

Mayor's Commission on Reentry Minutes
June 21, 2021 at 1:00pm

In attendance: John House, Kristin Barker, Baki Muhammad, Stacey Rivera, Gamaliel Torres, Cathy Robinson, Waleisah Wilson, Michael Forte and Monica Spencer.

Michael Forte opened the meeting in prayer.

The minutes were reviewed and Mike motioned to accept the minutes as read. Baki seconded that motion and the minutes were approved.

There was no correspondence to discuss.

Kristin reviewed an outline of the presentation to be delivered to City Council on June 22. The Commission approved the approach. Kristin explained that Keith Mitchell is experiencing health challenges and will be unable to deliver the update. Kristin will present that in his stead and asked members of the Commission and partners to attend that meeting in support if available. Cathy, Baki, Mike, and Monica will plan to attend. Cathy may bring her new Housing Coordinator for SafeHouse Ministries.

Kristin and Keith met with our Community of Practice (CoP) liaison to discuss next steps with the CoP. Our next steps will be to develop a connected and robust system for data sharing and communication in our community. We will work with one of the CoP experts to develop an action plan and approach for this.

Lori Trzop has asked everyone who has been actively involved with the CoP to attend a meeting on June 30 at 4pm to review this plan as a group. We also need to get someone from DCS and the Sheriff's office to attend these calls since Shereatha has left her position as Community Coordinator. Kristin asked who else would be key to attend.

Mike shared that he has reached out to someone high up at the GDC to get information on people who are returning from prison to Muscogee County. Kristin believes she is already receiving this information. It includes names, ID numbers, county of residence, and training received. This list is available when requested. Mike believes the person he is talking with can help us get additional data that is needed and may ask him to join us during the CoP conversations.

Monica shared that the faith based subcommittee continues to work on getting more churches involved and sharing resources. The Georgia EMI is planning a breakfast in Atlanta to try and identify high level clergy. They are also meeting with DA's across the state.

Cathy shared that SafeHouse is in the process of creating a master-list of all individually owned rental properties in town. The goal is to map this out to better understand where low-cost rental properties are located across Columbus. Cathy will also look at the proximity maps that were shared by John House in May.

Waleisah shared that Restore Georgia is working on a list of cities in Georgia that are reentry friendly and Columbus is not currently on this list. SafeHouse is the only place in Columbus for someone with restrictions to get help. Many organizations and private landlords in Columbus have tried to find properties to house this population and have been unable to do so because of laws and proximity restrictions. In contrast, there are over a dozen places in Atlanta that will take persons on the registry.

We also need education. Not everyone on the sex offender registry would be defined as a “sex offender” by the traditional definition. Not everyone is a danger to children. Housing is one of the biggest reasons that people recidivate. The laws we have on our books in Columbus make finding solutions difficult to impossible.

Kristin asked John for his advice on how to address these housing challenges. John agreed that many of the people on the registry shouldn’t be listed for various reasons. The only way to fix that is through working with state legislators. Also, it is very difficult in Muscogee County to find a spot that meets all of the state restrictions due to farmland being converted to residential properties and the associated influx of schools and churches. There is not enough land. The city of Columbus has mostly occupied the entire county since 1971.

Waleisah asked about the old transitional center on Schatugla Road. Someone was trying to get this property to use for housing people on the registry and it was blocked in Columbus. Why? John will be glad to find out what happened if the details are provided.

Kristin asked if zoning changes would help in this situation. John doesn’t believe they will solve the problem unless they are still on probation. He thinks there may be some land on Technology Parkway that could be used for this purpose if someone wanted to build something because it backs up to Ft. Benning. This makes those projects very expensive.

Transportation would also be a concern in this situation because the bus doesn’t go to the Technology Park. Kristin explained that people don’t apply to jobs in that area because they don’t have transportation. John asked if anyone has talked with METRA and suggested that having some data to show how lack of transportation impacts employment would be helpful. We may need to look for private solutions to this challenge.

The employment subcommittee is planning to hold two focus groups with employers in late September to get feedback that will be used to prepare for the Ban the Box campaign. We are waiting to hear about funding as well. Kristin sent reentry metrics to the subcommittee and Commission on June 9th. We have also been talking with the City of Columbus about hiring individuals who are on the list from the GDC and will be returning to Columbus upon release.

We need to ask how Columbus can become a model community. This will only happen when we begin to walk the walk.

The meeting was dismissed at 2:04pm.

Our next meeting will be on July 19, 2021. We will meet virtually on zoom.