

# ERIE COUNTY “TRANSITIONING CLIENT” REENTRY STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Erie County Reentry Services and Support Alliance Planning Group

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## BACKGROUND

### PROCESS:

In July 2013, Erie Together, our region’s collective impact anti-poverty movement, convened a group of stakeholders to explore the creation of a countywide “transitioning client” reentry strategy. The purpose of the proposed strategy is to support the successful reentry of formerly convicted county, state, and federal offenders into the community and individuals reentering a law-abiding life from criminal network activity so they can reach their highest potential. Stakeholders included law enforcement, social service, religious, government and educational professionals along with ex-offenders. This work was being done as part of Unified Erie’s three-pronged approach to violence reduction in our community.

The aforementioned stakeholder planning group, which represented a tremendous collaboration across several sectors, met regularly for nearly three years to identify challenges that transitioning clients face; elements that a successful reentry strategy must include; and desired strategic outcomes. They also discussed actions/milestones that transitioning clients must generally take/achieve in order for this strategy to be most successful.

In addition, the group reviewed local trends and important national data related to transitioning clients, to shed light on the importance of the issue. They considered unemployment, recidivism, and clients struggling with mental health, drug and alcohol and/or co-occurring disorders. The table below reflects national statistics for each of these areas.

It is appropriate to cite national numbers for two reasons: first, this data is not currently comprehensively tracked on a local level, and, second, there seems to be no indication that Erie County’s experience is significantly different, or better, than national trends. At the time of this writing, efforts were underway to begin collecting appropriate local level data.

**TABLE 1**  
**National Data - Transitioning Clients**

Unemployment		Data Source
	Studies show that unemployment for ex-offenders is 50% at 9 months to a year after release from prison	<a href="http://www.iwj.org/faj/faj-headlines/jobs-harder-to-find-for-ex-offenders">http://www.iwj.org/faj/faj-headlines/jobs-harder-to-find-for-ex-offenders</a>
	One year past release from prison, unemployment for ex-offenders is seen to be between 60 – 75%	<a href="http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/reentry/pages/employment.aspx">http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/reentry/pages/employment.aspx</a>

**TABLE 1**  
**National Data - Transitioning Clients**  
**(Continued)**

<b>Employment</b>		
	As a whole, the ex-offender population <i>conservatively</i> reduces the national employment rate by .9 percentage points	<a href="http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/ex-offenders-2010-11.pdf">http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/ex-offenders-2010-11.pdf</a>
	Possessing a criminal record reduced the likelihood of a callback or a job offer by nearly 50%	<a href="http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/reentry/pages/employment.aspx">http://www.nij.gov/topics/corrections/reentry/pages/employment.aspx</a>
<b>Recidivism</b>		Data Source
	68% of released offenders were rearrested for a new crime within three years; 77% were arrested within five years. Of those arrested within three years, 57% were arrested by the end of their first year out.	<a href="http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?y=pbdetail&amp;iid=4987">http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?y=pbdetail&amp;iid=4987</a>
<b>Mental Health</b>		
	Department of Justice study shows that 16% of inmates in the US prisons and jails reported having a mental condition or mental health hospitalization	<a href="http://www.courtinnovation.org/pdf/mental_health.pdf">http://www.courtinnovation.org/pdf/mental_health.pdf</a>
	33% of all prisoners have been diagnosed with a mental illness	National Center for Substance Abuse and Prevention. (2010). Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population. New York: Columbia University. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.casacolumbia.org/">http://www.casacolumbia.org/</a>
	27% of probationers reported having some sort of mental health condition	Crilly, J. F., Caine, E. D., Lamberti, J. S., Brown, T., & Friedman, B. (2009). Mental health
<b>Drug &amp; Alcohol (D &amp; A)</b>		
	65% of inmates nationwide meet the medical criteria for D&A abuse and/or addiction	<a href="http://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/552015/pdf/20150113e.pdf">http://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/552015/pdf/20150113e.pdf</a>
<b>Co-Occurring Disorders</b>		
	25% of prisoners with mental illness have a co-occurring substance abuse disorder	National Center for Substance Abuse and Prevention, 2010

**GENERAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Creation of the “Erie County Reentry Services and Support Alliance” - a “One Stop Shop.”

The planning group concluded that Erie County’s reentry strategy must include, at the onset, creation of a “one stop shop” to deliver important services and connect transitioning clients to appropriate resources and jobs in the community. To that end, they have proposed creation of an “Erie County Reentry Services and Support Alliance” (ECRSSA) to further refine and implement their proposed transitioning client reentry strategy. The ECRSSA intends to be a point of contact for any transitioning client returning to Erie from the federal, state or county correctional institutions, not limited to serving clients with certain “disabilities” as some programs do. Additionally, the ECRSSA should serve people reentering a law-abiding life from criminal networks.

They noted that for the ECRSSA to be most successful, the entity must work closely with federal, state and county correctional facilities so personnel from those institutions a) know that the ECRSSA exists, b) is accessible to their clients, and c) can provide important referrals and support services for individuals transitioning back into the Erie County community.

2. Mentoring Must Be Included Within Strategy. The planning group also concluded that a mentoring component – one where transitioning clients are matched with others in the community who could provide moral support and guidance - will be a key piece of any successful reentry strategy. They believe that the *Family Action Team* process, a successful goal setting and mentoring initiative administered through Erie Together, could be used with transitioning clients. They also agreed that the *Healing Communities Model*, a proven national model developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation with faith leaders from across the theological spectrum, could be used to engage local congregations in the restoration and healing of their own members who have been incarcerated.

3. Several Topical Areas Must Be Incorporated Into Strategy. The planning group determined that any successful transitioning client reentry strategy must address the following areas, and provided some guidance with respect to each. These areas are:

- Access to education
- Access to transportation
- Access to safe, stable, sustainable housing,
- Access to employment
- Addressing criminal record issues
- Creating a stable community that provides a positive and supportive environment.

More detail on these topic areas follows later in this document.

4. Indicators must be identified and monitored to assess the ECRSSA’s impact over time. Through much internal discussion and examining/analyzing other successful reentry initiatives, the group spent some time considering how the ECRSSA’s efforts and success can be monitored and measured over time. These should include, at a minimum, client recidivism and employment, and average daily cost of providing services through the ECRSSA vs. that of incarceration.

5. Transitioning Clients Will Play a Key Role in the Strategy's Success. The planning group noted that there are a number of things transitioning clients must do for this strategy to be most impactful. These include:

- Learning how to talk about their crimes so they can provide appropriate context for employers, housing providers, etc.;
- Taking a detailed look at their criminal records and correcting any inaccuracies;
- Understanding that accountability for their past is important, and acting accordingly;
- Establishing solid references through volunteerism, meeting financial obligations, and a consistent work history, etc.

The following pages detail the planning group's specific recommendations for the ECRSSA mission, vision, strategic goals, organizational structure and services.

## **ERIE COUNTY REENTRY SERVICES AND SUPPORT ALLIANCE**

### **MISSION:**

The mission of the ECRSSA is to provide support and services to transitioning clients through an intentional network of community- and faith-based organizations in partnership with the criminal justice system.

“Transitioning clients” are (1) individuals released from federal, state or county prison reentering Erie County after serving a sentence for a criminal conviction; and/or (2) people reentering a law-abiding life from criminal network involvement.

### **VISION:**

A county where transitioning clients are supported, empowered, and fully integrated into the community.

### **STRATEGIC GOALS:**

The primary goals of the ECRSSA are:

- (1) Increase access and connections to support services and assistance for transitioning clients.
- (2) Promote a responsible quality of life through positive family, spiritual and informal support connections.
- (3) Achieve safer communities through reduced recidivism.

“Recidivism” is defined as when an offender on probation or parole is returned to custody for new charges, technical parole violation(s) or both.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE:**

The ECRSSA organizational structure should include:

- A volunteer board representing human/social service providers and law enforcement professionals. (Note: this board should also serve as the “social services committee” of Unified Erie’s Gun Violence Reduction Strategy).
- A full-time executive director, who can also provide client intake services as needed.
- Three full-time case managers, who can also provide intake services as needed.
- A full-time “call-in” coordinator, who can provide necessary support to clients who enter the program through Unified Erie’s Gun Violence Reduction Strategy.
- Two part-time client advocates to mentor clients and add capacity to the volunteer mentor support envisioned through this strategy.

The ECRSSA should be housed within an existing local entity. Start-up funding opportunities should be explored from entities such as United Way of Erie County, The Erie Community Foundation, the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority and other local, state and federal grant sources. The

aforementioned, dedicated ECRSSA positions should be employees of the local entity within which they are housed.

Transitioning clients should be connected to appropriate support services based on their individualized needs. These services may include “billable services” already in place to serve Erie County residents (as resources permit) and may also include other services provided through contracted agencies chosen through a Request for Proposals process to serve the ECRSSA’s clients and funded through outside sources secured by the ECRSSA. The ECRSSA planning group helped compile a basic directory of service providers which will be given to the ECRSSA.

**GENERAL SCOPE OF SERVICES:**

The ECRSSA should provide both “intensive” and “non-intensive” services. “Intensive” services should be provided to a limited number of transitioning clients deemed medium to high recidivism risks through assessments used by the federal, state and local probation/parole professionals and the ECRSSA. They would then be accepted into the ECRSSA’s “Intensive Program” via a pre-release interview and application process. Clients who are not optimum candidates for intensive services may access other, less intensive services, through other ECRSSA referrals.

Decisions regarding admission into the ECRSSA’s intensive program should be made by the executive director, in conjunction with the client’s parole officer and the individual doing case management for the client within the prison system. Decisions regarding the services to which the transitioning client is referred should be made by a team including the ECRSSA executive director, parole officer and ECRSSA case manager (described below).

Intensive clients should be immediately assigned a Case Manager (CM), responsible for connecting transitioning clients to appropriate community resources and employment opportunities based on their specific needs. These connections may include the County Assistance Office; mental health and drug and alcohol counseling; housing, education and transportation resources; and access to necessary medications, etc. as indicated through the pre-release interview, screening and application process. The CM should also assist clients with other “life skills” -related needs and make appropriate referrals, such as financial literacy; landlord/tenant relationships; daily living activities; family, friend, mentor and religious connections; and healthcare, etc. Finally, the CM should arrange assistance with interviewing skills, resume development, “dress for success” attire, computer skills, and other job search-related needs. (See attached Flow Chart for more information.)

Transitioning clients not participating in the Intensive Program will not be “assigned” a CM, but will be provided less intensive support through the case managers who will make appropriate referrals on their behalf.

## **BUDGET – YEAR ONE**

The budget for the first year should include at a minimum, compensation for the executive director, three case managers, the call-in coordinator and two part-time client advocates, as well as funding for travel, training, supplies, miscellaneous costs, and overhead for the agency housing and hiring the positions.

## **SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following pages describe in more detail the planning group’s recommendations for ECRSSA’s initial service offerings related to the strategy’s key elements:

- Access to education, transportation, employment and safe, stable, sustainable housing.
- Addressing criminal record issues.
- Creating a stable community that provides a positive and supportive environment.

## **EDUCATION**

With respect to education, the planning group believes that transitioning clients must receive appropriate education and training necessary for sustainable employment.

To that end, the group recommends that the ECRSSA establish relationships with existing institutions in the community to provide transitioning clients with opportunities at every level, based on their individual needs. These entities include two- and four-year education and training providers and other workforce development programs, ranging from GED/diploma programs through post-secondary education and training, etc. Opportunities should include, among others, GED classes; attitudinal and personal development training; soft skills education; financial education; resume writing; interviewing skills; basic computer skills; job training; and higher education.

The planning group also recommends that the ECRSSA provide training to transitioning clients so each can successfully *navigate the local education/training system* and access appropriate resources. An important companion piece to this is development of an “education/training resource guide” so transitioning clients become more familiar with the wealth of education and training offerings that exist in the community.

The planning group also believes that the ECRSSA should understand current and explore new opportunities for education and training within the prison systems. (Entrepreneurship should be part of the consideration set.) This will enable clients to gain a head start on their future once they return to the community.

The planning group believes that the top educational challenges facing transitioning clients are financial hardship, lack of personal support systems, and self-efficacy issues. During their discussions, they spent some time generating ideas to potentially address these challenges. The ideas that garnered the most support from the planning group are offered below for the ECRSSA’s consideration and further due diligence:

Financial hardship to afford education:

- Identify mentors/advisors to assist in determining ability to participate or successfully complete educational programs.
- Identify/create free GED testing/training programs.
- Help clients do as much as they can before leaving prison (pre-reentry).
- Explore creating an “educational time bank” where transitioning clients can provide services to universities and/or other educational institutions in exchange for “credits” to “buy” education.
- Partner with educational institutions (universities and proprietary schools) to reduce tuition costs.

Lack of personal support systems:

- Establish teams of reentry volunteers – mentors - to work personally with transitioning clients to equip them with life skills and caring support. This could be done through the Healing Communities Model and/or Erie Together’s Family Action Team process and/or with assistance of the client advocates.
- Provide opportunities for transitioning clients to communicate in positive ways with other former offenders so that former offenders are also mentoring transitioning clients, and helping them learn from their experiences.
- Teach transitioning clients how to effectively develop a support system.

Self-efficacy issues:

- Identify or develop a self-empowering training program that deals with attitudes and personal empowerment.
- Focus on goal setting, broken down into small, manageable steps.
- Hold empowerment symposiums for transitioning clients on a regular basis, perhaps every three months or on some other manageable interval.
- Develop a “transitioning clients” support group like NA/AA to help identify and address issues.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

The planning group identified two significant challenges that transitioning clients face with respect to transportation. They are: (1) no license to drive (never obtained a license or license suspension); and (2) access to reliable public and/or private transportation.

The ECRSSA should provide troubleshooting assistance for licensing. While some paperwork can be done pre-release, individuals cannot get their driver's license while still incarcerated. The ECRSSA should make sure that what can get done pre-release does, help individuals identify legal issues that must be addressed prior to getting their license, and help them navigate the system to resolve their issues. Important resources to help facilitate this are PennDOT, the PA Driver's License website, local district justices, and local legislative offices, among others.

With respect to lack of access to reliable public and/or private transportation, the ECRSSA planning group recommends the ECRSSA explore the viability of the following:

- Creating of a "transitioning client job van" through partnerships with the faith-based community or social service agency(ies). This would require vehicle(s), driver(s), insurance, fuel, and a Memorandum of Understanding between the ECRSSA and its partner(s).
- A partnership with local temp agency(ies) who may be willing to provide transportation.
- Providing Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority (EMTA) bus passes to clients to get to and from work, appointments, etc., **and** exploring with EMTA the opportunity for route additions and/or changes to help get transitioning clients to existing companies where jobs are available. Part of these discussions should explore the possibility of and attempt to create a partnership with employers to help expand LIFT options to full-time workers (non-temp) and other county areas.

## **HOUSING**

The planning group discussed several challenges associated with transitional clients obtaining safe, suitable, sustainable housing. Of those, the top three were: (1) criminal record; (2) financial problems; and (3) public housing prohibitions.

Generally speaking, the planning group believes that transitioning clients must learn how to better communicate their story, establish references, and take responsibility for past mistakes while effectively communicating the person they are now. This will not only help them address housing-related issues, but also in securing employment and in other instances as well.

With respect to ECRSSA service, the group believes that the ECRSSA should provide transitional housing and other housing assistance, including a master leasing option between the ECRSSA and local landlord(s). Intensive clients should follow one housing tract, while non-intensive clients may have access to other housing options through ECRSSA referrals.

Intensive Client Housing Tract

Within the intensive client housing tract, clients with appropriate need should enter a transitional housing unit for 90 to 180 days upon release from incarceration. While in the transitional housing unit, clients should receive services and support through their CM as indicated in the “general scope of services” section above.

Once clients complete their 90-180 days in transitional housing, they may move into one of three options based on their unique circumstances: (1) congregate living, (2) master leasing, or (3) paying fair market rent.

*Congregate living* opportunities include boarding houses, nursing homes, Fairweather Lodge, Oxford House, moving in with family and potentially others.

*Master leasing* involves a relationship between the ECRSSA and landlord(s) in the community, whereby the lease agreement is between the ECRSSA and the landlord; the transitioning client pays a portion of rent and utilities on a graduated scale as the client becomes more established.

*“Fair market rent”* is one in which the transitioning client has the ability to secure rental housing on his own and pay the full amount of rent and utilities.

In order for the ECRSSA to appropriately address the housing needs of intensive and non-intensive clients, several goals must first be accomplished:

- ECRSSA must establish a transitional housing unit(s), or a relationship with a transitional housing unit provider, to serve intensive clients.
- ECRSSA must establish guidelines for determining appropriate placement for intensive clients once they complete their 90-180 day stay in transitional housing.
- ECRSSA must establish guidelines for referring non-intensive clients who have specific housing needs, but do not qualify for the transitional unit option.
- ECRSSA must develop relationships with a) congregate living options and b) landlords in the community. This will enable ECRSSA to provide viable referrals for both intensive and non-intensive clients. Landlord relationships must include those willing to enter into master lease arrangements with the ECRSSA and those who are willing to accept transitioning clients as tenants. (Note: A “summit” is planned for Sept. 2016 to begin to explore landlord-related issues and opportunities, as well as focusing on employers and a potential transitioning client “association”).
- ECRSSA must create formal written “agreements” for:
  - Transitional housing unit “procurement.”
  - Placement in congregate living situations (client and facility).
  - Master leasing agreement (client and landlords).

- Fair market rent (client and landlord).
- ECRSSA must put procedures in place for intensive clients to continue to receive supportive assistance for an additional 90-365 days after transitional housing stay.

Finally, the planning group recommends that the ECRSSA should do the following:

- Develop relationships with local landlords, perhaps through focus groups.
- Develop a marketing piece to engage landlords, describing benefits to them for housing transitioning clients
- Develop training for transitioning clients on how to be a good tenant and neighbor, perhaps in brochure form (ex. "10 Ways to Keep or Lose Your Apartment")

The ECRSSA planning group did some initial thinking around the "master lease" option as follows:

- Lease would be between the ECRSSA and the landlord, and should be one year in duration.
- Lease could be the standard Apartment Association of Northwest PA lease.
- All units must show City of Erie registration certificate.
- ECRSSA's CM, along with the landlord, should conduct pre- and post-occupancy inspection using GECAC's inspection form. Goal: protect all parties from fraudulent damage claims. Copy of pre- and post-occupancy inspections should be provided to landlord.
- Transitioning clients should be responsible for paying utilities, because this will give the client the opportunity to establish credit. If the client has credit problems, the ECRSSA should work with him/her to resolve old bills. ECRSSA may co-sign for utilities if needed. "Utilities" in this sense include gas and electric; not cable television. Water, sewer and garbage should be covered in the rent.
- Landlord must have contact information for the CM responsible for each occupant. ECRSSA should first work with landlords who already have experience in renting to this population, such as landlords working with Stairways, Erie County Care Management and Lakeshore. Once ECRSSA establishes a track record, it can reach out to other landlords through the Apartment Association of Northwest PA.
- Transitioning clients should pay a sliding scale to ECRSSA:
  - Months 1 and 2: Free
  - Month 3: transitioning client reimburses ECRSSA 10% of total rent
  - Months 4 through 11: and reimbursement increases 10% per month in months 4-11.
  - Month 12: transitioning client is paying 100% of rent to ECRSSA.
- During this 12-month period, transitioning client must:
  - Be working or seeking work and/or
  - Perform community service

- After one year, transitioning client has options:
  - Enter into a direct lease with landlord
  - Enter into congregate living situation
  - Opt to be “on his/her own” and find housing elsewhere

The planning group believes that the ECRSSA could begin with an intensive housing-related **pilot** as described below:

- Pilot could be run with 10-15 intensive clients in first year, coming from Erie County Prison and/or county work release centers (Gaudenzia, Gateway, etc.).
- Length of stay should be 90-80 days.
- Transitional housing unit could be (1) purchased; (2) leased to purchase; (3) leased space from Salvation Army or Erie City mission for men and Grace House for women, or some other local provider(s). Unit should consist of 10-15 beds.
- CM should help clients establish income sources and connect to other necessary resources (as aforementioned) to meet their specific needs and enable them to ultimately move out of transitional housing.
- Once transitional housing stay is complete, options are: congregate living, master leasing or fair market rent.
  1. Congregate living for clients for whom this option makes the most sense.
  2. Master leasing for clients unable to secure their own housing; one year in duration.
  3. Fair market rent, for clients financially able to rent directly from landlord.
- Once transitional housing stay is complete, intensive clients should continue to receive supportive assistance from the ECRSSA for an additional 90-365 days.

#### Housing options for Non-Intensive Transitioning Clients

ECRSSA may refer clients not participating in the intensive housing program to congregate, master lease, and/or fair market rent opportunities based on specific client situations.

#### **EMPLOYMENT**

The planning group identified a number of employment challenges related to transitioning clients. They are: a) ex-offenders’ sometimes unreasonable expectations regarding jobs and compensation; b) lack of employable skills and training; and c) lack of soft skills.

To address these challenges, the planning group recommends the following process to help transitioning clients secure meaningful employment. These services should be offered first to intensive clients, but should also be made available to non-intensive clients as capacity permits:

1. Transitioning clients should be required to complete a seminar(s) on skills needed to obtain and keep a job. The topics could include:
  - A. *Landing a Job when you have a Criminal Record*  
Assists the client in knowing how to talk about their criminal conviction, how to clean up their record and how to explain incentive programs for employers who hire offenders.
  - B. *Soft Skills Training*  
Helps the client understand and master the soft skills needed to be successful on the job.
  - C. *Resume Writing*  
Provides instruction and direction on how to write a targeted resume.
  - D. *Career Planning*  
Provides assistance on identifying the job seeker's skill set and expanding skills through training and education.
  - E. *Interviewing*  
Helps the client explore the fundamentals of a successful interview: preparation, practice and presentation.

These seminars could be offered through CareerLink® at the Erie CareerLink® office, or through another viable partner with appropriate staffing, experience and credentials.

2. Transitioning clients can then be referred to complete the *National Career Readiness Credential*. ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) is a portable credential that demonstrates achievement and a certain level of workplace employability skills in upon completion of three WorkKeys® assessments:
  - Applied Mathematics
  - Locating Information
  - Reading for Information

WorkKeys assessments measure "real world" skills that employers believe are critical to job success. Test questions are based on situations in the everyday work world. The ACT NCRC offers the efficient matching of talent with work—which helps people find great jobs, companies find skilled workers, and our nation's economy grow and prosper. This program is currently offered in Erie County by GECAC. This computer-based program is self-paced.

Both Step 1 and Step 2 could potentially be completed within 2-4 weeks.

3. Transitioning clients who have completed Step 1 and Step 2 could then be referred to a staff member at Career Link for Job Development Services.
4. For offenders who are more interested in training/education, the completion of the previous steps would qualify them for consideration of training money.

It will also be important for the ECRSSA to help employers understand the benefits of hiring transitioning clients as part of their workforce. These benefits include the idea that they have an additional support “mechanism” in place through the parole officers who are maintaining contact with clients who are still under supervision, and the CM who is also working with clients on a regular basis. The ECRSSA should seek to also gain input from employers known to hire transitioning clients so they may share their positive experiences with other companies.

The planning group believes the ECRSSA should seek input from employers known to hire transitioning clients to modify and strengthen this plan of action, and the planning group believes that some of this information will surface at the summit planned for September 2016. Additionally, the planning group learned the following from a similar program in Cincinnati called “Cincinnati Works”.

In Cincinnati, a core group of employers emerged who were willing to hire transitioning clients. These employers initially focused on unskilled jobs that are not industry-specific (cleaning, maintenance, etc.) before attempting to focus on skilled positions. After one to one and one-half years in a core job, clients get training for industry-specific jobs.

Program officials worked with their chamber of commerce to recruit employers. They focused on employers with over 50 employees with large numbers of unskilled/entry level positions (hospitals, colleges, retail, distribution centers, and others) that might otherwise outsource placement.

In Erie County, membership organizations such as the Manufacturer and Business Association, Erie Regional Manufacturer Partnership, and Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership can play a very meaningful role in helping identify employers willing to hire transitioning clients, and as a result, the ECRSSA should develop effective working relationships with these groups.

### **ADDRESSING CRIMINAL RECORD ISSUES**

The ECRSSA must find ways to help ex-offenders talk about their crimes appropriately, and position themselves in the right context when interacting with employers and others. Clients must establish solid references, which could come from past employers, clergy, prior volunteer opportunities, etc. Efforts must be taken to help transitioning clients understand the importance of accepting responsibility for their past mistakes, and being able to effectively communicate the person they are now.

Additionally, transitioning clients must be aware of their criminal records and correct any inaccuracies. The below paragraphs describe instruction for correcting inaccuracies relevant at the time of this writing. The ECRSSA, once launched, should update the following information (including fees) as needed.

**Local Charges** The Erie County Clerk of Courts Office is responsible for all county-offense criminal record keeping in Erie County. The Common Pleas Case Management System houses criminal records, which are available free of charge to the public with no subscription required to access. Transitioning clients will be advised to access a copy of their criminal records, and contact the Erie County Clerk of Courts to pursue any corrections to the record.

**State Charges** Transitioning clients with state charges must access a PA State Police record check which is kept on microfilm and electronic storage at the PA State Police Central Repository in Harrisburg. Send

the "Request for Criminal Record Check" (SP4-164 which can be downloaded from [www.psp.state.pa.us](http://www.psp.state.pa.us)) plus \$10 money order to PSPCR, 1800 Elmerton Ave., Harrisburg, PA 17110.

**Federal Charges** Clients with federal charges must access their NCIC "rap sheet." FBI Criminal Record can be obtained by sending your information to FBI, Criminal Justice Info Services Division, 1000 Custer Hollow Rd., Clarksburg, WV 226306 with an \$18 money order made out to the U.S. Treasury.

**Expungement of County Charges:** If a transitioning client is seeking to expunge county-related charges, he or she must file a petition consistent with state rules. If the charge(s) is not eligible to be expunged, the Clerk of Courts Office could refer the client to the Governor's office for pardon consideration. Additionally, dismissed charges can be expunged by the District Attorney. Paperwork and guidelines for county offense expungement appear on [www.eriecountygov.org](http://www.eriecountygov.org) website in the "Documents/Forms" section. There is a fee for filing expungement petitions, but this fee can be waived. The petition must attach a PA State Police record check, which is run online or through a state police barracks.

**Expungement Outside Erie County** For cases outside of Erie County, clients must go through the court that handled the case. State and county offenders would use the Clerk of Courts for the county where the charges were filed to start the process. For federal charges, clients should file an application with the Clerk of Courts in the district where the conviction was entered or write a letter to the judge explaining that a true miscarriage of justice will occur if you are forced to acknowledge your record to employers, landlords, and others.

It is important to understand that when charges are expunged, it does not mean that they disappear without a trace. For instance, the Common Pleas electronic case management system is open to the public for as far back as records were computerized, so information that existed prior to expungement can be accessed. This means that clients filling out job or other applications that inquire about possessing a criminal record should indicate "yes", because on a background check the charges could appear, and if answering "no", it could appear that the client lied on the application.

### **CREATING A STABLE, POSITIVE, SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY**

The ECRSSA planning group recommends the following to assist in the creation of a stable, positive supportive community:

1. Create a "former offender alumni association" that would empower transitioning clients to be part of advocacy process; provide venues to share their positive contributions. The planning group believes that this could begin to be addressed at the planned September 2016 summit.
2. Highlight employers willing to share their positive hiring experiences with this population and encourage other employers to hire transitioning clients.
3. Encourage parole officers to provide employers with training that can help them work with challenging employees.
4. Involve faith-based community and media to assist.

5. Effectively connect transitioning clients to supports (family, FACTs, Healing Communities).
6. Conduct transitioning client focus groups to identify additional ideas and plans of action.

### **MENTORING**

Finally, the ECRSSA planning group believes that mentoring will be critical to the success of all clients, and as such, recommends that every transitioning client be connected to a mentor. This can include the part-time client advocates, and/or mentors identified through the Erie Together Family Action Team Program ([www.erietogether.org/family-action-teams-and-mentors](http://www.erietogether.org/family-action-teams-and-mentors)) or a local Healing Communities initiative. Mentoring relationships should be motivational, encouraging, and address changes in thinking related to a need for instant gratification, etc. It should also support the transitional clients' need to develop transferrable skills for success.

### **CONCLUSION**

In closing, to reflect the aforementioned comprehensive transitioning client strategy, the ECRSSA planning group created a flow chart depicting the "path" clients will follow once connected to this "one stop shop". The flow chart is shown on the following page. The group concluded its work in April 2016 in anticipation of the ECRSSA's formal launch.

# ECRSSA

## Erie County Reentry Services and Support Alliance

