**City of Little Rock Re-Entry Sidewalk Program**

**ICMA 2017 Local Government Excellence Awards**

**Community Health and Safety**

 The City of Little Rock addressed the problem of recidivism by creating the Re-Entry Program, which provides a job to newly released ex-offenders to improve their transition from prison to being a productive member of society. Little Rock’s bold and innovative program gives ex-offenders the opportunity to learn trades while filling needed city positions. What started off as a pilot program with ten (10) ex-offenders to build sidewalks funded through a new city sales tax, has now touched hundreds of lives.

**The Program**

 As the largest city in the state of Arkansas, the City of Little Rock is often the destination for ex-offenders when they are released from the Arkansas Department of Corrections and other correctional institutions. With nearly 200,000 residents, Little Rock offers the housing, jobs and hope that ex-offenders need to build a new life for themselves. Ex-offenders who are former residents of Little Rock, as well as those from other locales around the state, often choose Little Rock as a new home in order to take advantage of these opportunities.

Unfortunately, as the City of Little Rock learned, newly released ex-offenders can find themselves disconnected from the world in which they now find themselves. The Arkansas Department of Corrections does not require ex-offenders to have a job upon release and many do not enter a support system that helps them navigate the world they are about to enter. The Department of Corrections provides $100 in “gate money” to ex-offenders upon release but those individuals are then left disconnected from the skills and resources to make the extraordinarily difficult transition from inmate to productive member of society.

As a consequence, many ex-offenders do not successfully make this transition; instead they find themselves returning to a correctional institution on a parole violation or on a new conviction. Statistics show quite a significant recidivism rate in Arkansas. While statistics show the problem of recidivism in Little Rock, the results of the City of Little Rock’s Re-Entry Sidewalks pilot program showed that none of its participants violated parole or were rearrested at any time since joining the program.

**The Economic Impact**

 According to the Arkansas Department of Corrections in September 28, 2016, the average cost per year per inmate is $22,856. A 2014 study by the Arkansas Department of Community Correction shows a three-year recidivism rate for male offenders is 42%. Additionally, the City of Little Rock Police Department uses resources each year investigating crimes committed by recidivists while the municipal and state court systems (including prosecutors, judges, bailiffs, etc.) use resources adjudicating these crimes. Overall public safety also suffers when recidivists commit crimes threatening the security of people and businesses. Finally, tax revenues also suffer as a productive taxpayer is removed from society and placed back into prison. Clearly, the real cost of a recidivist is much more than the annual $22,856 per inmate cost to the Department of Corrections.

**The Opportunity**

 On September 13, 2011, the voters of Little Rock passed the city’s first sales tax increase since 1994. Prior to the election, the City Manager and City elected officials provided a detailed plan of how the City would spend each dollar of the increased revenue. One component was $4.5 million on sidewalk construction over 10 years. The sidewalk funding afforded an opportunity for the city to create a new program to help ex-offenders released from the Arkansas Department of Corrections to make the transition into free society. Hiring ex-offenders to construct the sidewalks allows the City to not only build infrastructure to connect neighborhoods, it allows the ex-offenders to build new skills as they connect to their new lives outside of prison.

**The Pilot Program**

 Upon passage of the sales tax increase, City of Little Rock staff investigated re-entry work programs from across the country to determine successful and unsuccessful efforts; staff also researched evidence-based programs that offered proven, measurable success. After this study phase was complete, the City Manager engaged local experts, existing social service agencies, community organizations and City staff to propose a pilot program. These efforts resulted in the launch of the City of Little Rock Pilot Re-Entry Sidewalk Program.

In May 2012, the City of Little Rock began advertising for ten (10) positions in the program. The City received 158 applications for the ten positions; this illustrates the great demand for this new opportunity. Beginning in July of 2012, the City of Little Rock Public Works Department trained the new hires in the following trades: general construction, sidewalk forming and sidewalk finishing. Participants earned $8 per hour and generally worked 40 hours per week.

Under the leadership of the City Manager, the City’s Department of Community Programs administered program referrals, inquiries, and assistance to the applicants. In addition it provided program oversight and monitoring for the sidewalk program. The City’s Re-entry Program Coordinator provided coordination between the various entities and also served as the central point of referral and enrollment in the program.

**Results**

Among the ten participants who started the program, all became proficient in the construction trades they were learning and successfully completed the six-month program. Over the course of the program, none of the participants were arrested at any time or found to be in violation of their parole at any time. One of the participants has since been hired to work at a construction company with others expecting to be hired to work for similar companies in the coming months.

Another component of the success was the presence of partners in the community. In addition to state agencies such as the Arkansas Department of Correction, Arkansas Department of Community Correction and Arkansas Workforce Development Board, the City partnered with non-profit service providers including Goodwill Industries of Arkansas, Central Arkansas Re-Entry Coalition and Our House, Inc.

Following the success of the pilot program, the City of Little Rock implemented a full-scale program that includes pre-release services, post-release employment assessment and training, and employment preparation opportunities. The City is continuing its efforts to provide employment training to re-entry participants.  The Public Works and Community Programs staff are working across the board to identify and partner with other City departments on providing re-entry candidates with training opportunities in additional fields of work.  Participants receive six to nine months of paid employment training within various city departments such as Police, Human Resources, Fleet Services, Housing and Neighborhood Programs, Public Works, and the Zoo.

The program has grown to become so much more than simply placing a few people in a job. Since October 1, 2015, over eight hundred (800) Little Rock residents have enrolled in the Re-Entry program. The City’s Re-Entry Coordinator has worked with those participants in a variety of capacities such as conducting a one-on-one pre-assessment with each citizen, providing a list of Central Arkansas employers who will hire applicants with a criminal background history, and making sure they know how to complete a job application.

Because the City cannot do this alone, the City Manager has worked to build partnerships with other organization. The Re-Entry Program has collaborated with some agencies such as the Office of the Treasurer of the State and the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance to provide life skills training. Other partners such as Arkansas Department of Workforce Services, Goodwill Industries of Arkansas and Our House, Inc., may provide additional training as well as employment opportunities. The City is also looking into creating a program geared specifically for those ex-offenders who are aged 18 to 30.

 The City of Little Rock prides itself on a holistic approach to public safety which encompasses much more than simply relying on police and fire personnel. The Re-Entry Sidewalk Program joins other innovative and successful comprehensive, cross-departmental efforts. Working in concert, these initiatives offer citizens of Little Rock increased safety and security. These programs also provide a greater sense of possibility for a brighter future, especially to those for whom hope has been in short supply.