

Chapter 3: Getting Started/Taking Action

- Beginnings are important and can foreshadow outcomes

If you want to know the end...look at the beginning.

African Proverb

What we know about prisoners and their families gives communities the responsibility to build support for families of prisoners. This support is needed from arrest through release. How you get started, where you meet, who is invited to the table, and how the tasks are delegated will reflect the values and expectations of the project and will have a big impact on the outcome.

Questions to Ask in the Beginning

- Who will lead and guide the project?
- How will prisoners and their families contribute to the project? Will they be involved from the very beginning of planning? Will they be included in the ongoing process?
- How will the funder's priorities fit into the picture?

At start up, project planners set the tone. Initial decisions determine how inclusive or selective, comprehensive or single focused, daring or cautious a community will be. Knowing the importance of initial decisions is the first step in taking action.

Convening a Task Force or Collaborative

Bridging the gaps between the many systems that deal with families of prisoners is both essential and daunting. These systems include corrections, religious organizations, education, social services, child welfare, health, and mental health.

Connections between these systems can be made at the policy creation, program development and practice operations levels.

Priorities for Getting Started

- Get the right people.
- Group size matters.
- Choose leadership wisely.
- Clearly define goals and objectives.
- Recognize and discuss turf issues.

Whether you are gathering a small agency staff to start a new program or convening a wide reaching initiative, keep the following priorities in mind. Each community can best identify the representatives of systems, programs or departments needed for comprehensive planning. Families of prisoners and former prisoners should be included as crucially needed experts on issues related to their needs.

Group size is an important consideration. Will this be a think-tank group or a task and detail focused committee with a deliverable product as a goal? Small groups (10 or less) allow for inclusivity of input and more time for brainstorming. Larger groups can more easily accommodate sub-committees or working groups.

A community task force will also need clear-cut goals, realistic expectations and specific focus points, both for the overall project and for each meeting.