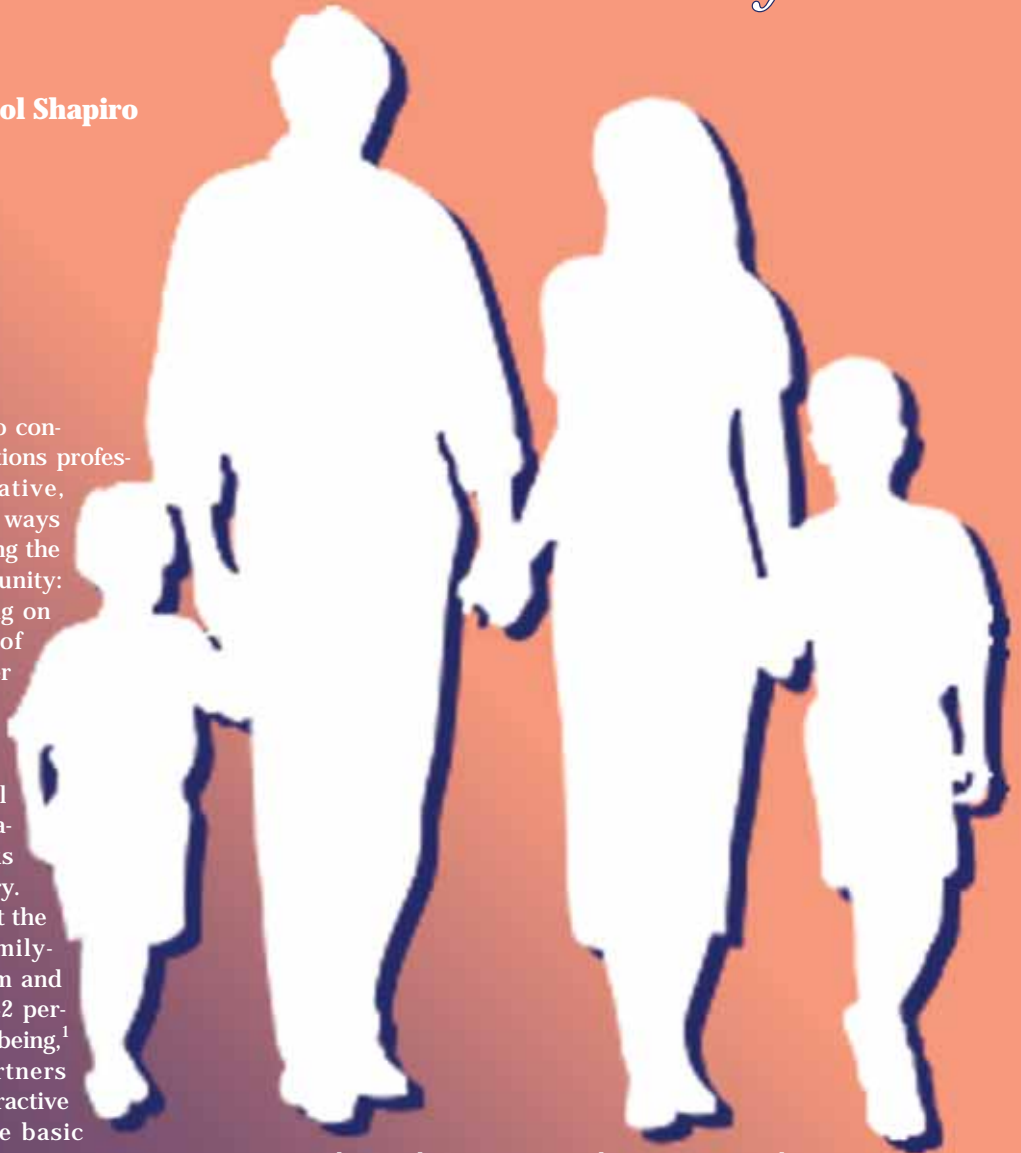


# Asking About Family Can Enhance Reentry

By Margaret diZerega and Carol Shapiro

One simple idea could lead to considerable change as corrections professionals search for innovative, effective and cost-efficient ways to help prepare people who are making the transition from prison to the community: Always ask about the family. Drawing on more than a decade's experience of engaging families that have a member involved with the criminal justice system, the national nonprofit organization Family Justice set its sights on developing a case management tool that would effectively collect information about people's social networks while initiating a dialogue about reentry.

Bolstered by research showing that the organization's strength-based, family-focused approach reduced recidivism and illegal drug use from 80 percent to 42 percent and improved overall family well-being,<sup>1</sup> Family Justice joined with five partners across the country in a dynamic, interactive process to design such a tool. The basic premise was to ask about individuals' family and other social supports in the context of reentry, using a format that is easy to administer and put into practice. The developed instrument is the Relational Inquiry Tool, a series of questions that can change the conversations case managers and other correctional staff have with people who are preparing to leave prison. The first three questions of the eight-question Relational Inquiry Tool are: 1) In thinking about your family support when you get out of prison, what are you most excited about?; 2) In thinking about your family support when you get out of prison, what do you think the greatest challenges will be?; 3) How did you help your family and friends before you came to prison? The questions are always asked in the order listed and they are accompanied with recommended probes that are also open-ended questions that are consistent with the family-focused, strength-based nature of the tool.



The Family Justice project has two main goals:

- The tool can serve as an easy-to-use method of recognizing and reinforcing the positive connections of family and social networks during and after incarceration; and
- The questions can build rapport between the professional using the tool and the individual transitioning home.

With significant support from the National Institute of Corrections, Family Justice has collaborated on this innovative project with five government and community-based partners: the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety, the Michigan Department of Corrections, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, the Oklahoma Department of Corrections and the Safer Foundation in Chicago.

## *Why Ask About the Family?*

In an Urban Institute study in Chicago, people interviewed four to eight months after their release cited families as “the most important factor” in helping them stay out of prison.<sup>2</sup> A study by the Vera Institute of Justice found that for individuals recently released from prison or jail, “supportive families were an indicator of success across the board, correlating with lower drug use, greater likelihood of finding jobs and less criminal activity.”<sup>3</sup>

The corrections field has grown increasingly interested in devising a tool that identifies the strengths of people involved in the criminal justice system and of families and social networks — and one that complements risk and needs assessment instruments. Despite the broad application of data collected by those instruments, they rarely identify how people receive assistance from or provide support to family and other members of their social network. Given the increasing emphasis on reentry as more than 650,000 individuals are expected to leave prison this year,<sup>4</sup> the corrections field must help identify the resources available to people as they return to the community. A simple, effective tool could serve as a catalyst for families and corrections professionals to help create successful reentry plans.

Professionals in the criminal justice field are increasingly recognizing the value of engaging families and their communities, as well as the impact of incarceration on people’s children and other loved ones. Although the idea of partnering with families may seem intuitive, the methodology for doing so is not. Current risk and needs assessment instruments focus primarily on indicators of institutional violence or propensity to re-offend, and some of those indicators rely on family histories of substance abuse, criminal justice involvement and other challenges. Though those aspects of a person’s past are important, they often lead correctional staff to focus on what an inmate should not do or whom they should avoid. Family Justice’s experience suggests that instead of focusing only on deficits, asking about positive social connections and personal strengths and resiliencies can provide case managers with a different entry point to talk about behavior change.

## *Testing the Relational Inquiry Tool*

The government and community-based partners were involved in all aspects of the study, from participating on the National Advisory Board for the Relational Inquiry Tool to scheduling pretest interviews. On the board, the five partners’ perspectives were complemented by academics and experts in tool development and inmate reentry. Each of Family Justice’s partners selected one pilot location for the tool. Oklahoma and Massachusetts each chose a women’s prison; Ohio and Michigan each chose a men’s prison; and the Safer Foundation focused on a church-based case management program for adults who have recently been released from prison.

## *Pretesting*

Family Justice staff members conducted pretest interviews with 99 incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals at the five pilot sites. Among other questions, respondents were asked about their perceptions or expectations of having such a tool administered by correctional or community supervision staff. They were also asked about previous conversations with correctional staff regarding family strengths and support and were asked whether they thought the tool could accomplish the intended goals.

The design of the Relational Inquiry Tool, especially the order of the questions, is intentional and was validated through focus groups and pretests. The experience of answering one question sets up the others that follow. The questions are consistent with strength-based principles and focus on an individual’s social network and family support. The key findings from pretesting are as follows:

- Less than half of the 99 respondents had ever been asked by agency or institution staff about their family. Of those, only 11 people described such questions or conversations as constructive.
- Among 79 respondents, 65 (82 percent) said the tool would help them plan for reentry. Female respondents were more likely to agree (95 percent) than male respondents (78 percent), and former inmates were more likely to agree than current inmates (89 percent vs. 80 percent, respectively).
- A majority of respondents (62 out of 77) thought the tool would help improve the way staff viewed them. Among women, 85 percent agreed; among men, 78 percent agreed. (The questions that correspond to the last two bullet points were added after pretesting was completed in Massachusetts.)

## *Pilot Testing*

The following data are based on assessments of the five pilot sites, four of which were prisons. An eight-item staff feedback assessment was attached to each tool to obtain data on staff’s experiences administering it; follow-up phone calls were completed with some pilot testers. Of the 156 tools administered in prisons, 145 were returned with completed assessments. Three key findings emerged:

- Openness between correctional staff and inmates increased by using the tool;
- Using the tool gave correctional staff an increased understanding of the inmate; and
- Both correctional staff and inmates believe the tool will be beneficial in reentry planning.

## *A Step Toward Broader Change*

Institutionwide implementation of the Relational Inquiry Tool will create a significant shift in culture. Organizations that integrate the tool into their case management practices must consider how to make other aspects of their work family-focused. Justin Jones, director of the Oklahoma DOC, offered powerful examples of things that must be consistent

such as fair phone rates on collect calls from prisons, child-friendly areas for family visitation and parole offices that are welcoming to family members.

By creating a mechanism for different interactions between case managers and inmates, the Relational Inquiry Tool is shifting the way staff view the people with whom they work. According to Jay Glauner, a reentry coordinator with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction: “One way the tool really impacted me was the humanization of the offender beyond what a stale file will do. We have a family history section in [a presentencing report], but it’s more of a ‘Who are your relatives?’ question than a ‘Who are you close to?’ question. This tool could very well create a good framework for productive dialogue when trying to find resources and support for the offender.”

By shaping a new conversation with inmates, case managers report that the Relational Inquiry Tool is increasing the level of openness between them and the incarcerated individuals. The 13 minutes on average that case managers spent administering the tool was clearly time well spent. In Massachusetts, for example, the tool increased the correctional program officer’s understanding of the inmate every time (n=15). In 14.5 instances, it “really improved” their understanding and the other two times it “somewhat improved” their understanding. For inmates with whom the officers already had a relationship (e.g., the inmate was on their caseload or they had met with the inmate at least once before), Massachusetts correctional program officers reported the degree of openness increased nine out of 10 times as a result of using the tool.

To understand inmates’ perspectives on how the tool could improve their interactions with case managers, Family Justice collected feedback on the tool itself from current and former prisoners. Of the 99 people who participated in the pretest, 54 reported having never been asked questions about family support. Only 11 reported being asked similar questions to those in this tool. When questions had been asked about family in the past, they were not phrased in a similar manner. Questions about family had typically been part of a routine inventory for intake or risk assessment and were rarely phrased in a strength-based manner or for the purpose of supportive inquiry. Several respondents described being asked questions in the past by individuals with whom they did not wish to discuss their families or in a tone that was unsupportive or condescending.

The majority of respondents (80 percent) thought that if case managers used the tool, it would improve how inmates are seen. In focus groups of former inmates, it was clear that sharing certain types of information could enhance their standing with correctional staff. Pretest respondents overwhelmingly thought the tool would help them plan for reentry (82 percent). In the pilot test, eight out of 10 case managers reported that the tool would help them work with people to plan for reentry, suggesting that it is useful in serving this function for staff and inmates alike.

One significant benefit of the tool for respondents is that it can improve their self-perception. Respectively, questions 3 and 4 ask, “How did you help your family and friends before you came to prison?” and “How did your family and friends help you before you came to prison?” Some respondents had difficulty identifying ways they had provided help. Upon further probing, they listed a multitude of things they did to help, including taking care of children, assisting with yard work, tending to a sick relative and being a shoulder to cry on for a friend. Many of those respondents later mentioned that they had not seen themselves as helpful people, but after talking about the positive roles they played for their families, they had a new perspective. Because the tool is designed to be strength-based, it encourages respondents and case managers to talk about strengths in ways they may be unaccustomed to doing.

“Every one of [the Relational Inquiry Tool questions] can be good, and it’s based on the time and the place and the intention of the person that’s asking,” one male focus group participant said. As several current and former inmates expressed during the development of the Relational Inquiry Tool, it will be significantly more effective when case managers follow through on the discussion rather than use it only to prompt the thinking of the inmate. For example, when someone reveals that he or she does not plan to rely on family support for future housing,

the expectation is that the case manager will be able to follow up with housing referrals.

Staff at the pilot sites also see the utility of the tool for improving release planning. In states, like Oklahoma, which are considering the role of family and friends in supporting a parolee, the tool could inform the discussion between the parole office and individual under supervision to help identify those support people. To stimulate the long-term integration of the Relational Inquiry Tool into case management practices, Family Justice is interested in exploring how the tool could be incorporated into information technology systems used to manage inmates’ files.

## *A Vehicle for Change*

The Relational Inquiry Tool is a promising way to gather information about families and social networks, identifying the resources available to people as they prepare for reentry into their communities. As organizations develop other reentry-related instruments, it is recommended that they use supportive inquiry in an effort to really listen, ask questions about family (broadly defined), and design questions in a way that builds rapport among staff and inmates. Family Justice learned that the introduction of a new tool or program in a correctional setting is more likely to be successful when other changes are taking place to support that innovation. For correctional departments and other criminal justice agencies, incorporating a strength-based,

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# National Advisory Board Members: Relational Inquiry Tool Initiative

- Steven Belenko, professor, Department of Criminal Justice, Temple University
- Patricia Caruso, director, Michigan Department of Corrections\*
- Todd Clear, distinguished professor of criminal justice, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York
- Kathleen Dennehy, former commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Correction\*
- Ema Genijovich, LIC, Minuchin Family Center
- Justin Jones, director, Oklahoma Department of Corrections\*
- Christopher Lowenkamp, assistant director, Corrections Institute, University of Cincinnati
- Anne Piehl, associate professor, Department of Economics and Program in Criminal Justice, Rutgers University
- Ed Rhine, deputy director, Policy and Offender Reentry, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction\*
- Carol Shapiro, founder and executive director, Family Justice
- Marilyn Van Dietsen, Orbis Partners
- Patricia Van Voorhis, director, Division of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati
- Diane Williams, president, Safer Foundation (Chicago)\*

\* Pilot site representative

family-focused approach into their work requires dedicated leadership among executives and at the line-staff level.

During the planning process for the Relational Inquiry Tool, Family Justice recommended that partner agencies form diagonal work groups — involving staff at every level of the work force, current and former inmates, and affected family members — throughout the pretesting and piloting phases of the project. By drawing on the resources, experience, and knowledge of the entire work force and of clients and families, the organization stands to gain — as do the individuals, families and communities ultimately served.

Family Justice continues to explore ways to help organizations throughout the country adopt a strength-based, family-focused approach. Recommended changes may include altering the way line staff and managers are recruited, trained and supervised; assessing and changing the way information is collected and used; and conducting an inventory of current practices for visitation, phone calls, education and other family-related opportunities in correctional settings. By working collaboratively and imaginatively — drawing on the strengths of the work force, always asking about families and using the information gathered to identify people's resources as they prepare to re-integrate into the community — the corrections field can make a farther-reaching, longer-lasting impact. Initial evaluation of the Relational Inquiry Tool demonstrates that it can be one vehicle for such change, collecting important information and improving rapport between correctional staff and inmates. Dramatic change can start with just a few questions.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, E., M. Mino, K. Nelson and J. Pope. 2002. *Families as a resource in recovery from drug abuse: An evaluation of La Bodega de la Familia*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> La Vigne, N.G., C. Visher and J. Castro. 2004. *Chicago prisoners' experiences returning home*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, M., P. Dees and C. Allen. 1999. *The first month out: Post-incarceration experiences in New York City*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice.

<sup>4</sup> In 2004, 672,000 people were released from state and federal prisons, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

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