Concordance Initiative Unites Research and Practice to Reduce Incarceration

Focused on supporting former prisoners as they reenter the community, the Concordance partnership will create, research and implement the best reentry practices and policies.
Coming together to make an impact on incarceration rates

One of the most important and compelling challenges of our time is to reverse the astronomically high rates of incarceration in the United States. The era of mass incarceration leading to these rates began in the 1980s and was fueled by “tough on crime” and “war on drugs” policymaking in the decades to follow. The burden of high incarceration rates has been shouldered primarily by people in poverty and ethnic minority groups.

But, at a cost of over $52 billion annually, everyone in the country suffers under these hyper-incarceration trends. Today, more than 13 million people cycle in and out of jails and prisons each year. Incarceration drives countless families into unrelenting poverty.

More than 2.7 million innocent children must fight the increased likelihood of serious emotional, behavioral and academic problems because of a parent’s incarceration. And communities are spiraling into sustained economic and social deprivation as a result.

Carrie Pettus-Davis, PhD, assistant professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, has devoted her life’s work to helping solve challenging incarceration issues and is all too aware of the toll taken on vulnerable people.

“Young incarcerated people face complex behavioral, physical and mental health challenges, in addition to most often being from under-resourced communities,” Pettus-Davis says.

“Once out of prison, in addition to everything else, they face numerous public policy barriers that limit their ability to rejoin society.”

Pettus-Davis notes that while billions of dollars were invested in locking people behind bars, little money was spent on research to develop programs and policies that would keep people out of prison—especially once they had gone before.
“The reincarceration of former prisoners is significantly contributing to the soaring rates of incarceration in the United States,” Pettus-Davis says. “Seventy-seven percent of former prisoners will be rearrested for a new crime within five years of their release, largely due to inadequate support and public policies that act as barriers to reentry to communities.”

Pettus-Davis intends to stop these cycles.

Working with Danny Ludeman, former CEO of Wells Fargo Advisors, Pettus-Davis has helped to launch a unique public-private-academic collaboration aimed at reducing reincarceration rates.

This spring, the pair announced the Concordance Academy of Leadership, which will offer comprehensive, integrated and holistic services to men and women returning to the community from prison. Ludeman will serve as CEO and president of the academy.

Pettus-Davis will lead the Concordance Institute for Advancing Social Justice, the research partner of the academy, which will be based at the Brown School.

The work of the Concordance Institute will focus on accelerating the feedback loop of research, practice and policy engagement, which in traditional contexts takes years to occur.

The institute will conduct rigorous real-world research to better understand factors that dramatically reduce the cycle of incarceration. The Concordance Institute’s efforts also will include innovation of sophisticated services designed for criminal justice-involved adults and the development of evidence-driven public policy statements.
The Concordance Academy’s services will focus on: employment, education, housing, behavioral health treatment, cognitive and relationship skills, life skills, family support, legal services, wellness programming, and community involvement.

“The Concordance Institute realizes one of the most fundamental goals of the Brown School, to apply the best evidence to solving one of the most important and compelling challenges of our time, significantly reducing the recidivism of prisoners back into the system,” says Edward F. Lawlor, PhD, dean of the Brown School and the William E. Gordon Distinguished Professor.

Collaboration Is the Key

Ludeman and Pettus-Davis are determined to help lead the country in solving the problem of high reincarceration rates.

Ludeman left his position as CEO of Wells Fargo Advisors in 2013 because he felt a call to help more people. After receiving an inspiring letter from an organization that provided reentry services for people who had served long sentences in prison, Ludeman agreed to help the small nonprofit to develop a strategic plan to expand capacity.

Having grown Wells Fargo revenue from $300 million to $10 billion, Ludeman doesn’t believe in thinking small. On the other hand, he also believes in doing his homework.

“I was told when I retired, just because you’re good at one thing, doesn’t mean you’ll be good at other things. I knew nothing about the problem, background or field, so I wanted to make sure I was surrounded with experts,” Ludeman says.

A phone call to Washington University Chancellor Mark S. Wrighton resulted in a connection with Pettus-Davis. It was clear from their first conversation that the two shared a strong commitment to the work.

“Carrie has been involved with me practically from the beginning—or I should say, I have been involved with her,” Ludeman says. “She is one of the top experts in reentry in the country. She not only has a strong academic and research orientation and commitment, but she also has worked in the field as a practitioner for many different organizations.”

As many as 96% of male and female prisoners have significant trauma histories.

Edward F. Lawlor, PhD, dean of the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis
The Concordance Institute helped to develop the Academy’s package of services and will test the program’s effectiveness as well as innovate new practices to discern and disseminate evidence-based approaches.

**REBALANCING THE SCALES**

The Concordance Institute is the first research center in a school of social work dedicated to scientific discovery focused on issues of incarceration.

Through its partnership with the Academy, the Concordance Institute will perform rigorous real-world research through applied randomized controlled trials; disseminate best practices; innovate new treatments; and perform evidence-informed policy engagement to reduce policy-related barriers to reentry.

The Concordance Academy is a unique reentry program with highly integrated services delivered by specialized clinical and peer specialist staff. The comprehensive program will include employment, education, housing, substance abuse treatment, cognitive and relationship skills, life skills, family support, legal services, wellness programming, and community involvement services. Services will begin six months prior to release and continue for one year afterward.

Nine million dollars have been raised to support the entire initiative for the next three years: $4.5 million from the business community, $3.5 million from public sources and another $1 million from nonprofit organizations.

The initial group of prisoners will begin receiving services in January 2016. Over the first two years, Concordance Academy will provide services to 250 prisoners.

To perform an applied randomized control trial, the Institute will follow an equal number of prisoners who will not receive services from the Academy, although they will be eligible for all standard services provided to re-entering prisoners.

“We will be rigorously testing services, generating and identifying best practices, advocating for evidence-based public policy adaptations or innovations that will facilitate positive outcomes for this population and the community,” Pettus-Davis says.
The Concordance Initiative establishes a model of reentry practice, while also pushing against existing boundaries of scientific practice and methods.

If the model succeeds, after three to five years, Ludeman hopes to secure pay-for-performance contracts for the Academy. The goal is to reduce reincarceration by 30 percent among Academy attendees. The model makes good sense and is financially sustainable, Ludeman points out. Funding an Academy participant costs about $15,000 over 18 months, much less than the $33,000 it costs to keep a person in prison.

Pettus-Davis explains that the initiative is not just about establishing a model of reentry practice, but also about advancing science by pushing against existing boundaries of scientific practice and methods.

“At so many academic institutions,” Ludeman says, “it’s about the theory. The Brown School really is acting as an innovator in using their expertise to solve the problem—not to just research it, not just to be an expert on it, but to come up with methods, services and programs that can have a tremendous impact on our country and on the lives of so many people.”

“We want to substantially accelerate the practice/research feedback loop,” she says. “It takes about 17 years for scientific discoveries to be adopted into practice. We aim to achieve almost immediate adoption of research findings into practice in the Concordance Initiative. And we plan to document that model for others to follow.”

“The relationship of the Concordance Institute to the Concordance Academy is a model for social work and social policy,” says Lawlor. “The close connection and feedback of research, practice, and ultimately policy is the key to making significant and scalable changes in our society.”

Learn more about the Concordance Initiative:

Concordance Institute for Advancing Social Justice
⇒ brownschool.wustl.edu/concordance

Concordance Academy of Leadership
⇒ concordanceacademy.com