

Mayor's Commission on Reentry Minutes
August 17, 2020

In attendance: Keith Mitchell, Kristin Barker, John House, Dr. Michael Forte, Pat Frey, Terry Gallops, Cathy Robinson, Jeanette James, Waleisah Wilson, and Leah Unwin.

Keith Mitchell opened the meeting and asked for a brief review and approval of the minutes. There was a common consent to accept the minutes as submitted.

Pat Frey shared that Mr. Gates is a returning felon who has reached out to Pat for help finding a place to live. She is waiting to hear back from him and from his attorney with the Innocence Project. She suggested the commission may be able to assist. John suggested that he may have been pardoned or found innocent recently. The NAACP was also very interested in his case.

Keith suggested that Home for Good could serve as a lead housing partner and connect into our Housing Subcommittee. The commission has an MOU that can be submitted to Home for Good to establish that relationship. Pat asked who's on the subcommittee and how and when do returning citizens find access to housing? Where are individuals going prior to connection to housing? Keith responded that the Housing Subcommittee needs to accept the responsibility identifying these gaps and working together on recommended solutions.

We want to wrap services around an individual so they have access to support throughout all stages of the process. The larger commission will support this work by accessing our direct lines of communication to the Mayor's office and the availability of support from the city as this support is needed. Pat mentioned one key gap is that returning citizens are often not eligible for housing vouchers. This brings the need for private landlords who are open, flexible, and willing to provide affordable and safe housing options. The commission can help to add structure and support to this effort. Coordinating training for private landlords may be a valuable way to approach this.

The Employment Subcommittee met and heard directly from Richard Bishop. He shared information about needed training and certifications being developed by Columbus Technical College. The city is currently working with Columbus Tech and looking for funding sources to provide financial support for low income individuals including returning citizens. We need to make sure that we are also addressing the ability for those with a criminal background to gain licensing if needed to work in these fields. He encouraged our partners to apply for funding through Crime Prevention.

Richard also expressed a willingness from the Mayor's office to support a campaign around Ban the Box. Educating businesses so that they become more willing to a chance to someone with a criminal record is important. Waleisah mentioned that it is illegal to apply a blanket ban to people who are sex offenders.

It was also suggested that we work with the Chamber to develop additional incentives for businesses who move into Columbus and are willing to hire returning citizens. We would like for the city to identify funding that could be used to support this as well. We would like to recruit someone from the Chamber to serve on the Employment Subcommittee.

The Faith Based Subcommittee could create educational opportunities on using 211 targeted to local churches. We may want to partner with the Chattahoochee Valley Poverty Reduction Coalition (CVPRC) on this as they have begun to offer 211 training for service organizations and have talked about extending this to churches in 2020. Pat recommended connecting with Adrian Chester, Director of the Columbus Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, to get a good list for church outreach and recruitment. Keith will work with Dr. Forte to reach out to Adrian for this.

Commission information has been updated on the city's webpage. Please check for accuracy of this information.

Community Supervision is an important member of the commission. Keith asked Leah Unwin the share information from GDC on individuals being released on parole or under community supervision.

Waleisah shared that Johnny Gates is her client. They have putting him up in AirBnB's and motels over the last three months. Since this case is well known, hearsay has been a real problem. His background looks ok, but people still know his name from the story 40 years ago. This is really what is limiting his chances. Money is not a problem. He needs a place that is a safe housing situation. Waleisah asked Pat to assist where she can.

An in-person expungement training for 2020 has been put on hold due to COVID-19 and an inability to reconnect with our District Attorney, Solicitor General, and Muscogee County Court Clerk.

Kristin motioned that we add someone from Home for Good to the commission. Dr. Forte seconded that motion. The motion was approved by majority vote.

Commission members were asked to review the submitted recommended standards for the commission and an overview description of the commission that can be used to share. Edits should be submitted and voted on via email.

Waleisah also shared information on two webinars and asked the commission to help spread the word. She also asked if there is a list of churches who are background friendly. It a great if the church has a pastor who is open about a prior incarceration. This would be a good place to refer returning citizens to for support. It would be better to gather this information 1-on-1 or through a targeted survey. This is a good topic for the Faith Based Subcommittee.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:05pm. Our next meeting will be September 21, at 1pm.