

Process and Evaluation Workgroup

Meeting Minutes

December 3, 2024

In attendance:

- **Rodney Brooks**, Alameda County Public Defenders
- **Gina Temporal**, Alameda County Probation Department
- **Denise Moody**, Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency
- **Jason Sjoberg**, Office of the Alameda County District Attorney
- **Karen Chin**, Urban Strategies Council
- **Mas Morimoto**, Office of the Alameda County District Attorney
- **Rezsín Gonzalez**, Alameda County Probation Department
- **Charlie Eddy**, Urban Strategies Council
- **Annette Briscoe**, Alameda County Probation Department
- **Dr. Maisha Scott**, Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency
- **Janica Wilson**, Alameda County Probation Department
- **Tamisha Torres Walker**, Executive Director, The Safe Return Project
- **Alex Garcia**, Alameda County Probation Department
- **Janene Grigsby**, Alameda County Probation Department
- **Jennifer Brown**: Alameda County Probation Department

The meeting opened with an explanation of the purpose of the workgroup and announcing the discussion would feature two presentations about Participatory Action Research (PAR) followed by questions and answers.

Everyone in attendance introduced themselves. A summary of the previous meeting discussions about feedback provided to probation by clients was given, followed by a brief introduction to the topic of PAR and the presenters, Tamisha Walker-Torres, Executive Director of the Safe Return Project and Karen Chin, Coordinator of the Justice Reinvestment Coalition for the Urban Strategies Council.

Summary of the presentation and discussion

- The work of the Safe Return Project is not only about Participatory Action Research (PAR), our work is also about providing justice involved individuals with agency and power; and the ability to drive the work of justice reinvestment strategies and criminal justice reform.
- Contra Costa County spent a year creating a comprehensive strategic plan, no one on the development team had been involved in the criminal legal system.
- A “Community Research Team” began to emerge consisting of individuals who had been involved in the system, they began to assess if the County plan met the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals; and if a new plan needed to be developed? In addition, they questioned, does Richmond need to create a plan of their own, since the County plan was not being implemented.
- The recruitment for the emerging Participatory Action Research team netted nine people who had returned to the community for 12-24 months after being incarcerated in county, state and federal institutions.
- The recruited individuals were paid above minimum wage.
- The first step was to evaluate their experiences in attempting to acquire services since coming home.
- Next, they evaluated the Contra Costa reentry plan, and saw things they liked, but clearly it was missing the voice of formerly incarcerated people.
- Still, not being trained in research, members of the team started to interview family and friends.
- The first step of the training was learning how to evaluate the Contra Costa County re-entry plan and the plans of other counties.
- Next, the group was introduced to the concept of Participatory Action Research; a process where the researchers are not isolated from the subject (in this case receiving re-entry services) their perspective is valued in the development of the questions and evaluation of the responses, as is the view of the individuals being interviewed in the community.
- Next the members of the Safe Return Team were trained about research questions, and research interviewing. For example, what are open ended questions, and what are yes/no questions? Also, how can you evaluate the information and synthesize the data to be effectively reported?
- The group was trained in conducting site visits and interviewed 109 individuals coming home from local, state and federal institutions.
- The interviews consisted of 100 questions and those interviewed were paid with gift cards. During the interviews, the Safe Return Team assisted individuals in filling out the questions, which allowed the team to capture the actual stories.
- After a year, the Team learned how to analyze the data and put it into a report.
- Ten years after the original report and the implementation of improved re-entry systems, the team interviewed individuals in eastern Contra Costa County who didn’t have access to the

services in central and west Contra Costa County utilizing PAR practices. The process revealed gaps in transportation, housing, family reunification and employment.

- The work is credible, because it is in the hands of formerly incarcerated individuals, coached and supported by academics who assist in interpreting the data.
- Research alone does not drive change. The formerly incarcerated individuals can't be seen as tokens; there needs to be a commitment to developing agency and capacity building. Finally, there needs to be a commitment to change.
- Community members are tired of being surveyed, seeing reports released and no changes in government programming.
- What were the challenges to conducting the surveys in government facilities? This was not really an issue, many of the surveyors needed to frequent parole buildings etc. Some probation and parole officers offered space inside their buildings to Safe Return Team members.
- What were the steps between releasing the report to establishing program changes? The first report highlighted the challenges of accessing resources, clients were forced to travel long distances etc. The first recommendation was to create a one stop shop that was near public transportation.
- As the recommendation for the one stop continued to expand (especially in Richmond), community members started to talk to members of churches, community organizations and other individuals; and turned their focus to the AB 109 dollars. Rubicon Programs was selected to run the Richmond locations. There is now a program located in Antioch, also run by Rubicon; yet their programming and operations were not developed by the formerly incarcerated individuals, which is apparent in the service delivery.
- Did the experiences of the individuals trained in PAR impact the questions? Yes, the interviewers started by focusing on their collective experience and theorizing what challenges people were facing. The experiences of the trainees allowed them to ask more detailed questions about housing. For example, many people said they were not homeless or struggling with housing; the more detailed question revealed people were sleeping in someone's house and/or not on a current lease.
- How much of the Safe Return Team has been incorporated into how Rubicon currently assists formerly incarcerated people? Initially, Rubicon was not serving formerly incarcerated people, only homeless individuals. When the AB 109 dollars became available, the organization started the work of serving formerly incarcerated people.
- Who supported the research financially and otherwise? The Office of Neighborhood Safety in Richmond, The Pacific Institute, and Cisco, formerly a PICO associate. As far as funding, the Rosenberg Foundation, The California Endowment, and The San Francisco Foundation.
- The next presentation by Karen Chin focused on COVID 19 and vaccine confidence; the PAR was done by a youth leadership training program. The young people had some prior training about engaging in conversations with adults. The research, sponsored by the Boys and Girls Club was done in San Mateo County. Supporters included the San Mateo Departments of Education and Health, and the U.S. Census. The interviewees were high-school age. The youth with longer

involvement in the leadership development program were paired with new commers, allowing for the development of cohorts where the students were able to go to each other for support.

- The researchers were trained in the basics of public health disparities; many were immigrants and/or resided in Section 8 housing; and they or a family member were of high risk for having contact with law enforcement or experienced poverty– thus they were seen as trusted messengers.
- Some of the training and interviews were done on digital platforms.
- Participatory Action Researchers were engaged in conversations about their own experiences, and where people congregated – giving them ideas of where to go to conduct the surveys.
- Students worked with a professor located in Australia who helped them understand the concept of rapid community assessments.
- Youth were able to confirm if the questions crafted by the public health staff were asked in a way that young people would ask other young people.
- How did adults work with the young people about understanding the data and the responses? The professors helped the youth convert subjective language into data points.
- Youth were concerned as being seen as tokens. The youth were paid and led in how to communicate with family and community leaders about what was actually said.
- What was the most important thing the researchers learned? Second, if someone starts a project, what do the trainees need to know?
- Members of the Safe Return Team are grateful for the opportunity to co-create the current organization, which allowed them to move forward in their own lives. They also learned they could be proactively powerful in a variety of spaces, by advocating for equity in their current work environments. The Safe Return experience was the basis for the transformation of their respective lives, as a result of their new life skills, team members are all clear that they are never going back to jail or prison.
- Without the individuals and agencies who invested in the Safe Return Team, team members would not have achieved their personal and professional accomplishments. Team members pay it forward by modeling how to live without going in and out of prison. Individually and collectively team members are working to decarcerate their communities.
- What is the difference between what you experienced with PAR vs. what you get from traditional service providers? First, they paid the Safe Return Team members. Other organizations are not invested in our development, and their methodology is to support individuals, not a group collectively. Safe Return asks individuals about how they want to invest in their community, opposed to getting individuals low paying jobs that won't take them out of poverty.
- What did people walk away from when completing the youth PAR project? The difference between regurgitating information as opposed to understanding the cultural context of the responses.
- Youth understood they could participate in research. The older students got to lead the cohorts. The cohorts were able to address the question of how did they want the project to impact their future and careers. At the end, youth were asked what they learned; and coached

on how their experiences from the project could be included in a college application or a resume.

- If the county moves forward on doing a PAR, we need to fund it. The challenge will be setting the right framework, which includes values, and writing the scope in the way organizations will bid on the project, finally evaluating the applications.
- It is important to pay the researchers a livable bay area wage to participate, there needs to be employment viability. The number of staff working to support the researchers needs to be adequate as well, and a consistent commitment from the government entity.
- When developing RFPs, the Probation department builds a budget that allows the organization to pay a living wage.
- If the county were to engage in a PAR project, smaller organizations who are “rooted in community” may not have the infrastructure to apply. The RFP would need to have an appropriate amount of money going to the community researchers. A traditional RFP or RFQ would attract applicants who are skilled in research but don’t have staff with lived experience.
- In Contra Costa, they have formerly incarcerated individuals in the selection process. Alameda County has a robust community of formerly incarcerated people who could evaluate proposals.
- When doing research, you always need to be aware of bias, and there is a need to strike a balance.
- How did bias come up and how did you address it? Bias often shows up in interpretation, how questions are asked, and who asks the questions – which happens before you get to the data. Where the questions were asked played a role involving people on probation at probation offices.
- The Safe Return Team attempted to address bias by allowing for the stories to be told, not just reporting the answers.
- Keeping community researchers through the process also helps to address bias.
- Professional researchers often apply a Differential Item Functioning (DIF) element to address bias in the final reporting.
- It is also important to be mindful of the samples used for the survey.
- It is important to have more rigor when assessing the data and perhaps formerly incarcerated people can present what is expected and the actual storylines.
- Does the CORE program in Alameda County attempt to build community as one of the presenters suggested? Also, can Alameda County duplicate the peer review process with formerly incarcerated people that is done in Contra Costa? In the upcoming probation contracts, in an effort to build community the goal is to have the providers act as a team and share information, so clients don’t repeat the same intake and other information.
- The County General Services Agency is concerned about bias and therefore will not allow anyone who has been involved in the criminal system and utilized county services to participate in the contract selection process. As a result, we are doing one of our RFPs within the department and we have a formerly incarcerated person on the selection panel.
- It would be helpful to have more than one person on the selection committee so multiple perspectives are considered.

- People who have worked for any of the community-based organizations that have received county program funding, are not allowed to be in the evaluation panel; it is considered a conflict of interest. However, individuals who have lived experience and have a conflict can assist in recruiting individuals for the selection panel.
- Non-profit organizations have been encouraged to hire people with lived experience; if the county policy is to eliminate formerly incarcerated individuals who have received services from community based organizations, that excludes a large number of skilled individuals. It is difficult to find a formerly incarcerated person who has not received community services; and if they have not, that is problematic because they don't have the necessary perspective. Including individuals who have provided re-entry services will naturally present a bias.
- Is it possible to have a time frame –for example, once a certain amount of time has passed from when the individual received services, can they become eligible to participate in the evaluation process? Currently, that time frame is two years.

Discussion about Next Steps

- It would be good to do a Participatory Action Research Project, but we need to narrow the scope of the question.
- The question could be assessing the feedback loop going to Probation about how services are currently being provided, which is what led us to becoming more informed about PAR.
- Perhaps the question could be, why is Probation having difficulties in getting organizations to respond to their RFPs; and what causes community-based organizations to say yes or no to applying?
- A question might be, did the investment actually change things? Did the investment get people employed, did the investment get people housed etc.? Can we/how do you measure the outcomes – are there gaps in the services? In addition, are government systems responding differently. Look at where the county is providing services and what needs to be adjusted as Prop 36 is implemented?
- Could the question simply be, has the investment achieved anything in the County Re-entry plan.
- Could we do it moving forward, using the annual plan(s) as the guide (baseline), not the original re-entry plan. The challenge with that proposal is the historical context is missing. That sounds like an internal evaluation; it is missing the impacted population as individuals doing the research and the individuals who are being reached.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:58.