

I Hope I See You Somewhere Else

Allegheny County Jail's Discharge Center
Helps Ex-Offenders Leave on the Right Foot



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Captain Bradley Flood used to be an intake sergeant at the Allegheny County Jail. He remembers how releases from the jail used to happen.

“If we arrested someone in August wearing flip-flops, shorts and a T-shirt, and if we released him in December, we would put him out the same way as he came in. No help with proper clothing, bus fare, finding shelter or notifying family. They never had a chance. They had to steal a coat to stay warm, or rob somebody in a bar to get bus fare. I would release them on the 3-to-11 shift, and they would be back in jail the next day when I arrived.”

That’s not only inhumane treatment, it is setting up ex-offenders for virtually certain failure, which contributes to the recidivism rate, with poor releases adding to the already-staggering costs that the United States shoulders to maintain the world’s largest incarcerated population.

But change isn’t easy to achieve when the same group of correctional officers has the work of both intake and release. For these busy officers, efficient jail intake had to take priority over coordinated release of residents.

The Allegheny County Jail initiated a major change in 2011 by opening a new Discharge Center as ex-offenders’ last stop within the jail before re-entering society. Inmates now have a different experience, meeting with positive and supportive staff who give them assistance designed to help them avoid an immediate return.

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

The idea for the Discharge Center had existed for a long time; in fact, the original design of the current Allegheny County Jail, which opened in 1995, included a Discharge Center, but the space was instead appropriated for other purposes. Officers like Captain Flood, as well as former inmates and family members, saw the problems that came from this decision and shared their concerns with the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative during the community meetings it convened in 2010 in preparation for the development of a strategic plan. Family members spoke of having to wait more than six hours for their loved one's release and of lingering outside the front door of the jail when they were no longer allowed to wait in the lobby. They told of releases at 3 a.m., when ex-offenders could not return home in freezing temperatures because bus service had ended at 11 p.m.

Improving discharges was becoming a priority, which aligned with the efforts of a longtime advocate for children and families of the incarcerated. As early as 2002, the Pittsburgh Child

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Spending hours mingling with families outside the jail's main entrance as they waited for a release that never came, she was dismayed to discover that the two-hour period from 2:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. was one of the two busiest periods for release.

When she started asking questions about procedures, Walker recalled, "Everyone in the criminal justice system who knew about it said it was someone else's fault and that nothing could be done." Undeterred, she held a series of focus groups with correctional officers and then assembled committees charged with discussing how to achieve what she called "known release"—that is, discharging jail residents at preset times, with proper preparation and family notification.

ORDER FROM THE COURTS

Walker's position gained traction after awareness of the issue was heightened during the 2010 community meetings, and Allegheny County's Jail Collaborative prioritized the development of a Discharge Center. Helen Lynch, a dynamic administrator for the Allegheny County Criminal Courts, agreed to lead the project.

Selecting a court administrator to improve jail systems was unusual; typically, the court system doesn't pay much attention to what happens after an offender is inside the jail's walls. But Lynch is a compassionate, compulsively hard-working administrator who understands that poorly managed discharges equal increased recidivism—and that, in addition to recidivism's negative impact on the community, it also results in even more work for the courts.

"I didn't volunteer, I was drafted," she chuckled, referring to the fact that Administrative Judge (now President Judge) Donna McDaniel had asked Lynch to represent her at Jail Collaborative

meetings. But it wasn't long before Lynch became oriented to the Collaborative and identified the Discharge Center as a definable and readily achievable project. She assembled a small work group that included Flood, Jail Policy and Planning Administrator LaToya Warren, Intake Captain David Hungerman, Warden Ramon Rustin, and Dana Phillips, Chief Operating Officer of Allegheny Correctional Health Services (ACHS), the jail's health care provider. With Lynch, they formed an efficient committee that worked out the logistical details in a matter of months.

Their task involved more than establishing a physical location for release from the jail; the discharge process also needed to be fixed. The jail had experienced a few embarrassing "bad releases," when a resident was released inappropriately due to a paperwork mix-up or a failure to identify a pending detainer. Communications between the courts and the jail were plagued by errors, primarily because of an antiquated process that required passing of court orders (known as 6As) by hand from judge to clerk to sheriff to correctional officer, with frequent wrong turns along the way. Faxing documents from place to place created its own set of problems, as the fax machines were not monitored and frequently ran out of paper, became jammed, or scattered the paper all over the floor. Even more troubling, 6As often sat in a file for days before coming to anyone's attention.

While Lynch couldn't get the courts and the jail staff to switch to electronic communication, she did succeed in streamlining the process. Now a court clerk logs all 6A forms, verifies their accuracy, and hand-delivers them to a specified jail guard twice a day. That was just the first step in improving the process of release.

48 HOURS TO PLAN

Flood was promoted to captain and given responsibility for the Discharge Center and programs involving re-entry into the community. With the approval of two discharge coordinators (funded by money spent by inmates at the jail commissary) and a fast-moving facility renovation, the Discharge Center quickly took shape. To make it function effectively, however, Lynch had to push a major procedural change through the court system.

While convicts obviously want to be released as soon as they are cleared by the judge, an immediate exit allows no time to ensure that all components of an effective release are in place, such as communication with family, filling of prescriptions, provision of suitable clothing, and arranging for appropriate shelter. Lynch explained the situation to Administrative Judge Jeffrey Manning, who gained his fellow judges' unanimous approval for a new policy under which all court-ordered releases are scheduled to occur within 48 hours. This allowed the discharge process to follow these steps:

- A correctional officer contacts the inmate to ask if he or she wants a free phone call or any assistance from the Discharge Center in preparing for re-entry. Discharge coordinators are available to address any housing, clothing or transportation issues.
- ACHS, the nonprofit organization that provides health services to inmates, prepares medications for individuals in its care, along with an expedited application for health insurance for individuals likely to qualify for Medical Assistance.

- Meanwhile, the cashier's office prepares a check for the funds in the resident's account, and the resident's personal property is recovered. Finally, the criminal database is checked for any other pending charges or detainees.
- Finally, as the individual is ready to leave the jail, he or she stops at the Discharge Center to pick up the medical packet and cashier's check, make a free telephone call, and receive a bus ticket if one is needed.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF PLACE

The Discharge Center looks as if it belongs in the outside world. Exiting residents, having already traded their drab, indistinct jail uniforms for personal attire, step off the elevator into a brightly painted, attractively decorated office. They are invited to sit in spacious chairs beside the desk of a friendly discharge coordinator who is dressed in civilian clothing rather than the intimidating uniform of a correctional officer.

"Inmates call this the 'happy place' of the jail," said Asia Pruden, one of the two discharge coordinators on staff when the Discharge Center opened on March 14, 2011. Indeed, with concern for the inmates' future welfare taking center stage, it has a completely different atmosphere.

Added Discharge Coordinator Ronele Thomas, "At first, we wanted to wear uniforms, but people wanted this place to be something separate. The inmates have been dealing with uniforms for six months or a year. At this point, we want them to have a taste of freedom."

Outgoing residents can make free phone calls from the Discharge Center to notify friends or family of their release—a welcome change from the expensive collect calls that are their only means of phone communication while in jail. Bus tickets are available for those who have neither money nor transportation.

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The discharge coordinators banter with the soon-to-be ex-inmates, saying things such as "I hope to see you again—somewhere else." The stairway on the other side leads directly to the jail's main lobby, where freedom awaits.

DISCHARGE: A HARD THING TO PLAN

At first, the intention was to have four release times each day and to give family members advance notice of scheduled departure times. But that level of precision proved unsustainable. Officers' other responsibilities, processing delays and movement restrictions during the daily inmate count created unexpected delays.

Now, releases occur from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.—an improvement over the open-ended times of two years ago. While this is a larger window of time than was originally planned, family members still appreciate the change, especially because they can be notified by that free phone call.

During a recent morning at the Discharge Center, the inmates reacted positively to the services available. Each took a turn in the chair next to Ronele Thomas's desk, the escorting correctional officer sitting across from them. "Mr. James," she advised one inmate, "you have said you did not need to call anyone, but Kara called here and wants you to call her."

Another offender, newly reunited with the pinstripe suit he was wearing when arrested, had told his correctional officer that he didn't need to call anyone, but changed his mind when actually seated next to Thomas's free phone.

"That's why we always ask twice," Thomas explained afterwards. "We've already called the pod [the inmate's housing unit within the jail] and asked the same questions, but once they get here, they feel more comfortable and realize what they're being offered, or they see someone else make a phone call and then want to make one too."

EARLY BUMPS

The opening of the Discharge Center required that correctional officers adjust to a variety of new requirements, including talking with outgoing inmates about what they need to be able to reconnect with transportation and home, coordinating with the discharge coordinators, and adhering to a tighter discharge schedule.

"There was a trust issue at first," Thomas recalled. "But overall the officers are wonderful. They have accepted the process now and are very helpful. Often they are anticipating our call, because someone came back from court saying he was getting released, and already have found out what the inmate needs."

Both discharge coordinators have prior work experience at the jail: Thomas served as an intern there as part of her graduate work in criminal justice at Point Park University, while Pruden graduated from the same program and then worked in jail health services under Discharge Center planning committee member Dana Phillips. Even so, there were new adjustments to be made and new challenges to face.

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"The first couple of months were hard even though I had already worked at the jail for two years," Pruden said. "Promoting the concept of helping the offender reintegrate into society successfully was hard. People would ask why we were giving bus tickets to predators. But many officers welcomed the Discharge Center as a way to increase public safety and prevent violent and senseless crimes."

Captain David Hungerman, the jail's Director of Intake, understood his officers' unease. "In the old way of releasing inmates," he said, "we could call down the people being released a few times a day in large quantities. One officer would take 20 or 25 people down to the cells, and then it would take time to get the inmates out. We would be releasing people all the way past midnight. Now we try to bring five or six down at a time, which requires an escort officer to take

the inmates from the pod to Intake, and we have to concentrate more on discharging people expeditiously rather than at random. We've been about 95 percent successful in getting people out by 8:00 p.m.

"When you try new things," Hungerman continued, "people want to buck it until they get used to it or see the reason for it. We've educated officers on what needs to be done with offenders rather than just booting them out the door, so that your recidivism rate doesn't keep rising.

"The people getting out need help, and often family members who say they care don't follow up. Now we have a 48-hour buffer to ask if the inmates need help with clothing, transportation, shelter or whatever, and to get them started in the right direction so they don't come back in the door."

Hungerman agreed that coordinating discharges to occur at specified times has been stressful for intake supervisors, but the discharge coordinators also relieve some stress; for example, having them available to field family members' calls permits the Night Supervisors to concentrate on timely discharges.

WHAT ABOUT A BUS TO CHICAGO?

The Discharge Center's performance history is thoroughly recorded in a long Excel spreadsheet, into which the two discharge coordinators have entered each inmate who has come through the center, describing any interaction and services provided. During its first six months of operation, about 95 percent of the inmates released from the jail passed through the Discharge Center on their way out.

Thomas's and Pruden's case notes reflect strongly favorable reaction to the Discharge Center, along with a few cases that illustrated the center's limitations. One departing inmate was pleased to learn that the Discharge Center provided bus fare for those who need it, but his eagerness quickly turned to disappointment when he was offered a Port Authority bus ticket. "That's all?" he moaned. "I need to go to Chicago." On another occasion, the mother of a young inmate telephoned Thomas, asking if her son could be kept at the Discharge Center for two hours until the mother could reach the jail to pick him up. However, not having the authority to detain someone who was now a free person, Thomas was unable to prevent him from leaving when he chose to do so.

FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Based on the Discharge Center's first year of operation, several areas have been targeted for improvement.

Most significant is that the 48-hour window has not been applied as consistently as originally intended. Inmates are eager to leave when they learn that the courts have approved their release, and friendly correctional officers often try to accommodate that desire rather than appear responsible for delays or risk being accused of violating an inmate's rights by exceeding

the 48-hour limit. Thus, in actual practice, discharging the inmate quickly has sometimes taken precedence over careful planning for a successful release. Lynch has suggested a change in how the process is described, from “You will be released within 48 hours” to “This is our release procedure, and it takes 48 hours.”

The high cost of incarceration and overcrowding issues also can create “a rush to get people out the door and save bed days,” said LaToya Warren. “But we do more harm than good if we push them out, particularly if they need shelter and it’s after 7:00 p.m., when the shelters stop accepting referrals.”

Rushing a discharge also can have a negative impact on medical care. According to Phillips, some inmates stop taking their medications a week or so prior to their anticipated release date,

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because they have heard that they can get out faster if ACHS does not have to prepare a supply of medications for them. Speedy releases also limit ACHS’s ability to schedule follow-up appointments for residents with behavioral health needs or to get applications for Medical Assistance completed. “We can give them the medical necessity form [to apply for

Medicaid] and that is all,” Phillips said. “Some days, by the time we get the list [of residents being discharged] and start responding to it, Intake has already called the people downstairs for discharge.”

Other potential areas of improvement include:

- Expanding the discharge coordinators’ currently limited role in case management
- Improving coordination with the cashier’s office: While the cashier’s office does not want to cash out an inmate’s account until it is certain that the inmate is leaving that day, its hesitancy to act can result in delays in discharge or cause inmates to leave without their money
- Providing backup coverage for the discharge coordinators so that they may take time off without having to close the Discharge Center, which has become an integral part of jail operations
- Involving probation officers in the discharge process to ensure a more seamless transfer of oversight and support
- Engaging correctional officers more fully in the Discharge Center’s operations, to encourage their input and support

Despite these continuing challenges, however, the Discharge Center is successfully smoothing the transition to the outside world and providing ex-offenders with practical assistance to keep them from coming back. As Captain Flood — who was about to retire before the opportunity to lead the Discharge Center offered him a new challenge — put it: “We want inmates to change their attitudes while in jail and leave on a positive note. Now we are finally making their discharge a positive experience.”