

December 5, 2018

---

## Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office Case Study

Sheriff's Office Hires Formerly Incarcerated Community Members to Promote Alternatives to Enforcement

---

*Rebecca Neusteter, Megan O'Toole, and Libby Doyle*

© 2018 Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.

Additional copies can be obtained from the communications department of the Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12<sup>th</sup> floor, New York, New York, 10279, (212) 334-1300. An electronic version of this report is available for download on Vera's web site, [www.vera.org](http://www.vera.org).

Requests for additional information about the research described in this report should be directed to Rebecca Neusteter at the above address or to [RNeusteter@vera.org](mailto:RNeusteter@vera.org).

## Table of Contents

- 4 Introduction**
- 5 Program Overview**
- 6 Implementation Challenges and Solutions**
  - 7 Hiring individuals with criminal records
- 7 Hiring**
- 9 Employment Responsibilities**
- 11 Post-Employment Engagement**
- 11 Impact**
- 13 Conclusion**

## Introduction

Since 2009, the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) in Michigan has been successfully implementing an innovative community outreach program that employs formerly incarcerated individuals as outreach workers (OWs). OWs assist with proactive policing strategies such as referring community members to resources, applying system expertise to help individuals navigate it, and strengthening law enforcement-community relationships. The initiative doubles as an individualized reentry program for OWs, providing them with stable employment, trainings, and personal development opportunities. Sheriff Jerry L. Clayton's willingness to attempt this program has yielded high dividends, as the program now represents a promising practice in achieving desired public safety outcomes, encouraging nontraditional community police partnerships, and integrating community engagement into WCSO's culture. The success and lessons learned from this program make it a model for other law enforcement agencies looking to expand their proactive outreach and reduce recidivism in their communities. Staff from the Vera Institute of Justice's (Vera) Policing Program conducted a series of interviews with five members of WCSO—including OWs, the director of community engagement, the community outreach coordinator, and human resources representatives—to examine this program.

# Program Overview

Comprising 120 sworn officers and 425 total personnel, WCSO serves a population of more than 350,000 residents across 25 local municipalities.<sup>1</sup> One of WCSO's core philosophies is a commitment to engaging with the community. WCSO's robust community engagement division—which promotes community safety by providing a variety of programs, educational opportunities, and outreach services—ensures that enforcement is not the only tool available to the WCSO in building strong and sustainable communities.<sup>2</sup>

WCSO's community outreach program is housed within this division. The program has three primary goals:

1. **reduce** re-offending, crime, and victimization;
2. **provide** resources to communities by acting as system guides; and
3. **enhance** problem-oriented policing strategies by building bridges between community members and WCSO.<sup>3</sup>

OWs are equipped with resources that simultaneously support their individual reentry into society, prepare them to help others in their communities, and proactively try to prevent crime. The outreach program provides OWs with stable employment, trainings, and personal development opportunities in exchange for their work, in which they seek to build relationships with and increase available resources for their local communities. During their tenure, OWs are able to go on various agency visits, enroll in certification programs, and attend specialized trainings to support their work. The outreach program has expanded over the years to a two-tiered system of employment, in which experienced OWs are able to specialize in areas of interest (such as homelessness or substance use) and take on larger roles within the WCSO.<sup>4</sup> Programs that ensure the successful reentry of formerly incarcerated people by reducing barriers to resources are critical not only to these individuals, but also to ensuring public safety and improving the economy.<sup>5</sup>

As formerly incarcerated people from the same communities they are serving, OWs are the best equipped individuals to perform this role. While WCSO serves the entire county, over time the agency has identified four particular neighborhoods that have historically high crimes rates

---

<sup>1</sup> Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office, "Your Sheriff's Office," <https://www.washtenaw.org/1140/Your-Sheriffs-Office>.

<sup>2</sup> Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office, "Letter from the Sheriff," <https://www.washtenaw.org/1225/Letter-From-the-Sheriff>.

<sup>3</sup> Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office, "Community Outreach Team," <https://www.washtenaw.org/2500/Community-Outreach-Team>.

<sup>4</sup> WCSO recently began to develop a third tier of this program, which would hire former OWs on as full-time outreach staff members.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, Ryan Nunn, Lauren Bauer, et al., *Twelve Facts about Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry* (Washington, DC: Hamilton Project, 2016), [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/thp\\_20161020\\_twelve\\_facts\\_incarceration\\_prisoner\\_reentry.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/thp_20161020_twelve_facts_incarceration_prisoner_reentry.pdf).

and troubled relationships with law enforcement. With the help of OWs living in these neighborhoods, WCSO has been able to provide both traditional street outreach (including meeting and talking directly with community members and hosting neighborhood basketball tournaments) and more specialized outreach in the form of individual referrals to service organizations or enrollment in WCSO outreach programs. OWs spend the majority of their time connecting residents to organizations that provide services such as employment support, substance use counseling, mental health counseling, and housing assistance.

OWs are able to leverage their positions within the community to act as information providers and bridge-builders between WCSO and residents. As members of their communities and employees of the sheriff's office, OWs have the unique capacity to play the role of liaison. The value of this relationship was recently demonstrated when, in response to an outburst of gun violence in their neighborhood, an OW was able to reach out and facilitate a sit-down with the mothers of the specific young men involved. Together, they developed a plan to address and de-escalate the ongoing situation. Separate from this, WCSO deputies continued to perform their jobs and investigate these incidents. Similarly, when the death of a young man threatened community trust in the police, an OW facilitated a conversation between the man's girlfriend, whom he knew, and WCSO's Director of Community Engagement Derrick Jackson. This conversation—which without an OW's connections never would have occurred—brought down anger and tensions within the community. In their role as bridge-builders, OWs often utilize their credibility within communities to facilitate understanding of WCSO and, in turn, help officers better understand the communities they're serving.

From supporting community members' successful reentry to facilitating WCSO's various outreach efforts, OWs provide tangible support to their communities and the WCSO. The outreach program is grounded in the civic engagement model of reentry, which emphasizes the importance of community-based support, service-delivery, and restorative justice in successful reentry.<sup>6</sup> This role empowers OWs to not only develop themselves and reduce their likelihood of recidivating, but also to uplift the communities they may have previously harmed.

## Implementation Challenges and Solutions

Under the leadership of Sheriff Jerry Clayton and the Director of Community Engagement Derrick Jackson, the community outreach program was first developed and implemented in 2009 with the support of a grant from the Department of Justice's Justice Assistance Grant program.

---

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Bazemore and Jeanne Stinchcomb, "A Civic Engagement Model of Reentry: Involving Community through Service and Restorative Justice," *Federal Probation* 68, no. 2 (2004), [http://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/68\\_2\\_4\\_0.pdf](http://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/68_2_4_0.pdf).



Washtenaw County Sheriff  
Jerry L. Clayton

The community outreach program was originally designed to employ OWs for a yearlong appointment. However, once WCSO realized that the anticipated implementation hurdles were not insurmountable—and they observed the program’s overwhelmingly positive impacts on both the community and OWs—the program quickly expanded and WCSO introduced efforts for long-term sustainability. The program now operates under a two-tiered system, which allows highly-skilled OWs to stay on for longer periods of time and contribute to more specialized programming. To date, WCSO has hired a total of 16 formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as one individual who has been affected by the criminal justice system but not incarcerated. The current program is staffed by five OWs. These accomplishments were not achieved without overcoming legal and administrative hurdles, and WCSO’s success in navigating these hurdles can serve as a model to other agencies.

## Hiring individuals with criminal records

Due largely to legal, human resources, and logistical concerns, law enforcement agencies do not typically hire individuals with conviction histories. WCSO, however, has worked to modify its hiring procedures in order to accommodate these circumstances. For example, there are existing laws that restrict what sorts of resources, information, and data that individuals with criminal histories can have access to and be in the presence of. For example, Michigan state law does not allow individuals with felony and select other types of criminal convictions to access or be near their Law Enforcement Information Network (LEIN).<sup>7</sup> Because access to this type of information is not necessary to the OW job and officials were able to physically restrict access to these specific resources, WCSO’s legal team determined that there was nothing legally prohibiting WCSO from hiring individuals with felony convictions to work as OWs. Some internal policies had to be revised, but none of the anticipated legal barriers posed any insurmountable problems.

In effect, there are no requirements as to the length of time an individual must be out of jail before applying, or the types of offenses that can exist on their records.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, Sheriff Clayton’s strong support and leadership for this program was integral in overcoming these internal barriers. In addition to this positive leadership, the rigorous hiring process for OWs (see “Hiring,” below) helps to reduce some of the typical concerns that a law enforcement agency might have when hiring individuals with criminal histories.

---

<sup>7</sup> Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards “Advisement and Acknowledgement LEIN Systems Access,” May 2013, [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mcoles/LEIN\\_Access\\_Policy\\_Notification-Oct-12\\_421458\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mcoles/LEIN_Access_Policy_Notification-Oct-12_421458_7.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> According to WCSO staff, individuals with certain types of violent offenses on their records are considered carefully, however, to ensure their suitability to safely and effectively serve community needs.

# Hiring

OWs are recruited through two different methods: agency outreach and individual referrals. Most OWs are currently recruited through word of mouth, although WCSO has previously employed other outreach programs and in-jail advertising to solicit applicants as well. Applicants must first submit a comprehensive, 31-page personal history statement, which requires them to write short statements, attach résumés, complete employment and housing histories, and include all criminal records. These extensive applications can take about six months for individuals to compile. According to Community Outreach Coordinator Marvin Gundy—who is also a former OW—this document is “the start of the cleansing process.”

---

“When I finally did sit down and do [the background investigation], it was a spiritual cleansing for me.”

—Jeanette Hadden, current OW

---

Once an application is received, the WCSO background team investigates and confirms the information provided, just as they would for any other hire at the office. But, unlike most other positions that require background checks, an OW’s criminal history is expected, often prolonging this initial investigation, which can take up to a few months to complete. WCSO often loses applicants during this period, as they struggle to meet financial obligations during the delay.<sup>9</sup> As part of the background check, Director of Community Engagement Derrick Jackson uses the information provided to complete a “selection suitability assessment,” which classifies candidates as low, medium, or high suitability for the position based on a number of key indicators (including number of offenses, time elapsed since offense, substance use history, and likelihood of recidivism). While this assessment is useful in evaluating a candidate’s current status, Jackson emphasized that a low score does not mean that an individual is ineligible to be hired. Rather, it helps the WCSO identify the proper level of support and placement for an OW. Furthermore, leaders of the outreach program use this assessment to intentionally create a diverse

---

<sup>9</sup> WCSO recognizes this delay as a current limitation of its program and is actively striving to address this challenge. Other agencies aiming to implement similar programs should also consider the policy implications of this delay and strive to help applicants access other key supports while their applications are pending.

team in terms of both personal experiences and current condition (for example, some OWs are recently sober, others have no addiction history).

At the same time as the background investigation, candidates begin to undergo training and volunteering at WCSO. As volunteers, applicants begin to perform some of the entry level outreach responsibilities of OWs, such as helping to pass out information in neighborhoods, attending team meetings, and assisting in the office. This is an integral step in the hiring process, as potential OWs are given the opportunity to get an inside look at WCSO, while Jackson and Gundy (who together form the community outreach program selection team) are able to begin assessing whether a candidate might be a good match for the program.

Once the initial background investigation is complete, applicants sit down with a background investigator to talk through their entire application and discuss any omissions or inconsistencies that may have been found. After this, the background investigations team performs a secondary sweep and delivers a final report to the community outreach program selection team, which ultimately makes the decision based on this report, the selection sustainability assessment, and observations during the volunteer period.

## Employment Responsibilities

Once officially hired, OWs complete a series of agency-wide, OW-specific, and community resource-specific orientations. In addition, new OWs work with their supervisors to develop an 18-month personal case management plan to ensure their own successful reentry and employment within WCSO. These individualized plans cover both personal (e.g., obtain stable housing, secure a driver's license, etc.) and professional (e.g., attend trainings, develop computer literacy, etc.) goals, and are seen as vital in reducing the likelihood of recidivism. As a former OW and the current community outreach coordinator, Gundy himself appreciated this component of the program, stating that, "I've rebuilt myself and reimaged myself."



*Director of Community Engagement Derrick Jackson at the WCSO's Mott's Children's Hospital Shop with a Cop event.*

Much of this experience is transferable and prepares OWs to help support other community members who are also reentering and experiencing similar needs.

Although OWs' day-to-day activities vary depending on their skill sets and current community needs, all OWs share certain responsibilities. OWs typically divide their time between formalized WCSO duties, individually-led community programming, and personal and professional development. In their role as WCSO employees, OWs perform administrative tasks such as answering phones and conducting door-to-door surveys of residents about their relationships with WCSO and perceptions of community safety. This survey data helps WCSO assess its community impacts and, if

necessary, adjust its practices to achieve the goals of making civilians feel safe and forming strong police-community relationships. Additionally, OWs also have the opportunity to specialize some of their responsibilities to fit specific areas of interest or expertise. For example, an OW interested in working with the homeless might spend 10 hours a week forming a program to address this issue. Or an OW with an interest in substance use disorders may spend time working with the Washtenaw Recovery Advocacy Project (WRAP). In addition, all OWs spend a portion of their time working towards their personal and professional development goals. This aspect of the job, which Gundy has termed “anti-recidivism building,” allows OWs to take time to attend doctors’ appointments, parent-teacher conferences, or workshops on résumé writing, among many other responsibilities. OWs log their hours spent on each responsibility in an online program and attend biweekly check-ins with their supervisors to discuss their progress.

OWs also provide integral support to the variety of community engagement initiatives housed at WCSO.<sup>10</sup> (See Figure 1, below.) Over the years, WCSO’s strong commitment to community engagement has led to the development of a variety of programs aimed at helping not only those with direct experience in the criminal justice system, but also their families and other affected community members. Each of these programs depends heavily on the experience and guidance of the OWs who lead them. The programs currently housed within community outreach highlight the value of hiring individuals with lived experience in the criminal justice system and these communities. (See “Outreach Programs,” below.)

#### Outreach Programs

**Peer 2 Peer (P2P)**—Pairs OWs with Michigan Department of Corrections probationers to serve as peer mentors and provide resources to help with reentry.

**Sisters United Resilient and Empowered Moms (SURE)**—A peer support group organized by an OW for mothers of youth in the criminal justice system.

**St. Joe’s Collaboration**—In partnership with a local hospital, OWs work as community educators on a variety of health topics and support medical professionals to better understand the various communities they serve.

**Interrupters**—An OW-facilitated group that brings together residents and neighborhood volunteers to attend community programs with a focus on “interrupting” violence before it happens.

For Willie Sturdivant, Jr., a current Tier 2 OW and P2P coordinator, the community outreach program has given him an invaluable opportunity to directly support recently incarcerated people. In this role, Willie helps facilitate peer mentor relationships between OWs and probationers to reduce deeper involvement in the justice system, either because of committing a new crime, or failing to meet some of the conditions of probation. In order to perform this role,

---

<sup>10</sup> Washtenaw County Sheriff’s Office, “Community Engagement Program Manual,” [https://mi-washtenawcounty.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/7826/WCSO\\_CE-ProgrammingGuide05-17?bidId=](https://mi-washtenawcounty.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/7826/WCSO_CE-ProgrammingGuide05-17?bidId=).



*Community Outreach Coordinator Marvin Gundy facilitating a group at Washtenaw County Jail.*

he has attended numerous trainings, such as Moral Recognition Therapy (MRT), an evidence-based cognitive-behavioral therapy curriculum, which provided him skills for day-to-day work with individuals detained in the jail. The community outreach program leaders, Jackson and Gundy, help manage OW development in these positions and regularly conduct check-ins to ensure that OWs receive adequate support. The leadership skills and expertise that OWs gain through this program often open doors for post-employment opportunities and engagement as well.

## Post-employment Engagement

The community outreach program serves as an invaluable opportunity for OWs to connect with resources to help reduce their likelihood of recidivism. In addition to short-term employment, the program allows OWs to develop skill sets intended to help them obtain future employment. WCSO provides OWs with access to trainings and certifications in a broad range of categories, including substance use recovery, peer support, dispute resolution, and mental health first aid, among others. As employees of WCSO, OWs also have access to a full professional development curriculum, which includes courses on skills such as Microsoft Word and Excel, public speaking, and grant writing. Jeanette Hadden, a current OW, notes, “I have grown so much from being in this office; I was computer illiterate when I came here.” Now Hadden has learned a number of computer skills critical to her personal and professional development. Furthermore, the program builds in opportunities for OWs to connect and nurture professional working relationships with public service agencies, which often serves as an avenue to employment.

---

“The doors that they opened for me couldn’t have been opened anywhere else.”  
—Willie Sturdivant Jr., current OW

---

Thanks to these connections, former OWs such as Ashton Marr, who now works as the Washtenaw Recovery Advocacy project director, and Laura Tew, who works as a corrections officer with WCSO, have found full-time employment. Leaders of the outreach program also place a heavy emphasis on the importance of education and encourage OWs to research such opportunities and assist with applications. As a result, many OWs choose to enroll in associate, bachelor, or master’s level programs in social work.

## Impact

While WCSO has not conducted a full scale process or impact evaluation on its community outreach program yet, they are actively seeking resources to do so, and currently have a wealth of related data on the program, including OWs’ records both during and post-employment, exit interview scripts, and metrics on the number of programs provided and community members served. Initial examinations of these data suggest that the program is promising and has the potential to be quite successful.<sup>11</sup> (See “Program success rates for OWs,” below.) Of the total 17 OWs hired by WCSO since the beginning of the program, only 6 percent have reoffended to date, a rate significantly lower than the Washtenaw County jail’s average recidivism rate of 63 percent and the national recidivism rate of 67 percent.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Washtenaw County Sheriff’s Office, “Community Outreach Team,” <https://www.washtenaw.org/2500/Community-Outreach-Team>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; and National Institute of Justice, “National Statistics on Recidivism,” last modified June 17, 2014, <https://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/Pages/welcome.aspx>.

### Program success rates for OWs

- 94 percent **have not recidivated**
- 94 percent found **stable housing**
- 94 percent are **gainfully employed post-program**
- 88 percent remain **substance free**
- 71 percent go on to **higher education**

In addition to this benefit to OWs, the outreach team has provided vital services to the community. The various programs, which typically meet weekly and many of which would not exist without OW support, offer much needed resources to Washtenaw community members. From meetings to support mothers of incarcerated youth to peer mentoring programs for probationers, the work of OWs assists a wide array of residents. In 2017 alone, the community engagement division, which the outreach program is housed within, hosted or participated in 479 community events, which were attended by over 19,320 participants.<sup>13</sup> This role has been vital in altering the way that the community views WCSO and vice versa. The team assisted in recruiting community members to attend six community education sessions in 2017, which covered an array of topics, including police use of force and managing mental health crises.<sup>14</sup> The willingness of community members and WCSO officials to come together and have these often-difficult conversations illustrates the value OWs have in their role as bridge builders.

The OW program has also had a robust impact on WCSO. As Jackson describes it, this focus on community engagement ensures that enforcement is not the only tool available to officers. The outreach team has played an important role in developing engagement as a proactive policing tool, by establishing and strengthening WCSO's connection to the communities they serve. Through SURE Moms—a program that was created by Florence Roberson, an OW—officers like Deputy Heather Morrison have been able to cultivate relationships within these communities. By building these connections with mothers of incarcerated youth, Morrison has a better understanding of their home lives and knows who she can talk to in these neighborhoods when a situation arises.

---

<sup>13</sup> Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office, "2017 Annual Report," <https://www.washtenaw.org/DocumentCenter/View/8403/2017-Annual-Report?bidId=>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



*WCSO deputy interacting with children in the community.*

According to Derrick Jackson, this is one of many examples of how “this outreach work can literally make officers better at their jobs.” This strengthened community connection has also altered the way that WCSO views its role in Washtenaw County. For example, when Black Lives Matter began to organize in the county, officials at WCSO sat down to form a relationship with the group’s leaders rather than waiting for a crisis or confrontation to occur. The presence of formerly incarcerated individuals within WCSO has also influenced culture and attitudes within the agency and, in particular, at the jail. Having OWs come into the jails and do their community outreach programming has shown WCSO employees that regardless of their criminal justice system history, these individuals are able to do outstanding work to help and give back to their communities.

## Conclusion

Since its initial implementation in 2009, the community outreach program has grown to become an integral piece of WCSO’s community engagement efforts. WCSO officials have learned much from the program’s evolution, beginning with a single OW in 2009 to its current multi-tiered structure. WCSO officials had to overcome the challenges posed by traditional hiring standards and human resources practices to design a hiring process that ensured the safety of individuals within the community without discounting candidates due to their criminal justice histories. Clayton and Jackson’s approach to community outreach has transformed the office and the community in a number of valuable ways. Jackson and Gundy hope that their experience implementing the outreach worker program will encourage policymakers and police practitioners beyond Washtenaw County and Michigan to consider how such a program could fit within and benefit their departments.

To learn more about this and other emerging issues or best practices in policing—or to nominate them—please contact: [EmergingIssuesPolicing@Vera.org](mailto:EmergingIssuesPolicing@Vera.org)