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ComALERT: A Prosecutor's Collaborative Model for Ensuring a  
Successful Transition from Prison to the Community  
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## COMALERT: A PROSECUTOR'S COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR ENSURING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION FROM PRISON TO THE COMMUNITY

*Charles J. Hynes*<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Times change. Fifteen years ago, even ten years ago, the term “re-entry” had not yet bloomed in the vocabulary of most criminal justice practitioners. Now, the term flourishes on a slew of websites, including those of the United States Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs,<sup>2</sup> the Urban Institute,<sup>3</sup> and the Council of State Governments’ Re-Entry Policy Council.<sup>4</sup> In addition, “re-entry” has increasingly entered the policy dialogues of law enforcement personnel. Surely, the primary impetus for this change is one titanic fact—namely, that the explosion of the nation’s incarceration rate over recent decades has led to a corresponding boom in the rate of ex-offend-

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1. Charles J. Hynes has been the District Attorney of Kings County (Brooklyn), New York since 1990. He has been a member of the American Bar Association’s Commission on Effective Criminal Sanctions since 2005 and the First Vice Chair of the Association’s Criminal Justice Section since 2007. He has also served as Vice President of the National District Attorneys Association since 2006.

2. United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/>.

3. Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org/>.

4. Council of State Governments’ Re-Entry Policy Council, <http://www.reentrypolicy.org/>.

ers returning to their communities and attempting to re-enter and re-integrate into society.<sup>5</sup>

Each year, well over half a million people are released from state and federal prisons in the United States.<sup>6</sup> As formerly incarcerated individuals stream back into their communities, they all face a multitude of challenges to becoming productive law-abiding citizens. All carry the stigma of at least one, and often more than one, criminal conviction.<sup>7</sup> About half have not graduated high school.<sup>8</sup> Over two-thirds have engaged in substance abuse.<sup>9</sup> Many were unemployed before incarceration and have checkered employment histories and no job to go to upon their release.<sup>10</sup> Some have mental health problems or anti-social attitudes or personality traits, such as

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5. In 1974, approximately 216,000 persons were incarcerated in U.S. prisons. THOMAS P. BONCZAR, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PREVALENCE OF IMPRISONMENT IN THE U.S. POPULATION, 1974-2001, NCJ 197976, at 1 (2003). By June 30, 2006, the U.S. prison population had swelled to *over six times* that figure, to 1,471,822 inmates. WILLIAM J. SABOL ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISON AND JAIL INMATES AT MIDYEAR 2006, NCJ 217675, at 8 (2007). From 1980 to 1998, the number of federal and state inmates released to communities increased more than threefold, from 148,867 to 532,136. See U.S. GEN. ACCOUNTING OFFICE, PRISONER RELEASES: TRENDS AND INFORMATION ON REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS, at 3 (2001). And by 2005, the number of releases from state and federal prisons had climbed to 698,459. See WILLIAM J. SABOL ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISON AND JAIL INMATES AT MIDYEAR 2006, NCJ 217675, at 3 (2007).

6. Sabol, *supra* note 5, at 3 tbl.5.

7. For example, of the 26,784 inmates released from New York State prisons in 2001, approximately 57% had been sentenced as second felony or persistent felony offenders. LESLIE KELLAM, STATE OF NEW YORK DEP'T OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES, 2001 RELEASES: THREE YEAR POST RELEASE FOLLOW-UP 24, 25 tbl.9.1 (2007).

8. The percent of state prisoners entering parole in 1999 who did not graduate high school was about 51%. TIMOTHY A. HUGHES ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, TRENDS IN STATE PAROLE, 1999-2000, NCJ 184735, at 13 (2001).

9. Of the state prisoners expected to be released in 1999, 84% reported being involved with drugs or alcohol at the time of the offense; nearly 25% were alcohol dependent; 59% had used drugs some time during the month preceding the offense; and 21% had committed the offense for drug money. *Id.* at 9. And the picture looks grim for future releases. According to a 2004 survey of state prison inmates, one-third said they had committed their current offense while under the influence of drugs. Over one half (56%) used drugs in the month before the offense. More than two-thirds (69%) had used drugs regularly at some time in their lives. In addition, more than a half (53%) of the state prisoners met the criteria for drug dependence or abuse. CHRISTOPHER J. MUMOLA & JENNIFER C. KARBERG, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, DRUG USE AND DEPENDENCE, STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONERS, 2004, NCJ 213530, at 2, 6 (2006).

10. Only about two-thirds (67%) of state prison inmates had full-time employment in the month before incarceration. Drug dependent or abusing state prisoners had an even lower rate of full-time employment (56%). *Id.* at 8 tbl.8.

anger management issues or lack of impulse control.<sup>11</sup> Some lack family support.

A constellation of these and other factors too often forecast re-arrest, violation of parole, and return to prison. According to a national study of the re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration of a representative sampling of state prisoners released in 1994, within three years of their release, just over two-thirds (67.5%) had been re-arrested for a new offense, close to one-half (46.9%) had been re-convicted of a new crime, and about one-quarter (25.4%) had been re-sentenced to prison for a new crime.<sup>12</sup> Many also returned to prison for violating the conditions of their release, so that, all in all, slightly more than half (51.8%) of those released were back in prison within three years.<sup>13</sup>

Recidivism by formerly incarcerated individuals takes a huge toll—in terms of both the immediate harm caused by the criminal activity and the direct and indirect costs of criminal recidivism, such as the criminal justice system costs of investigation and prosecution, incarceration costs, and social costs (health, foster-care, and welfare systems).<sup>14</sup> The potential for increased crime and the wholesale destabilization of communities looms large.<sup>15</sup>

Faced with such a threat to the public weal, law enforcement officials, including district attorneys, cannot help but sit up and take notice. Because the ultimate goal of law enforcement is increasing public safety, law enforcement, and a district attorney's office in particular, can and should play a leadership role with regard to re-entry. This article will examine the effort

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11. A recent report estimates that at midyear 2005, 56% of inmates in state prisons had a mental health problem. DORIS J. JAMES & LAUREN E. GLAZE, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OF PRISON AND JAIL INMATES, NCJ 2136000, at 1 (2006).

12. PATRICK A. LANGAN & DAVID J. LEVIN, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, RECIDIVISM OF PRISONERS RELEASED IN 1994, NCJ 193427, at 1 (2002).

13. *Id.*

14. See generally JOAN PETERSILIA, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, WHEN PRISONERS RETURN TO THE COMMUNITY: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES, 9 SENTENCING & CORRECTIONS: ISSUES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (Nov. 2000); see also AMY L. SOLOMON ET AL., URBAN INSTITUTE, UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF PRISONER REENTRY: RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE URBAN INSTITUTE'S PRISONER REENTRY PORTFOLIO, JUSTICE POLICY CENTER (Jan. 2006).

15. *Id.*

of one metropolitan district attorney's office to address re-entry issues. In 1999, the Kings County (Brooklyn, NY) District Attorney's Office organized the first meeting of a prosecution-run re-entry program that would eventually become ComALERT—Community And Law Enforcement Resources Together.

### Creation and Evolution of ComALERT

As in the rest of the nation, the number of individuals released from New York State prisons rose in the late 1980s and the 1990s, corresponding to the rise in prison commitments during the eighties and nineties.<sup>16</sup> In 1985, 12,675 offenders were released from New York State prisons.<sup>17</sup> Just five years later, the number had gone up by more than ten thousand to 23,630.<sup>18</sup>

By 1999, the 1985 figure had *more than doubled* to 26,323.<sup>19</sup> Of those released, the overwhelming majority (24,238) were released to some kind of parole supervision.<sup>20</sup> Over two-thirds had originally been committed from New York City and these men and women were inevitably destined to return to their communities.<sup>21</sup> At this time (as of December 31, 1999), the population of parolees under supervision in New York City had swelled to 33,669.<sup>22</sup>

As a result, unless these returning ex-offenders were successfully re-integrated into the community, they threatened to become a disruptive force that would burden the city and state with the direct and indirect costs of crime and re-incarceration upon any new offenses. Unfortunately, parole resources were stretched thin, making it difficult to identify, address, and monitor the treatment and social services needs of parolees.<sup>23</sup> This

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16. LESLIE KELLAM, STATE OF NEW YORK DEP'T OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES, 2001 RELEASES: THREE YEAR POST RELEASE FOLLOW-UP 2 tbl.1.1 (2002).

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. E-mail from Elizabeth M. Staley, Program Research Specialist III, New York State Dep't of Correctional Services, Office of Program Planning, Research & Evaluation (September 7, 2007).

20. *Id.*

21. *Supra* note 19.

22. E-mail from the New York State Division of Parole, Office of Policy Analysis (December 20, 2007). On file with the author.

23. See William D. Burrell, *Trends in Probation and Parole in the States* (Nov. 26, 2007), [http://web.appa-net.org/c/headlines/docs/Trends\\_Probation\\_Parole.pdf](http://web.appa-net.org/c/headlines/docs/Trends_Probation_Parole.pdf) (providing a national perspective on challenges faced by parole and probation

public safety crisis demanded a collaborative response from the community and law enforcement.

The Kings County District Attorney's Office had already launched in 1990 the Drug Treatment Alternative-to-Prison (DTAP) program, the nation's first prosecution-run program, diverting chronic, non-violent felony drug offenders into substance abuse treatment. DTAP was grounded in the belief that there had to be a more successful and cost-effective way than re-incarceration to stop non-violent, drug-addicted offenders from perpetually recommitting crimes to support their habit. By treating the addiction of these offenders in a community setting and inculcating life and job skills, the DTAP program aimed to provide this population with the tools necessary to resist returning to drug-related crime. DTAP resulted from a boundary-spanning collaboration with residential drug-treatment providers, as well as the New York State Division of Parole, the New York City Department of Probation, the New York State Office of Court Administration, and the defense bar.<sup>24</sup>

Bearing in mind the success of DTAP's collaborative approach, I asked my executive staff to explore similar ways in which a district attorney's office, charged with promoting public safety, could assist this growing population of formerly incarcerated individuals in becoming productive members of society. Led by Patricia L. Gatling, at the time First Assistant District Attorney and now Commissioner and Chair of New York City's Commission on Human Rights, senior staff met with executives from Parole, Probation, and the New York Police Department. Then, taking advantage of the many contacts developed over the years by the Kings County District Attorney's Community Relations Bureau, the District Attorney's staff brought together representatives and leaders from a broad

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with increased workloads and on the strategic trends characterizing their efforts to improve effectiveness).

24. See CHARLES J. HYNES & ANNE J. SWERN, KINGS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, DRUG TREATMENT ALTERNATIVE-TO-PRISON SIXTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT (2007) (providing more information on DTAP); see also THE NATIONAL CENTER ON ADDICTION AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, CROSSING THE BRIDGE: AN EVALUATION OF THE DRUG TREATMENT ALTERNATIVE-TO-PRISON (DTAP) PROGRAM (2003), available at [http://www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/Crossing\\_the\\_bridge\\_March2003.pdf](http://www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/Crossing_the_bridge_March2003.pdf).

spectrum of community-based organizations, religious institutions, and social service agencies, discussed with them the problems faced by ex-offenders, and enlisted their aid in a coordinated re-entry effort.

Initially focusing on neighborhoods within three Brooklyn precincts, ComALERT held meetings at community halls and churches from 1999-2000. Potential participants were notified about the meetings by their parole or probation officers and through flyers and faith-based community outreach. At the meetings, attendees, after being alerted that their precincts were under heightened law enforcement scrutiny, were informed about the services available to them through a multitude of community-based agencies. The services were without charge and included various support systems for ComALERT participants and their families. If the attendees elected to participate in the ComALERT program, they completed an information card, checking off the services they needed in the areas of education, housing, job training, and drug treatment. The District Attorney's Office then referred the participants to service organizations throughout Brooklyn. The ComALERT resource network grew to include over 100 social services providers and community-based organizations. A total of approximately 290 individuals sought services at these ComALERT meetings.

Although the meetings generated interest in the issue of re-entry and led to the referral of many individuals to service providers, there was reason to believe that greater direct involvement by the District Attorney's Office could lead to more accurate assessments of clients' needs, facilitate the tracking of clients' outcomes, and allow for a better evaluation of the program's strengths and weaknesses.

Accordingly, in the spring of 2000, the District Attorney's Office hired a licensed social worker specifically dedicated to ComALERT, and the program changed from the community-meeting model to a model of direct assessment and referral. Parole officers who knew of ComALERT through the networking efforts of the District Attorney's Office would discuss the program with their parolees, and any parolees who were interested in ComALERT's services would then make an appointment to meet with the ComALERT counselor. ComALERT also contin-

ued to attract participants who had heard about the program through the District Attorney's Office's community outreach.

The ComALERT counselor interviewed each client, conducted a needs assessment, and discussed the client's goals. He would then refer the client to those social service providers that could best meet the client's specific needs. The counselor followed the client's progress, and acted as a case manager, offering re-assessments, counseling, and additional referrals as needed. In addition, he spoke with the client's parole officer to determine whether the client was complying with the conditions of parole. If the parolee was showing signs of violating those terms (for example by failing a drug test), the counselor would discuss with the parole officer how ComALERT could help to ensure that the parolee did not return to prison unless it was necessary for public safety (for example, by providing a referral to outpatient or residential substance abuse treatment).

In 2001, ComALERT formally partnered with the Doe Fund,<sup>25</sup> a non-profit organization that had been providing transitional employment and housing for the homeless since 1994. At the time, the Doe Fund's Ready, Willing and Able program (RWA)<sup>26</sup> was already operating a facility in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. Homeless men, some with criminal records, lived in and maintained the RWA facility while also engaging in transitional employment (usually street cleaning) and receiving counseling and supportive job-related services.

Many of ComALERT's clients needed the transitional work and job skills training provided by the Doe Fund's RWA program, but they already had a place to live. Thus, in partnership with ComALERT and Parole, the Doe Fund created a new program, RWA-Day, to meet the transitional employment needs of former prisoners on parole in Brooklyn who were not homeless.

Also, starting in about 2001, ComALERT increasingly focused exclusively on parolees, and phased out servicing probationers. ComALERT concluded that parolees, having been

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25. Doe Fund, <http://www.doe.org/>.

26. Doe Fund's Ready, Willing and Able Program, <http://www.doe.org/programs/?programID=1>.



incarcerated in state prison and removed from their communities and families for substantial stretches of time, had more acute needs than probationers. In addition, the program had forged strong ties with individual parole officers who provided a steady stream of referrals. Furthermore, parole supervision was generally more intense than probation supervision, which made it easier to monitor a ComALERT participant's progress and influence his or her behavior.

Then, in 2004, Counseling Service of the Eastern District of New York (CSEDNY),<sup>27</sup> which had contracted with Parole to provide substance abuse treatment to mandated parolees, entered into a formal partnership with ComALERT. CSEDNY, a non-profit agency incorporated in 1974 and licensed by the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS)<sup>28</sup> for the provision of outpatient services, was originally created as an alternative to incarceration program for substance abusers on federal probation or parole. CSEDNY now has sites spread over the greater New York City area and provides outpatient substance abuse treatment services to mandated clients for every jurisdictional level (city, county, state, and federal). In space donated by the City of New York through the Kings County District Attorney's Office, CSEDNY began providing treatment services in the county's Municipal Building in downtown Brooklyn. The CSEDNY counselors at this Municipal Building facility, the ComALERT Re-Entry Center, henceforth exclusively serviced ComALERT participants, all of whom would now be on parole.

After switching from the community-meeting model, ComALERT targeted five Brooklyn precincts (73rd, 75th, 79th, 81st, and 88th), which consistently absorbed a disproportionately high number of the approximately 3,500 former inmates returning to Brooklyn each year. However, in 2006, the Kings County District Attorney's Office received a grant from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS)<sup>29</sup> to

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27. Counseling Service of the Eastern District of New York, <http://www.csedny.org/>.

28. New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, <http://www.oasas.state.ny.us/index.cfm>.

29. New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, <http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/>.

renovate its space, enhance the on-site services, and expand the program. This grant allowed the program to broaden its efforts and enroll parolees from all the precincts in Brooklyn.

Salaries of ComALERT staff (including the director, deputy director, community resources coordinator, and research director) are primarily paid out of the DCJS grant, with the District Attorney's budget providing additional funds.<sup>30</sup> ComALERT relies substantially on subcontractors, who have established Memoranda of Understanding with the Kings County District Attorney's Office, to provide parolee reentry services, most on site at the District Attorney's office space in the Brooklyn Municipal Building. The subcontracting agencies providing these services currently include: (1) Counseling Service of the Eastern District of New York (CSEDNY), providing medically supervised, non-intensive, OASAS licensed outpatient substance abuse treatment; (2) the Doe Fund, providing transitional employment; (3) HealthFirst,<sup>31</sup> providing assistance for Medicaid and benefits enrollment; and (4) the Brooklyn Plaza Medical Center, providing HIV/STD/Hepatitis workshops.<sup>32</sup> Funding for these agencies comes from both government and non-government sources. For example, treatment services provided by CSDENY are paid in part by the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS). The bulk of the Doe Fund's revenue comes from contracts for its services and from individual, corporate, foundation, and government grants.

## ComALERT's Current Structure

### Eligibility, Referrals, and Screening

To be eligible for ComALERT, the participant must: (1) be paroled to Brooklyn and must have at least six months remaining of parole supervision; (2) be at least 18 years old; (3) be in

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30. In addition, a ComALERT social worker was, until recently, paid through a Public Safety Housing Initiative grant from the United States Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York. That social worker was supervised by CSEDNY. Now that the grant money has expired, the social worker is being paid directly by CSEDNY.

31. HealthFirst, <http://www.health-first.org/>.

32. HIV/AIDS Services in NYC, <http://www.aidsnyc.org/servicesnyc/support.html>.

need of substance abuse treatment; (4) not be a sex offender or arsonist, and (5) not suffer from a serious and persistent mental illness. Most participants are on parole either for a drug crime (41%) or a crime of violence, such as robbery, assault, and homicide (39%); the rest are on parole for crimes against the public order, such as weapons possession and criminal contempt (11%), and property crimes, such as larceny and possession of stolen property (9%).

The primary source of ComALERT referrals is the New York State Division of Parole, and the program's relationship with Parole ensures that parolees receive services *rapidly*, often within the first few weeks or less of their release. Speedy delivery of services may help reduce recidivism, especially for ex-offenders with drug and alcohol addictions who, removed from the controlled environment of prison and confronted with multiple opportunities to re-engage in substance abuse, may quickly fall on the road to re-entry.<sup>33</sup>

Prison inmates heading home to Brooklyn are directed to report, within 24 to 48 hours of release, to one of three Parole offices in the county. There, the parolee meets with his or her assigned parole officer and reviews with the officer the conditions of his or her release. These often include a condition to seek and maintain substance abuse treatment—a condition based on a pre-release assessment of the inmate.<sup>34</sup> If there is such a condition, the officer refers the parolee to a counselor from Parole's Access program, which is staffed with personnel who have expertise in substance abuse treatment and knowledge of a broad array of treatment providers throughout the city. Parole's Access program is located in a center in downtown Brooklyn.

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33. Among the 26,784 inmates released in 2001 from New York State prisons, 10,677 (40%) returned to custody within three years. Of those who returned, the median time-to-return was 14 months. Close to one-fifth (18%) returned within the first six months. LESLIE KELLAM, STATE OF NEW YORK DEP'T OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES, 2001 RELEASES: THREE YEAR POST RELEASE FOLLOW-UP 5, 7 (2002).

34. According to data supplied by the New York State Department of Correctional Services, of those inmates released in 2006 who had originally been committed from Kings County on a new crime (*i.e.*, not on a parole violation), 81% were identified as having a substance abuse treatment need. E-mail from Elizabeth M. Staley, Program Research Specialist III, New York State Dep't of Correctional Services, Office of Program Planning, Research & Evaluation (September 12, 2007).

Access counselors interview parolees either at the Access Center or, occasionally, at the different Parole offices themselves when staffing permits such off-site visits. The Access counselor assesses the intensity level of treatment needed by the parolee. If the Access counselor determines that there might be a good match with the moderate intensity out-patient treatment provided by CSEDNY through ComALERT, the parolee meets with a ComALERT-CSEDNY counselor who is present, three times per week, at the Access Center. The ComALERT-CSEDNY counselor interviews the referred parolee, discussing, *inter alia*, past criminal activities and future goals, and conducts a thorough treatment needs assessment.

At this stage, the ComALERT-CSEDNY counselor may conclude that the client is not suitable for the program, based on, for example, the type of crime that the parolee committed or on a determination that the parolee, in fact, needs a more intense level of treatment than ComALERT provides.

If found eligible, the client is then directed to report to the ComALERT Re-Entry Center in the Municipal Building in downtown Brooklyn for a program orientation. Orientation sessions are held approximately four times per month. Immediately thereafter, an on-site licensed counselor from ComALERT-CSEDNY is assigned to the client and conducts a complete psychosocial assessment which provides the basis for any future re-entry planning and treatment at ComALERT. This primary counselor works with the parolee to help him or her comply with conditional release requirements.

Candidates may decide not to participate in ComALERT after their assessment by the ComALERT-CSEDNY counselor at the Access center and can also opt out of ComALERT after the initial orientation session. However, in only about 19% percent of the referred cases do parolees decide not to participate in the program. Although ComALERT requires attendance at substance abuse treatment, the treatment's moderate level of intensity and time commitment appeals to many participants who are trying to both comply with their treatment mandates and seek and/or maintain a new job. Additionally, for those without employment or housing, the prospect of preferential place-

ment in RWA's transitional work and housing (if necessary) program offers a strong incentive to join ComALERT.<sup>35</sup>

Although most of ComALERT's participants (approximately 80-85%) are newly released prisoners who have been referred to ComALERT by Parole in conjunction with its Access program, ComALERT also accepts participants through other channels. Some clients are referred to ComALERT from the Doe Fund's residential RWA program. These clients may have already been out of prison and on parole for months or even years. In need of transitional employment and housing, the parolees have enrolled in the Doe Fund's residential RWA program. Because the Doe Fund enforces a zero tolerance policy with regard to the use of drugs and alcohol, case managers at the RWA facility will, on occasion with the approval of Parole, refer participants to ComALERT for substance abuse treatment. The participants attend the orientation program and then are assigned a ComALERT-CSEDNY primary counselor.

ComALERT also receives a small number of self-referrals. These parolees may have learned about the ComALERT program while still incarcerated, through the informational sessions that ComALERT regularly conducts via video hookup at various prisons throughout New York State. Alternatively, they may have learned about ComALERT as a result of ComALERT's efforts to publicize the program in the community. The parolees who contact ComALERT are told to attend the next available orientation session. After orientation, they meet with a counselor for an assessment and, if appropriate, enrollment in the program and assignment of a primary counselor.

### **Treatment and Services**

The ComALERT re-entry program emphasizes substance abuse treatment and employment assistance. Drug use and unemployment appear to be among the greatest stumbling blocks to successful re-entry and social integration. For example, it is known from the high numbers of drug-addicted predicate felons who re-cycle through the criminal justice system that pa-

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35. Any parolees who decide not to participate in ComALERT must, of course, consult with their parole officer about how they will otherwise fulfill their substance abuse treatment mandate.

rolees who have an untreated drug addiction are more likely to re-offend than those without any substance abuse issues.<sup>36</sup> We also know from research data on the Kings County District Attorney's Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison (DTAP) program that the DTAP graduates who were working at the time of program completion were far less likely to get re-arrested in the three years post-graduation, than those graduates who were unemployed (13% v. 33%).<sup>37</sup>

CSEDNY, a substance abuse treatment agency licensed by New York State's Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), staffs ComALERT with professional counselors. Treatment can begin immediately at the ComALERT Re-entry Center following the orientation program, even for those parolees without Medicaid, thanks to OASAS funding for this purpose. Additionally, one of ComALERT's social services partners, HealthFirst, provides on-site staff who assist with rapid benefits enrollment to ensure that Medicaid is obtained as soon as possible.

For most clients, the ComALERT program lasts three to six months. Each week, clients attend one individual counseling session and one or two group sessions which focus on specific issues such as anger management or relapse prevention. Treatment draws on different modalities: cognitive behavioral, client-centered supportive, and relapse prevention therapies, with motivational interviewing used throughout the therapeutic process. Counseling seeks to nurture and support the clients' inner resolve to build a new life.

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36. Released inmates who return to prison for a new felony offense (as opposed to parole violation), are most frequently recommitted for a drug offense. LESLIE KELLAM, STATE OF NEW YORK DEP'T OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES, 2001 RELEASES: THREE YEAR POST RELEASE FOLLOW-UP 41 (2002). Further, over three-quarters of the drug offenders who returned to prison for a new crime were convicted yet again of a drug offense. *Id.* at 18-19. Most of these drug offenders (about 88%) are identified substance abusers. See State of New York, Dep't of Correctional Services, HUB SYSTEM: PROFILE OF INMATE POPULATION UNDER CUSTODY ON JANUARY 1, 2006 at 28 tbl.11-A (showing the total number of inmates committed for a drug offense was 14,257); STATE OF NEW YORK, DEP'T OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES, IDENTIFIED SUBSTANCE ABUSERS, DECEMBER 2005 at 6 tbl.6 (showing the number of substance abusers who were committed for a drug offense as 12,554).

37. Hynes & Swern, *supra* note 24. See also AMY C. SOLOMON ET AL., URBAN INSTITUTE, FROM PRISON TO WORK: THE EMPLOYMENT DIMENSIONS OF PRISONER RE-ENTRY, JUSTICE POLICY CENTER (2004).

In order to graduate from ComALERT, a participant must be drug-free for three consecutive months and be either employed or in school, if physically able. After completion of the treatment mandate, clients are encouraged to continue to visit the ComALERT Re-entry Center to receive aftercare counseling if they need it.

Clients may be discharged from the program for different reasons. The most common reason for discharge (accounting for about one-third of all the discharges) is that ComALERT loses contact with the client after he or she fails to attend treatment for more than 30 days and the primary counselor is unable to reach the client by telephone or mail. About one-quarter of the discharges occur because the client does not comply with program rules (*e.g.*, he or she refuses to be drug tested or attends counseling only sporadically). In addition, a ComALERT-CSEDNY primary counselor will occasionally refer a client to a more intensive drug treatment program (usually residential)—accounting for a little less than a quarter of all discharges. A client may also be discharged if he or she is re-incarcerated due to a parole violation or to an arrest for a new crime (about 16% of all discharges). Finally, a small percentage of the discharges are based on various other reasons, such as that the client has moved to a new location or that he or she cannot complete the program for medical reasons.<sup>38</sup>

Although approximately two-thirds of all ComALERT clients (68%) test negative for drugs and alcohol at entry into the program, almost a quarter (24%) test positive for marijuana. In much smaller numbers, participants test positive for cocaine (3%), opiates (2%), and alcohol and other drugs, including morphine and methadone (combined total of 3%). While in the program, clients undergo drug testing (urinalysis) at least twice per month, and about 36% test positive for drugs or alcohol at least once while in the ComALERT program. Random drug testing can be a powerful therapeutic tool, as a “dirty urine” test result

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38. Depending on the circumstances of the case, clients who have been discharged from the program may subsequently be permitted to re-enroll in ComALERT. For example, a client may be referred to residential substance abuse treatment and discharged from ComALERT, and then, after completing residential treatment (which might last several months), may re-enroll in ComALERT with the approval of his or her parole officer.

forces a participant to confront the reality that he or she has relapsed, and it assists treatment staff in re-evaluating a participant's progress. Treatment staff may decide to increase the number of counseling sessions that the client must attend per week, or, if the relapse is severe, may conclude that the client must be referred to in-patient treatment. The client's parole officer is notified of the positive drug test and consulted about the recommended modification in the parolee's treatment plan.

Once drug testing results verify that a client has been drug and alcohol free for at least 30 days, he or she can begin utilizing other ComALERT social services, and, per the referral of the primary counselor, will meet with ComALERT's Community Resources Coordinator.

Approximately one-third of all ComALERT clients receive a referral to, and preferential placement in, the Doe Fund's RWA program, which provides transitional employment, transitional housing (if needed), job skills training, 12-step programs, and courses on financial management and other life skills. The program also offers financial assistance to clients who wish to obtain a commercial driver's license, provides courses toward computer skills certification, and offers a vocational program in extermination (called 'Pest@Rest'), through which clients can become licensed exterminators.

Those participating in the RWA program work full time in manual labor jobs, primarily street cleaning, and are paid \$7.50 per hour. A portion of the salary is deposited directly into a savings account for the client. Clients receive meals and other services in a Doe Fund facility. After nine months of transitional employment, participants begin the search for a permanent job. During this process, they continue to receive a stipend. Once RWA participants secure permanent employment and housing, they graduate from the program, and the Doe Fund continues to provide them with \$200 per month for five months.

ComALERT's periodic drug testing and weekly individual and group counseling sessions help clients maintain sobriety and their enrollment in RWA, which enforces a zero-tolerance policy for drug and alcohol use. The RWA-Day program is designed for ComALERT clients who have a place to live; however, for those RWA/ComALERT participants who do need



transitional housing, the Doe Fund maintains Stuyvesant House, a Doe Fund supervised facility in Brooklyn, New York, for their use.

In addition to providing referrals to RWA and other transitional employment programs, ComALERT's Community Resources Coordinator also links participants to a wide range of other social services offered by community-based providers, such as transitional housing, vocational training, GED test preparation, family counseling, and job readiness programs. Service referrals are specifically tailored to meet the needs of the individual clients.

ComALERT offers many on-site services as well. At the ComALERT Re-Entry Center, ComALERT participants may attend HIV/STD/Hepatitis workshops led by the Brooklyn Plaza Medical Center. ComALERT also has an on-site doctor who conducts physical health assessments and provides medical referrals as necessary. ComALERT participants who need mental health treatment, but only at a moderate level, may receive such treatment from their ComALERT primary counselor. If the client has a serious and persistent mental illness and/or needs treatment involving medication, the primary counselor or the on-site doctor will refer the client to an outside mental health treatment provider.<sup>39</sup> ComALERT plans to augment, in the near future, the range of wraparound services offered on site (this is discussed further in **Future Challenges**, *see infra* pp. 821-823).

This one-stop, multi-service model has distinct advantages. First, the one-stop center, at its easily accessible downtown Brooklyn location, ensures that, from a practical standpoint, clients can access a full range of necessary services quickly and easily. In addition, the one-stop model also fosters greater coordination in the delivery of those services. Coordination reduces the likelihood that a client will fall through the cracks. The one-stop model also symbolically reinforces the holistic approach to the parolee's re-entry. Re-integration into a community, especially after a long period of incarceration,

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39. Because the Kings County District Attorney's Office has its own treatment diversion program for those suffering from serious and persistent mental illnesses, Treatment Alternatives for the Dually Diagnosed (TADD), and also participates in the Brooklyn Mental Health Court, the Office has well established links with mental health treatment providers throughout New York City.

poses challenges to every aspect of an individual's life—employment, housing, physical health, mental health, family relations, and so on. All of these facets interrelate and the multi-service, one-stop nature of the ComALERT Re-Entry Center acknowledges that complex relationship.

#### **The Role of the District Attorney's Office**

The leadership role and hands-on participation of the Kings County District Attorney's Office distinguishes ComALERT from other re-entry programs.

A district attorney's office is uniquely positioned to act as the lead agency for a parolee re-entry program. First, a district attorney's office often already has strong ties to both the parole and the police departments, agencies responsible for supervising ex-offenders and patrolling the neighborhoods to which they return. All three law enforcement entities have in common the paramount duty of protecting public safety, and each maintains a level of trust in the judgment of the others.

Working with the New York State Division of Parole ("Parole") and the New York Police Department ("NYPD"), ComALERT monitors its clients to ensure public safety. A failure to cooperate or a violation of any program condition is promptly brought to the attention of the client's parole officer. Graduated sanctions may be employed at the discretion of the parole officer. For example, if a ComALERT client tests positive for drug use, an increase in the number of counseling sessions that he or she must attend per week or more frequent drug testing may be mandated. The parolee may also be required to report more frequently to the parole officer. If the client has a serious drug relapse, he or she may be mandated to community-based residential treatment.

If a ComALERT client is arrested for a new offense, ComALERT counselors will act as a liaison between the prosecutor assigned to the case and with the client's parole officer. Depending on the facts of the case, it may be possible to resolve the case without the ComALERT client's parole being revoked and without re-incarceration. However, for serious breaches of the parole, revocation may be warranted.

Additionally, the Kings County District Attorney's Office's swift access to Parole and the NYPD offers reassurance to social

services providers, such as the Doe Fund, that they can participate in this re-entry effort without jeopardizing the safety of their employees or the integrity of their own programs. Moreover, the same kind of reassurance is extended to the public at large. Many communities are reluctant to offer a helping hand to parolees coming out of prison. But, by explaining that such help will in fact cut down crime and by exercising a leadership role through ComALERT, the District Attorney's Office plays a crucial role in enlisting community support for the re-entry effort. Finally, the District Attorney's Office's development and implementation of ComALERT reminds residents that prosecutors are community lawyers, responsible for more than seeking punishment for offenders.

### **ComALERT Outcomes**

ComALERT's capacity has grown over the past few years, and the District Attorney's Office aims to continue expanding the program to meet the needs of all parolees re-entering Brooklyn. Since the program assumed its present structure in October 2004, almost one thousand parolees have participated in ComALERT. Over half of those who participate, graduate from the program. ComALERT graduates have low recidivism and high employment rates. Preliminary data confirm that ComALERT promotes parolees' successful re-integration into their communities.

### **Participant Profile**

As of October 1, 2007, there were 144 active participants in ComALERT; 446 had graduated; and 401 had been discharged, giving ComALERT a graduation rate of 53%. Demographic characteristics of ComALERT clients have varied little over the last couple of years, fluctuating only a percentage point or two in either direction. Approximately 81% of program participants are African-American, 17% are Latino, and the remaining participants are either white or of other racial groups. Men make up the overwhelming majority of program participants (about 98%), at a slightly higher rate than their presence in New York

State's overall parole population.<sup>40</sup> About one quarter of ComALERT clients are 18 to 25 years old; a little more than one third are 26 to 35 years old; another quarter are 36 to 45 years old; and the remaining one-sixth are older than 45 years old. A little over one-half of the clients live with their mothers or other relatives, and close to one-fifth live with spouses or partners. Approximately one-eighth live in transitional housing, and the remaining clients live either alone, with a friend, or in a shelter. Only about 12% of those entering ComALERT are married. About 60% of clients have at least one child, and close to 20% have three or more children.

### Criminal Recidivism

A key measure of ComALERT's success is the recidivism of its participants. In 2006, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services provided a research grant to the Kings County District Attorney's Office to fund an independent evaluation of ComALERT, including a recidivism analysis. The District Attorney's Office asked Professor Bruce Western to conduct the research, as he had previously expressed an interest in studying ComALERT.<sup>41</sup> Preliminary results of Professor Western's research are very promising, and indicate that ComALERT is indeed an effective model for reducing recidivism.

Recidivism can be measured by re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration rates. Re-incarceration rates can be parsed into re-incarceration based on a sentence for a new crime and re-incarceration based on a parole violation. Professor Western analyzed the recidivism rates of ComALERT graduates from July 2004 to December 2006, and compared those rates to all ComALERT attendees for that period (*i.e.*, for all participants

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40. According to statistics on the New York State Division of Parole website, men made up 93% of the parole population in March, 2007. New York State Division of Parole, Program and Resources Statistics, <http://parole.state.ny.us/PROGRAMstatistics.asp>.

41. Professor Western has researched and written extensively on the intersecting subjects of crime, punishment, incarceration, employment, and race. Previously on the faculty of Princeton University, he is now a professor of sociology at Harvard University and the director of its Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality & Social Policy. His publications include the article *Lawful Re-Entry*. Bruce Western, *Lawful Re-Entry*, 14 THE AMERICAN PROSPECT 54 (Dec. 2003), available at [http://www.prospect.org:80//cs/articles?article=lawful\\_reentry](http://www.prospect.org:80//cs/articles?article=lawful_reentry).

regardless of whether they graduated or were discharged) and to those of a matched control group of Brooklyn parolees who did not participate in ComALERT.<sup>42</sup> Professor Western's research indicated that ComALERT graduates were *substantially* less likely to be re-arrested, re-convicted, or re-incarcerated than were parolees in a matched control group, as can be seen in the table below.

**Table I**  
Recidivism Outcome Percentages of  
ComALERT Graduates, ComALERT Attendees, and  
Members of Matched Control Group,  
based upon time elapsed since release from prison

<i>Status</i>	<i>6 months</i>	<i>1 year</i>	<i>2 years</i>
Re-Arrest	4 / 12 [16]	<b>11</b> / 21 [28]	<b>29</b> / 39 [48]
Re-Conviction	3 / 6 [8]	6 / 12 [18]	19 / 28 [34]
Re-Incarceration (new crime)	0 / 1 [1]	0 / 2 [2]	3 / 4 [7]
Re-incarceration (parole violation)	1 / 4 [6]	7 / 14 [14]	16 / 25 [24]
Re-incarceration (total)	1 / 5 [6]	7 / 15 [16]	19 / 29 [30]

- ComALERT Graduates in **bold**
- All ComALERT Attendees (discharges and graduates) in normal type
- Matched Control Group Members in brackets [ ]
- Note: Percentage figures have been rounded.

As Table I, *infra*, indicates, parolees in the matched control group (who did not have the benefit of ComALERT) were over twice as likely to have been re-arrested, re-convicted, or re-incarcerated within one year of their release from prison as were ComALERT graduates. Even two years out of prison, ComALERT graduates showed far less recidivism than the parolees of the matched control group. Twenty-nine percent of ComALERT graduates were re-arrested, 19% re-convicted, and only 3% re-incarcerated for a new crime.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, 48% of

42. Erin Jacobs, ComALERT's Research Director, collaborated with Professor Western on this research. A final report of their findings and evaluation was submitted to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services in October 2007.

43. Although the comparison is imperfect, the recidivism rates of ComALERT graduates were dramatically lower than for prisoners released from state prisons in general. A study conducted in 2002 of inmates released from prisons in 15 states in 1994 concluded that, two years after release, approximately 59% of offenders had been re-arrested, 36% had been re-convicted, and approximately 19% had been re-incarcerated for a new crime. PATRICK A. LANGAN & DAVID

the matched parolees were re-arrested, 34% re-convicted, and 7% re-incarcerated for a new crime. Even re-incarceration based on parole violations occurred much less frequently for ComALERT graduates (16%) than for parolees in the matched control group (24%).

### Graduate Characteristics

Because those ComALERT participants who graduated were less likely to recidivate than those who had merely attended the program but not graduated, it is useful to understand those characteristics, if any, which appear to have some relation to program success. Two particular client characteristics merit additional scrutiny. First, older clients, perhaps not surprisingly, often fare better than younger clients.<sup>44</sup> ComALERT clients in the youngest age group (18-25), a group that comprises approximately one-quarter of all ComALERT clients, are far less likely to graduate than clients in any other age group. Only about 39% of those in this age group complete the program. In contrast, graduation rates for all other age groups are above 50% and, in general, graduation rates seem to increase as age increases, so that three-quarters of those above 46 years old graduate.

Second, there also appears to be a strong relation between employment and completion of the program. Those who were already employed full-time when they entered ComALERT had a graduation rate of 60%. In comparison, those who were unemployed when they entered ComALERT were least likely to graduate, having a 42% graduation rate. Most strikingly, ComALERT clients who participated in the RWA transitional employment program had a 72% graduation rate.

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LEVIN, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *RECIDIVISM OF PRISONERS RELEASED IN 1994*, NCJ 193427, at 3 tbl.2 (2002).

44. These results are not aberrational when assessed in light of studies that show that younger ex-offenders are more likely to recidivate than are older ex-offenders. For instance, a study of all New York State prison releases from 1985-2001 determined that those offenders who were under the age of 25 at the time of their release returned to prison at much higher rates than older offenders. For example, the study found that 51.5% of those released between the ages of 19-20 returned to prison, whereas only 30.3% of those released between the ages of 46-49 returned to prison. LESLIE KELLAM, STATE OF NEW YORK DEP'T OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES, *2001 RELEASES: THREE YEAR POST RELEASE FOLLOW-UP* 21 tbl.7.1 (2002).

### Employment

In October, 2004, ComALERT began keeping statistics on client characteristics, including data on clients' employment status at the time of entry into ComALERT and at the time of graduation. Analysis of the figures has revealed a startling before-and-after picture of the ComALERT graduates. Approximately 50% of clients entering ComALERT are unemployed, 23% are in transitional employment, and only 19% have full-time, non-transitional employment. (The remaining ComALERT clients are employed part-time, are disabled, or are students.) Upon graduation, the employment status of these clients has changed dramatically: only 14% are unemployed; 36% have transitional employment; and 34% now have full-time, non-transitional employment. (Again, the remainder are employed part-time, are disabled, or are students.)

Professor Western studied the employment and earnings of ComALERT graduates, and compared them to those of a matched control group of Brooklyn parolees. The results of his examination are heartening. ComALERT graduates were nearly four times as likely to be employed as the parolees in the matched control group. ComALERT clients who participated in the RWA program had an especially high rate of employment (nearly 90%). ComALERT graduates also had much higher earnings than parolees in the control group.

While the results of Professor Western's research highlight the strong connection between employment and successful re-integration into the community, the personal stories of ComALERT graduates make that case, as well. For example, one former client, a 53-year-old Latino, Vietnam War veteran, was employed for many years following his discharge from the military. But then, he began using drugs, and his previously steady life derailed. His addiction and drug use led to his divorce, the loss of his job, and two prison sentences. The second, for a robbery conviction, lasted about one and one-half years. While on parole after his latest release, the client entered ComALERT and began receiving drug treatment from the professional ComALERT/CSSEDNY counselors. Through ComALERT, he also participated in the Doe Fund's RWA program.

He graduated from ComALERT, and after about one year, he landed a full-time job as a doorman. Satisfied in his job, he is very thankful to be in his present situation. He has remained clean for several years, and attends Narcotics Anonymous meetings to prevent relapsing. He used to live at one of the RWA facilities, but, while in the program, he managed to save about \$5,000. With his savings and the salary from his present job, he is now able to pay for a room of his own. He aspires to get his own apartment by the end of this year.

Another ComALERT graduate, a 36-year-old African-American, served over 15 years in prison for a robbery conviction—his only arrest. He had been using drugs for several months leading up to his crime. After his release from prison, Parole's Access program referred him to ComALERT for mandated drug treatment. The client addressed several issues with his ComALERT primary counselor, including drug use, child custody issues, and employment. The client, who already had housing, was referred to the Doe Fund's RWA-Day Program. He went through RWA training, starting with street cleaning, and then participated in RWA's Pest@Rest exterminator training program. He is now employed full-time as an exterminator for a private company, and is also drug free.

For both of these men, employment has promoted stability, self-pride, financial independence, and sobriety. They have become productive citizens and have turned their lives around.

### **Future Challenges**

While confirming the success and value of ComALERT's collaborative model, Professor Western's research has also helped identify aspects of the program that can be strengthened with the hope of thereby increasing positive outcomes.

In the near future, ComALERT will be offering additional job-related services on-site at the ComALERT Re-Entry Center, such as job readiness and resume writing workshops. The goal of these services will be to engage and retain a greater number of those clients who enter the program without full-time employment, but who, for various reasons, decide not to participate in the RWA program. Classes in computer use will also be made available on site. This will allow parolees, some of whom



have been incarcerated for several years, to develop marketable skills for today's quickly changing, technologically-driven world.

To further increase the employment prospects of clients, ComALERT, in partnership with Medgar Evers College,<sup>45</sup> will be offering on-site GED test preparation classes and transitioning-to-college classes. These classes may be particularly attractive to younger ComALERT clients and may help to raise the graduation rate of members of this age group.

ComALERT's Executive Director and Deputy Director already work hard at cultivating contacts within the business and labor communities in order to secure jobs for clients. Soon, a job developer will be joining the ComALERT staff to augment their efforts. ComALERT is also investigating possible partnerships with businesses and agencies, such as New York City's Department of Small Business Services, that would teach specialized job skills to ComALERT clients and assist them with job placement.

The Kings County District Attorney's Office hopes to increase the number of female clients, who currently make up only about 2% of ComALERT participants, even though about 7% of all New York State parolees are women.<sup>46</sup> The few women who have participated in ComALERT have a high graduation rate (77%). On-site services geared towards the needs of female clients—such as family counseling, sexual abuse and domestic violence counseling, and parenting classes—may help to attract more female clients. To that end, the District Attorney's Office is exploring the possibility of partnering with community-based organizations such as Family Justice's La Bodega de la Familia<sup>47</sup> to provide these services.

Obviously, all these services cost money, and securing adequate funding is a constant challenge. As already noted, most of ComALERT's present budget is covered by a grant from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, and ComALERT's subcontractors, such as CSEDNY and the Doe Fund, receive their funding from a variety of government and

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45. Medgar Evers College, <http://www.mec.cuny.edu>.

46. New York State Division of Parole, *supra* note 40.

47. La Bodega de la Familia, <http://www.labodegadelafamilia.org>.

private sources. In light of its success in reducing recidivism and increasing employment rates of ex-offenders, the ComALERT re-entry model should continue to attract fiscal support.

New York taxpayers pay over \$2.5 billion a year to maintain state prison operations.<sup>48</sup> In New York City, it costs \$67,000 per year to house an inmate in jail.<sup>49</sup> Each time a person is re-arrested and sent to jail, it costs \$183 a day to house the person.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, providing a person with ComALERT's drug treatment and case management services costs only \$10 a day and providing a person with wages for the Doe Fund's transitional employment costs only \$44 a day. These figures show that an effective re-entry program targeted at reducing the number of parolees returning to prison has the potential to save New York a significant amount of money.

Thus, not only does ComALERT meet the long-term goals of reducing crime and increasing public safety, but this enlightened approach to law enforcement also makes sound economic sense. The New York State government has wisely decided to invest funds in ComALERT. The District Attorney's Office hopes that the program's success will also help persuade Congress to pass the Second Chance Act of 2007.<sup>51</sup> This bipartisan legislation would authorize federal funding for re-entry programs throughout the country, and would mark a tremendous stride forward in encouraging collaborative programs between law enforcement, community-based organizations, and social services providers.

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48. In 2001, New York's prison expenditures totaled \$2.8 billion. JAMES J. STEPHEN, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, STATE PRISON EXPENDITURES, 2001, NCJ 202949, at 2 (2004).

49. According to the New York City Independent Budget Office, this figure does not include a multitude of additional costs attributable to jail operations, including, but not limited to, pension and health care costs of jail employees and debt services costs associated with jail construction and renovation. If all those additional costs are taken into account, the average annual cost per city jail inmate vaults to \$113,276 per year, or \$310 per day.

50. *Id.*

51. H.R. 1593, 110th Cong. (2007); S. 1060, 110th Cong. (2007). On November 13, 2007, the House passed its version of the Second Chance Act, and the following day, the bill was received in the Senate and referred to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary.

## Conclusion

Increasingly, district attorneys are embracing a more proactive, preventive, and holistic approach to crime reduction. Integral to that approach is a willingness to collaborate with partners, both within and outside the criminal justice sphere, in order to address the many interrelated causes of criminal behavior.

For district attorneys considering launching a re-entry program based on the ComALERT model, the Kings County District Attorney's Office has found the following steps to be key in creating an effective program:

- Learn about: who is coming back to the jurisdiction and in what numbers; which communities they are returning to; what social services they need, such as drug and alcohol treatment, transitional employment, transitional housing, vocational training, or family counseling.
- Exploit existing connections with prisons, with the parole system, and with the police. Channels of communication probably already exist, but talk to these entities about how a partnership, including one that involves rapid information sharing, could help connect individuals to needed services and ensure that they do not violate parole.
- Establish relationships with community leaders, faith-based organizations, and community-based service providers. Open a dialogue. These entities will provide links and services that are crucial in assisting the re-entry of ex-offenders.
- Form connections with transitional employment services, labor groups, and businesses within the community. Jobs are a key to success, but, given the competitive job market, may be difficult to come by. Educating these entities about the importance of re-entry and advocating on behalf of the re-entry program can help stimulate interest in the issue and generate employment opportunities.

- Create a program that can respond, to the greatest extent possible, to the specific needs of individual clients. Provide individual counseling if possible.
- Commit the resources of the District Attorney's Office to the re-entry effort—if not office space or a social worker, then at least the time and passion of an executive-level staff member. Assigning such staff to the re-entry program establishes its credibility and demonstrates law enforcement's commitment to the project.
- Advocate for a central location for the program, so that the delivery and quality of services can be better monitored and controlled, and so that a lack of transportation does not become a bar to accessing services.
- Track data regarding client outcomes. An examination of such data over the long term can help identify those parts of the program that are most effective and those that need improvement.

The influx of ex-offenders returning to their communities presents a stark challenge to district attorneys who seek to promote public safety and reduce recidivism. Too often, these formerly incarcerated individuals end up re-offending and landing back in prison—contributing to a cycle of destabilization within neighborhoods that are often impoverished and struggling. Scarce government funds get spent on criminal justice processing and incarceration, instead of on education, health, and social services.<sup>52</sup> By implementing a collaborative re-entry model such as ComALERT, a district attorney's office can steer these communities in a new and safer direction, toward social strength and fiscal health.

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52. See DON STEMEN, VERA INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE, RECONSIDERING INCARCERATION: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR REDUCING CRIME 13-14 (Jan. 2007).