The Opportunity Network

With nearly 24,000 people serving time for felony convictions and thousands more in local jails for misdemeanors or awaiting trial throughout Kentucky, there is a need to better connect justice-involved individuals to supports and opportunities that will re-direct them into productive lives. While services exist to support justice-involved people, there is a gap in connecting those services to those who would most benefit from them.

The Opportunity Network seeks to fill that gap by bringing system decision makers together with users and providers of services and supports to improve outcomes and remove barriers to successful re-entry. Its mission is to address policy and practice gaps in order to create a healthy, vibrant community that prevents and reduces recidivism. It shall provide a connection to opportunities for justice-involved individuals, specifically returning youth and adults, to build/rebuild their lives in our community.

The Opportunity Network aims to create a bridge that links services and supports to those who would benefit from them in order to decrease time spent incarcerated and reduce recidivism. The Network will look to drive changes in practice, policy and legislation at the local and state level, leveraging its partnerships to do so.

Last year, roughly 18,000 people returned to communities across the Commonwealth from state custody, both from state prisons or local jails. Of those state inmates, 3,650 returned to Jefferson County in 2017. Another 32,000 people cycled in and out of Metro Corrections in 2017. Louisville Metro Youth Detention Center housed 1,050 youth in 2017.

When they returned to their communities many of these women and men faced alienation from their families. Many struggled to find housing, especially those in need of sober living. Many faced barriers to employment – lack of training, unwillingness to hire those with a record, inability to get to and from a job due to lack of transportation. Some hit roadblocks trying to obtain basic necessities, such as identification cards, bank accounts or driver's licenses. And for many who returned, they continued to face the struggles of addiction as they returned to lives that often are filled with continued temptation.

Across Louisville, and throughout Kentucky, there are many dedicated service providers poised to help with mental health management, addiction, homelessness, career counseling and many other basic needs justice-involved individuals face. Additionally, there are non-profits, churches, families and caring individuals poised to offer support and mentorship to those returning from incarceration.

Still, Kentucky's prison population is projected to grow 19 percent in 10 years, adding more than 4,400 beds, at a cost of more than $600 million dollars to taxpayers, according to the December 2017 Final Report of the Kentucky CJPAC Justice Reinvestment Work Group. Louisville Metro Corrections maintains an overcapacity population, leaving it struggling with how to safely house inmates being brought to the jail each day at a cost of more than $1 million per week.

The National Employment Law Project estimates 70 million people in the United States – nearly one in three adults – have a prior arrest or conviction record. Department of Corrections assessments show nearly 12,000

inmates have medium to very high substance use levels. More than 34,000 people under probation and parole supervision have a medium to very high substance use assessment.

Kentucky has made some progress. In 2017, the legislature passed fair licensing legislation to allow those with felony convictions to apply for professional licenses. The Kentucky Department of Corrections established a Re-entry Division to bolster services to those leaving the system. Metro Corrections has established substance abuse programs and re-entry pathways to better serve individuals leaving its custody. And state youth detention numbers have dramatically decreased since the passage of Senate Bill 200, which provided substantial changes in youth detention laws statewide.

Metro Louisville has recognized Re-entry as one of the six pillars key to addressing crime and creating a safer community. That work in Louisville is done through a lens of Public Health, recognizing that violence spreads through a community like an epidemic. Change can only be made by addressing the root causes of the epidemic.

What has been missing is a coordinated effort between state and local entities – system and community based – to troubleshoot barriers to successful re-entry and community transition. The Opportunity Network will fill that void.

Outcomes of the Opportunity Network should include, but not be limited to:

- Improve service array to promote self-sufficiency and reduce recidivism of justice-involved individuals.
- Improve communication and collaboration between justice system agencies and private/public service providers.
- Improve collaboration between local and state initiatives.
- Foster a community that is more open, welcoming and accepting to offenders.
- Drive policy and legislative change at the state and local levels.

The Opportunity Network will function as a working-group of the Louisville Metro Criminal Justice Commission.

A project of the 2018 Class of the Bingham Fellows, the Opportunity Network seeks funding to support three years of operation under the auspices of the Commission. That funding will support a full-time staff person dedicated to working just with the Opportunity Network to get it established and operational.

This three-year period will serve to test the concept of coordinated, dedicated efforts to system improvement. It is a pilot effort in Jefferson County meant to test the viability of such a network for local communities across the Commonwealth.

Expected results after the first year of convening include a 1,3,5-year strategic plan for re-entry in Jefferson County, finalization and production of a re-entry workbook for adults and youth returning from incarceration, and a completed system-mapping assessment that will drive future change.