Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project
2015 Annual Report

A partnership between the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
It’s about more than just recidivism rates. There is more at stake.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are working together to shift our criminal justice system to focus on building strong communities, advancing restorative justice and promoting the human development of each person. We are striving to build transformative relationships that create better understanding and compel each of us to act. We want to go beyond recidivism reduction and promote the common good.

In 2015, we worked with 717 returning citizens (formerly incarcerated women and men) across our five states. This includes leadership training, public speaking, strategy and planning meetings, speaking to legislators, and much more. Not a single person active in our work in any of our states has been convicted of a new crime. But this isn’t our goal – our goal is to impact systems and structures that have led to over-criminalization, swollen state budgets to fund prisons and second chances that are out of reach. By just looking at recidivism, we reinforce dirty stereotypes like “once a criminal always a criminal,” and “those people have a criminal mindset.” It is these ideas that have convinced states to over-incarcerate, for some communities to be over-policed and for people to be fearful of other citizens.

We are bringing together Vincentians and returning citizens to work together on critical justice issues. In partnership with other faith-based and community organizations, we are investing in the leadership skills necessary to grow powerful and effective teams. Our teams are working together to build winning campaigns and develop innovative approaches to addressing the challenges of reentry.

The Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project is a partnership between the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. We are a national project, with five target states: Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Ohio, Florida and Louisiana. Together, we are bringing Vincentians and returning citizens together to re-center the public discussion on criminal justice back on families and back on people.
In every community where we operate, we are leading partnerships between the local diocese, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, community organizing projects, and returning citizens. We are investing the leadership of returning citizens to define and drive the work and campaigns in each community. Our organizing model is driven by Catholic Social Teaching. We are prioritizing the preferential option for the poor, and exercising our power as Vincentians to act in solidarity. Our focus is to invest in the leadership and organizing power of formerly incarcerated men and women. By listening, supporting, and engaging returning citizens as the core of our work, we develop stronger relationships and more compelling and inspired efforts.

Our role as Vincentians is to join returning citizens in collective action and advocacy. Never do we speak for returning citizens and impacted communities. We listen, learn and advocate with them. And in the process, we can be transformed. Catholic Social Teaching and the Gospel message of love requires that we allow people often left out of the public arena to lead on campaigns and issues that impact them. Through leadership development, we invest in the leadership skills, social capital and talent of returning citizens. We turn to experienced partners in community organizing to strengthen advocacy strategies and lead life-changing leadership training workshops and retreats.

2015 Major Accomplishments:

Promoting Fair Hiring and Ban-the-Box

We had big victories in Florida and Ohio: Vincentians and returning citizens are working to end barriers to hiring. In many places, this is starting with adopting Fair Hiring / Ban-the-Box policies in the public and private sector. Our leadership helped pass Ban-the-Box in Daytona Beach and Orlando, Florida, and led to the state of Ohio adopting the policy in June (through executive action) and signed legislation in December. There were also several of our returning citizen and Vincentian leaders working with our partners to promote a national Ban-the-Box policy. In November, after months of urging and petitions, President Obama signed an executive order to ban the box on executive branch job opportunities. Many of our local Councils have also adopted a Fair Hiring policy, and are hiring returning citizens in thrift stores and other positions.
Advancing legislation

Leaders in each state are working intensely on public policy reform. In addition to Ohio’s major legislative win, our leaders are backing critical policy reforms that would substantially improve the quality of lives of people affected:

In Massachusetts and Ohio, we are working to end the use of collateral sanctions on driving. Almost every state suspends the driving license of people released from incarceration. Licenses are can be reinstated, but usually after great financial cost. In partnership with the Massachusetts Catholic Conference, we are promoting a bill that would end the use of these unnecessary and redundant sanctions. This bill has passed the House of Representatives 150 to 0.

Leaders in Wisconsin helped launch “Restoring Our Communities,” or ROC Wisconsin. The ROC Wisconsin platform seeks to reform prisons and improve conditions, promote healthy and safe reentry to the community, and keep people from entering incarceration. This campaign was launched on November 2 with a prayer vigil at the Dept. of Corrections and a press conference in the state capitol.

Creating encounters that propel deep relationships

We are working to bring Vincentians, Catholics, and other people of faith together to grow relationships and share stories. In Ohio, we call these conversations Dismas Journey. In 2015, we organized eight such conversations, which brought together 131 Catholics with about 60 returning citizens. In New Orleans, we organized a Reentry Symposium with just over 200 Vincentians and people of faith, to better understand the issues and challenges formerly incarcerated women and men face. In each state, there is an example of how Vincentians and returning citizens are coming together, learning from each other, and seeing each other as equals.

Creating our own solution

We want to create strong and vibrant communities, and take work beyond recidivism and towards full human capacity. In addition to our thrift stores hiring returning citizens, we are working with private employers to hire returning citizens. And in Cincinnati, we have partnered to build a social enterprise that is employing returning citizens to learn the craft of printing. Social enterprise and other creative approaches that address issues of reentry emerge from the teams that we are building in each state.
**Vincentian Reentry Organizing Team**

Each one of our organizers have been impacted by mass incarceration in one form or another, from families and loved ones to their personal experiences. Their experiences and skills bring energy and clarity to why building more redemptive and healing systems matter.

**Mykal Tairu, Florida**

Mykal Tairu is currently the Program Coordinator in the state of Florida. Tairu is a recent graduate of Yale Divinity School where he earned a MA of Religion in May 2014. At Yale, Mykal completed a thesis that explores how religious institutions can engage inner-city communities and be instrumental at improving minority student achievement. He is a passionate advocate for criminal justice and ex-offenders rights. Having done extensive academic research within the field of criminal justice, he has been exposed to the harsh discrimination that ex-offenders face once they have satisfied their incarceration. Prior to Yale, Mykal earned his bachelor’s degree from Bethune-Cookman University where he studied philosophy. Mykal is married to Shanicka Tairu, who is a public school teacher in Daytona Beach.

**Benito Vega, Massachusetts**

Benito became involved in the Social Justice movement because of his first-hand experience to the barriers and obstacles that are in place hindering individuals from moving forward. His thirst for knowledge and understanding led him to volunteering with EPOCA (Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement). An organization whose mission is to break down barriers for those who have paid their debt to society by changing policies within the criminal justice system. It was there where his passion for organizing was ignited, which led the team in fighting and developing a New and Comprehensive Fair Hiring Ordinance for the City of Worcester and carried momentum into a state-wide movement on CORI Reform to reduce recidivism, create opportunities for millions in Massachusetts as well as to battle the mass incarceration problem in this nation.

**David Fields, Wisconsin**

In the past David served in the capacity of Prison Ministry Coordinator for the African–American Ministry Office in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee for 10 years. He received the Mentor of the Year Award in 2003 and has been recognized for his diligent service to the prison population in the state of Wisconsin, from the Chaplains Association of American and the Convocation of Jail and Prison Ministry as well as advocating for youth rights and protection in MPS, the Catholic Schools and in the Central City of Milwaukee. He received the Community Impact Award in 2009 for his efforts to help the poor, disenfranchised and those who are ex-felons to receive the dignity and respect that they deserve in our community. Out of all of these achievements that have been accomplished, he had the background of being a formerly incarcerated individual, serving four years 8 months in both federal and state prisons in Oklahoma and Texas. David is a returning citizen, but has never let this hold him down or let this be held against him.

**Dominic Duren, Ohio**

Dominic has helped organize returning citizens for advocacy for several years. After his own incarceration, he met countless other women and men struggling to prove their own redemption and get a second chance. Because of his advocacy, a number of returning citizens have found good job. He is most proud of his two young children, Dominic Jr and Eden. He is motivated to create a community where they can grow up invested in, loved, and living full and prosperous lives.
The Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project is a partnership between the National Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

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