

Vermont – Prison Research and Innovation Network
Executive Committee Meeting
August 21, 2020

Meeting Attendees:

Steering Committee Members:

- Al Cormier, DOC Facilities Executive, VT PRIN Chief
- Jessica King-Mohr, DOC Lead Research Analyst, Interim Prison Research and Innovation Manager (PRIM)
- Judy Henkin, DOC Deputy Commissioner
- Monica Weeber, DOC Administrative Services Director
- Mike Lyon, DOC Southern State Correctional Facility Superintendent
- Dr. Kathy Fox, University of Vermont Professor in the Department of Sociology, Research Partner
- Dr. Abigail Crocker, University of Vermont Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Mathematics & Statistics, Research Partner
- Jesse Jannetta, Urban Institute Senior Policy Fellow, Vermont Site
- Lauren Farrell, Urban Institute Policy Assistant, Vermont Site
- Rudy Perez, Urban Institute Research Analyst, Vermont Site
- Aristotle Jones, Urban Institute Government Affairs Coordinator, Vermont Site

Executive Committee Members:

- Dr. Lorelei Ammons, VitalCore Chief Operating Officer—Clinical Services
- James Baker, Interim DOC Commissioner
- Senator Becca Balint, VT State Senator, Majority Leader
- Tim Burgess, Formerly Incarcerated & Advocate
- Tom Dalton, Executive Director—Vermonters' for Criminal Justice Reform
- Representative Alice Emmons, VT House of Representatives—Springfield
- Ashley Messier, Formerly Incarcerated & Advocate
- Representative Marybeth Redmond, VT House of Representatives—Essex

1. Introductions

a. Alan Cormier – VT DOC PRIN Chief welcomed everyone to the meeting

2. Overview of the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative (Urban)

a. See VTPRIN_EC_Urban_8.21.2020 Document for full presentation

a. The Urban Team explained the purpose of the Prison Research and Innovation Network (PRIN) is to support states interested in researching and improving prison culture, operations, and design to make correctional environments more humane and rehabilitative.

b. Expected outcomes of the project are

i. Invite people who are incarcerated and those who work in prison to contribute to change in their facility

- ii. Enhance capacity to collect and analyze data on life behind bars
 - iii. Develop, implement, and evaluate innovations to improve prison environments
 - iv. Identify and pursue opportunities for state-level policy change
- c. Vermont is one of 5 system to participate in the Initiative. The other sites are: Colorado DOC, Delaware DOC, Iowa DOC, and Missouri DOC. The goals of creating this network are to:
 - i. Develop a better understanding of prison environments
 - ii. Enhance the capacity for collecting data on prison environments and measuring impact of improvements
 - iii. Generate transformative thinking and new thought leaders
 - iv. Nurture a community of practice
 - v. Incubate innovation
 - vi. Contribute to a national narrative change campaign
- d. Urban's role:
 - i. Developing core measures
 - ii. Support administrative data collection
 - iii. Promote peer learning
 - iv. Conduct process evaluation
 - v. Provide TA as needed
 - vi. Share lessons learned
 - vii. Connect and support everyone in VT – accessible to everyone on the committee

Urban will connect work at the sites to the larger national initiative. Idea of the project is to go directly to the “problem” of the gap of knowledge about incarceration. The climate survey in the prison helps to understand and mine information. Urban recognizes they are coming in the middle of the story and history of reform in the state. They will be engaging with people who have been working on this already in Vermont to nurture ideas. The project also will incorporate the narratives of people who live and work at Southern State Correctional Facility (SSCF).

Urban acknowledges the increased attention of the country related to racial equity. This is a particular challenge around incarceration and always is an area of focus for the project. We will need to think about how we pay attention to this topic, perhaps by adding racial equity measures to the project.

2. Overview of VT Work and Phase I specifics (UVM)

- a. The UVM team described their history of working with justice innovation in Vermont noting their experience with the Circles of Support and Accountability Program (CoSA), Inmate Family Survey and experience teaching at prison location in Vermont
- b. Reviewed the PRIN structure which includes Southern State Correctional Facility (SSCF) as the pilot facility, UVM as the research partner, an onsite Prison Research Innovation Manager (DOC in the process of hiring), a Steering Committee to support logistics, and the Executive Committee to hold the project accountable and support big changes.
- c. Reviewed the Phase 1 Research Timeline. Goal is to have surveys developed, administered, and analyzed by March 31, 2021. UVM will also look at DOC administrative data. Administrative Data analysis to tap into data that might be kept on documents versus in a defined system.

- d. Described participatory research and the importance of involving members of study as active and equal participants in the project. To accomplish this, UVM will establish research councils among staff and incarcerated people. Each will have 10 -12 participants and meetings 2x per month. There will have an application and nomination process for people to be on the councils. UVM will also conduct focus groups and individual interviews to get feedback and ensure the right questions are being asked. The project will serve as a pilot that could be replicable across the other VT DOC facilities.
- e. Project Milestones:
- UVM IRB meeting successful review to get green light move forward with the research
 - First Executive Committee meeting
 - Hire PRIM
 - UVM/DOC contract
 - Schedule remaining Exec Committee Meetings
- f. Access to SSCF:
- SSCF is excited about the initiative. It will bring about difficult and needed conversation. In order to assure access to the site during the pandemic, they converted a room and equipped with a computer with the Microsoft Teams application. They created a space that will allow for confidential conversations. The facility adheres to VT Department of Health and CDC guidelines around sanitizing, temp checks, and health screens. Inmates movement is limited to protect them and not cross contaminate. Preventing introduction and spread of COVID is priority. Staff have been asking about the project. The facility is ready to start and will welcome the PRIM and UVM team when they arrive.

Questions (Beginning of Video Recording of Meeting)

Q: Will COVID-19 impact UVM's ability to engage? Are you compensating or incentivizing engagement?

A: It does create a challenge. The UVM team will be tested weekly and then will have protocols to follow and expect that there will be times they cannot be on site. During those times, they will use the video conferencing room that can be private.

Engaging people is always a challenge. At the facility visit in February, we did talk with people and explained the consultative nature of the project. DOC will pay staff for their time in focus groups and councils. Federal law says you cannot compensate inmates when doing research. We can provide a special snack whether people to participate or not.

Another benefit is to make change and that can be a motivation to participate.

Q: Feel strongly that part of culture change is doing thing differently and need to value their time and giving something in reciprocity.

A: We will continue to keep this in mind. Really need to listen to people and bring their ideas forward.

Q. The Council of State Governments is also working on Justice Reinvestment II (JRII). How will the information be coordinated and not at cross purposes? VT is a unified system – that also changes dynamics. Will you see a difference with other states? SSCF also houses a geriatric and mental health population which are already challenging. Interested in the programs that will be developed.

A: There is overlap with the strategies of JRII and this project. Many of the JRII strategies impact releases, release planning, and returns. JRII established presumptive parole for a subset of the population, established an earned good time program which can lead to earlier releases, and changed the furlough system with the goals of lessening the churn of people returning to prison after release.

Urban also has contacted the CSG JRII team to establish a connection between the projects.

Delaware is also unified system however, the prison they have identified primarily houses sentenced people. We understand that the turnover in detainees could make it harder to get their participation on the research council.

In terms of the population at SSCF, it is important to develop a plan that ensure the survey is inclusive as possible with the population needs in minds.

3. Facilitated Dialogue

Ground Rules

Our primary commitment is to learn from each other and make this effort stronger: We will listen to each other and not talk at each other. We acknowledge differences among us in backgrounds, skills, interests, and values. We realize that these very differences will increase our awareness and understanding through this process.

Take space, make space: We create an environment for everyone to contribute. We speak up when we have something to share, but leave room for others to share.

Participate Fully: We let go of all the other things we need to be doing and keep our focus here.

Use 'I' statements: We tell our experiences and our perspective, and don't assume that others feel the same way.

Goals from the Committee Members:

- Help bring experiences and represent those who need a voice or answer questions about how something works
- 26 years with DOC have seen a lot of change and still opportunity to do something. Have a voice now to move forward. Now is the time. We need to create the Vermont model. We can do good things and want to be looked at nationally as a place that has a positive prison culture.
- This in an incredible opportunity as a health care partner. We like to think that we are continually improving and would also want to share nationwide. Good things will come forward that we can implement.
- Two aspirations: moment to use the energy around racial justice and improve situation for people of color. Fundamental goal of culture change must come at the level of the relationship between the officer and incarcerated individual.
- Small enough state that we can tailor the national efforts to our system. Want to see something that lasts. Take the new momentum build and not regress again.

- Make sure that buildings are appropriate for the policy. Changing culture day to day will require a change to the buildings. Need to bite the bullet on state level to put money to that problem. Like to include how buildings are contributing to the culture and ability to make change.
- DOC is working on feasibility study for facilities. Can bring the information from this project to that study.

Challenges

Vermont can be provincial. Change becomes personal and not about the system. Change comes up against the small nature of the world that is Vermont.

Accountability – What can we do to help support the change

- Listen to what people say at the facility and make sure the information is shared and communicated
- Rather than a big report – small bursts of updates that come over time are easier to digest. Send periodically.
- Share information from bi-weekly Steering Committee meetings with the Exec. Committee.
- Share with the families of people who are incarcerated. Open those communication lines. Use the new Constituency Management Unit
- Connecting with other sites? Is there an opportunity for sites to give feedback to each other? What has happened to date?
 - It has been slow since most states have been in crisis mode. Urban can make it happen as much as sites have capacity. When sites are ready can start.
- Very fortunate to be able to participate. Do other sites have a person with lived experience as part of their team?

4. Next Steps

- Review and sign the charter
- Meeting Notes
- Recording
- Setting up next meetings