in staff satisfaction with the work they're doing because now they're finding meaning. They're not only opening and closing doors and patting people down and searching cells. They're actually building these healthy relationships. They're seeing incidents of, I hate to say it, but correctional officers and law enforcement have a heightened level of spousal abuse, substance use disorder. All of that is going down. And Oregon is studying that.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: So would you say it's like community policing on the street? Like, the theory of community policing on the street, but just in a DOC setting in a way?

CHRIS POULOS: Yeah, I mean, I'd go even broader and say it's about humanization. It's about just treating people with dignity and respect, and learning how do you do that in a cell block environment? And then recognizing, "Oh, my goodness. It's actually possible to do that."

And the incidents of staff and incarcerated individual conflicts and even conflicts among staff and between incarcerated individuals, all of that goes down and, you know, I can even say it in a sentence as I've never heard of a riot happening in a prison because people felt they were being treated too humanely.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah. That's great.

CHRIS POULOS: And in fact, we have experiences where when things did go south and violence did occur, there are example after example where the incarcerated individual have protected staff members who did treat them like fellow human beings. I don't mean special favors or anything. I just mean they were there. They were doing their job and treated people humanely, and the powerful incarcerated people because there are power dynamics in prisons and jails...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Of course.

CHRIS POULOS: ... they did what they could to make sure that people who treated them well were not harmed. And I actually did the, you know, the correctional officer training recently, the Core Academy myself, and that was passed down from our instructors that said, "Hey, we treat people with respect who are incarcerated. We strive to. It's unacceptable when we don't. And it's not just because it's the right thing to do. It's because it makes us safer. And we want to get home at the end of the day." And it's amazing how that can have a ripple effect through everything.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Are you looking also at recidivism rates for people who have actually taken advantage of the programming that you're offering?

CHRIS POULOS: Yeah. I mean, so the challenge with measuring recidivism alone is determining, pinpointing what caused the rates. So because this is going to be this, you know, "What caused the increase or the decrease?" Is it just the fact that there's, you know, more jobs, less jobs? There're so many independent factors that I'm hesitant to gauge progress based on recidivism rates alone.

At the same time, and I think for certain programs, Amend is being implemented slowly but surely throughout all of the prisons. So there's not really one target group that we can measure recidivism from one facility alone. But for other programs, like, you know, people who have access to higher education in prison, for example, and we study their outcomes. There has been substantial, you know, research and findings that people who do have access to higher ed in particular have astronomically lower recidivism rates upon reentry.

So I'm not sure if we'll be able to measure it specifically related to the work with Amend. But we certainly can in some areas. And that is the long-term goal, of course.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Great. Well, Chris, thank you so much. This has been really fascinating. We really appreciate taking your time today to join us, and thank you for a great conversation, and more importantly, thank you for all the great work that you're doing. It's really a model, it should be a model for the whole country. And, you know, I just look forward to hearing your continued success. So thank you again for being here today.

CHRIS POULOS: Thank you, Karen. And something I'll just end with is I found that in one sentence the key to successful reentry is when internal healing and growth is met with external opportunity. That's what I found to be the cornerstone, but thanks again. It's been an honor to be on the podcast.