Positive Programs

Safer prisons are within reach

Lessons from prison systems across the United States where innovative reforms are curbing violence, reducing staff turnover and improving public safety

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Lessons from prison systems across the United States where innovative reforms are curbing violence, reducing staff turnover and improving public safety

Alabama's prison system is in crisis. Federal courts have said so. Back-to-back years of record prison deaths show it. The people who live and work inside those facilities feel it every day.

Violence, understaffing, and overcrowded dorms are pushing the system past a breaking point, and while new prison construction continues, that alone won't fix the deeper problems. Alabama needs answers that go beyond bricks and mortar—answers rooted in what's actually working in other parts of the country.

This briefing lays out five real-world examples of prison reforms from other states. They're not theories. These are programs already in place that are reducing violence, cutting recidivism and helping staff do their jobs more safely and effectively.

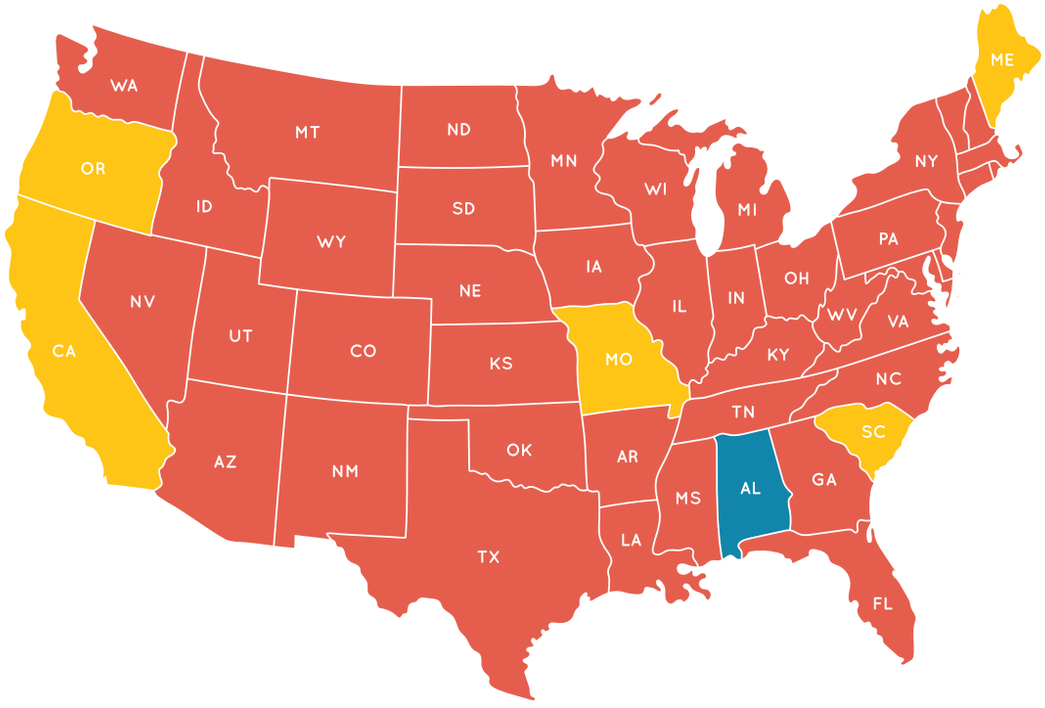
Take California's GRIP program, where men serving long sentences learn how to manage anger and take responsibility for past harm. Graduates almost never come back to prison. In South Carolina, a pilot program for young adults has cut the use of solitary confinement and assaults on staff. Missouri, Maine and Oregon are trying models that focus on rehabilitation and basic human dignity—with results that speak for themselves.

These aren't soft-on-crime experiments. They're serious efforts, backed by data, that reflect a growing national understanding: safer prisons aren't just better for those inside. They're better for public safety, for communities and for the people who go to work behind the fences every day.

Alabama has the opportunity to lead among Southern states in implementing bold, results-oriented reform. The following case studies offer a roadmap for change—one that can enhance safety, reduce legal liabilities, support staff retention, and, most importantly, provide incarcerated individuals with the tools to return home prepared to contribute to their communities.

It's important to note that none of the state prison systems highlighted below are immune from problems such as overcrowding, poorly trained and supervised staff, inadequate medical care, and institutional violence. Prisons systems across the United States are strained to the breaking point in dealing with some of the world's highest rates of incarceration and a shrinking workforce. But the case studies below prove that shifts in approach that take into account the capacity for change and leadership among incarcerated people themselves are transforming prison culture. If Alabama ever hopes to be free of the grip of the federal courts and the enormous costs of litigation - and lives - state leaders must look to innovative, non-traditional approaches.

If Alabama fails to change the culture inside its prisons, we're likely to waste more than $1 billion building new facilities filled with the same broken, outdated approaches that got us here.



California:
"It's for us, by us and about us."

Andrés Rodriguez entered California prisons at the age of 18, directly into a level four maximum security prison.

"I pretty much thought my life was over...I actually got worse while I was incarcerated," Mr. Rodriguez said. He became involved with the negative side of prison culture and what he describes as "prison politics," which resulted in him being transferred between prisons.

"I got kicked out of four level four institutions. I got transferred because I was being a security risk," he said, but changes in policy saw him reduced down to a lower level facility where more programming was available.

"I was exposed to deeper programming. More trauma based, and I did everything under the sun," he said. "But there was something missing. It was like trying to go around the four corners of a street block, but I would never get around that last corner."

In 2016, Mr. Rodriguez entered the Guiding Rage Into Power (GRIP) program that was being run at the time by the founder, Jacques Verduin, a Dutch-born therapist and social justice advocate. It began at San Quentin prison in 2012 and by 2016 had expanded into pilot programs across prisons in Central California, where Mr. Rodriguez was at the time.

Completing the program can take between 13 and 14 months. GRIP is peer-led by other incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and designed to help address anger, trauma, and violent behavior through deep self-exploration and emotional intelligence training.

"It really got me the pieces that I was missing, which was the impact of my crime on my victim and the survivors," Mr. Rodriguez said. What's special about GRIP, he explained, is that it places incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people at the center. "It's for us, by us and about us."

Mr. Rodriguez oversees all of the GRIP programs across California's central valley prisons. At each year's evaluation he's asked what his biggest

accomplishments are, and he said his answer is always. “Building safe containers,” meaning safe spaces where participants can openly share experiences and gain the emotional intelligence needed to make meaningful changes in their lives. “The biggest thing about any program is willingness. Has the individual suffered enough, been through enough, understand what it is to go to prison?” he said.

Mr. Rodriguez candidly discussed how when he first entered prison he described feeling as though he found a sort of family, felt protected and enjoyed prison culture, but he said he was “blind to what was really going on” inside those prisons.

Those “safe containers” he and his colleagues help build give a chance for participants to let their own walls down, to talk about the impacts of their crimes openly with others, who are grappling with many of the same issues. Facilitators in individual programs have varied backgrounds, and that’s on purpose, he explained, so that all the participants might see some of themselves in those guiding them through the process.

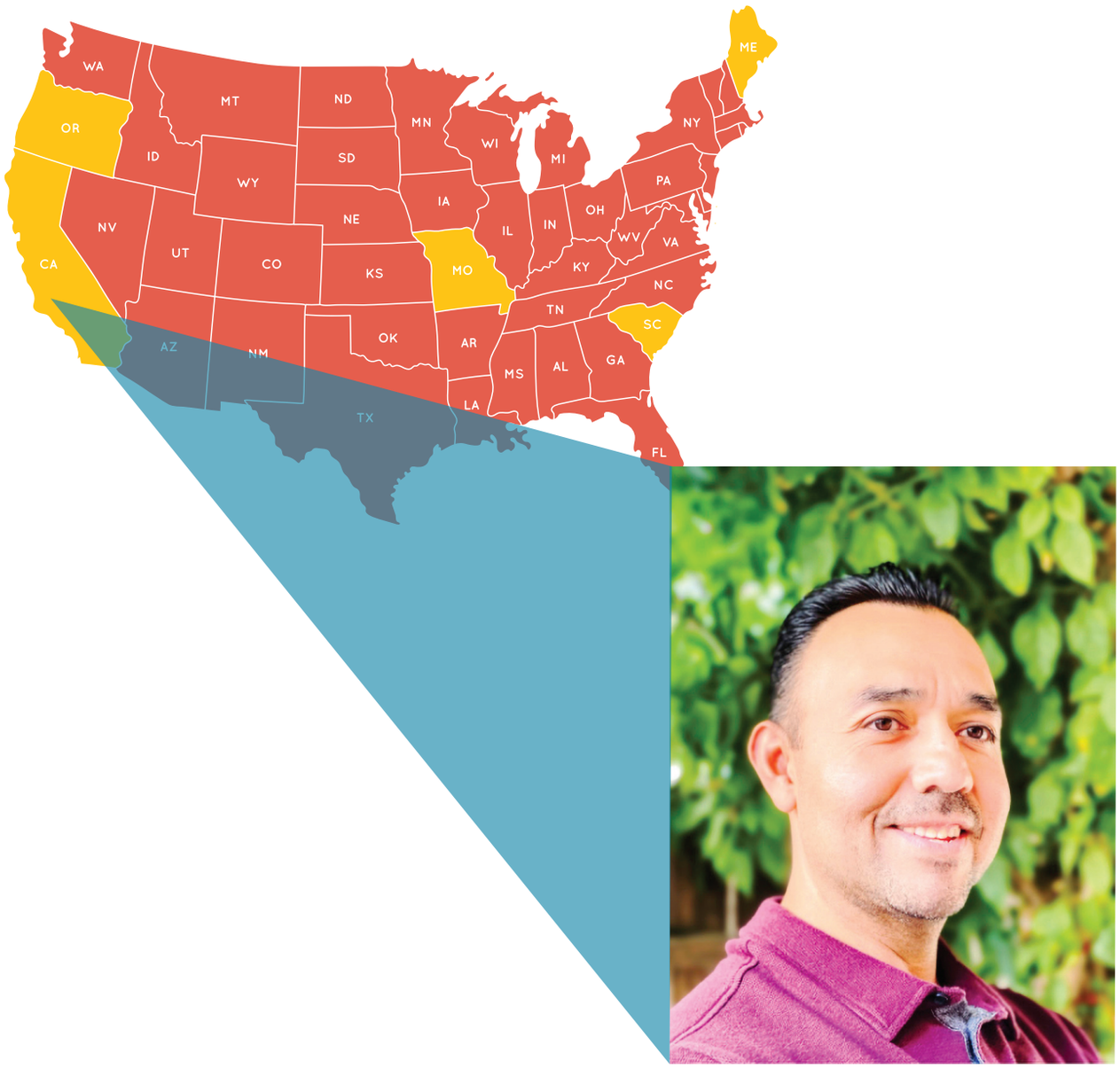
What’s it like to see participants open up inside those safe containers? “To witness it is life-changing,” he said.

The work of getting prison leadership to continue to support the program is a matter of constant cultivation, he explained, but it’s made easier because of the positive outcomes. He said when he was incarcerated and facilitating the program the warden at his prison was a huge supporter.

“It changed the whole culture to where they actually called from headquarters to ask, how is it that you have the highest numbers in the whole state of suitability for parole? That you have the lowest numbers of violence in the whole state? She told them that it was the culture that group has created here,” Mr. Rodriguez said.

Whereas before prison gangs would go to war with one another if someone was within a few feet from an opposing member, eventually the culture inside his prison changed so drastically that those gangs would meet to play contact sports together, break bread in the yard, and hold other events peacefully. He witnessed positive changes in not only the incarcerated participants, but also in prison staff and how they interacted with those they were tasked with guarding. “It’s very unique when you walk in sometimes and you run into an officer that you knew and they actually embrace you and shed tears of, man, I didn’t think this was possible,” he said.

Mr. Rodriguez has several family members who are prison officers and described one - his brother-in-law - as a “Robocop” type who came for a visit to his home one afternoon. “He sits next to me on the patio and starts breaking down into tears. He told me, you really changed my mind on rehabilitation



Andrés Rodriguez

Of the 1,765 GRIP graduates, 869 have since been released and just 12 have reoffended, giving the program a success rate of 98.8 percent.

and that it was possible. The way that you are with my sister. The way that you are with my kids. The way that you are with my dad. I always said, lock them up and throw away the key. There is no rehabilitation," Mr. Rodriguez said his brother-in-law told him.

His own crimes included an execution-style murder and bank robberies while he was a teenager, and to hear his brother-in-law say such things about his transformation "put the cherry on top of the cake for me."

He often runs into officers he knew while incarcerated, and many will tell him that he's made them a believer in the possibility of rehabilitation.

The first GRIP participants graduated in 2012, and over the following six years the program saw 106 graduates who were subsequently released from prison. Almost all of the participants are serving sentences for violent crimes, including homicide-related crimes. "Almost all of them were life-sentenced (with the possibility of parole), violent offenders," an earlier GRIP report states, noting that "none of them have re-offended. Up to this point, that is, our program has a recidivism rate of 0.0%."

Of the 1,765 GRIP graduates, 869 have since been released and just 12 have reoffended, giving the program a success rate of 98.8 percent. Students who complete the 13-month intensive program receive milestone credits, which is a credit awarded in California that removes one week from their sentence. Additionally, completion of the program can move a parole board hearing up one week for those who have an indeterminate sentence.

GRIP estimates that because it costs $130,000 per year to incarcerate a person in California, the program is saving over $600 million dollars annually "while improving public safety and preventing re-victimization."

While most graduates have yet to be released, the transformation created by GRIP compels them to actively work for more peaceful and safer prisons until they are free.

"When I was new at San Quentin," Ronald Broomfield, the former San Quentin warden and current chief of the state prison system's Division of Adult Institutions, told Mother Jones. "I would tour the yard and ask, 'What's working for you? What has helped you change?' And I kept hearing: GRIP... They're living in a yard where there's active criminal activity. And they're choosing to pull themselves away and form a supportive community. That takes real courage."

South Carolina:
Mentorship, Healing, and Accountability

On April 14, 2018, gang violence at Lee Correctional Facility in Bishopville, South Carolina exploded into a prison riot that left seven incarcerated men dead. An investigation later determined that gang activity, a staffing shortage, overpopulation, and poor living conditions were the catalysts for the riot.

Ofonzo "Zo" Staton, then incarcerated at Lee Correctional, helped clean up the blood and carry off the dead. Not long after the riot a new program began at the prison, aimed at changing the hearts and minds of the young people imprisoned there.

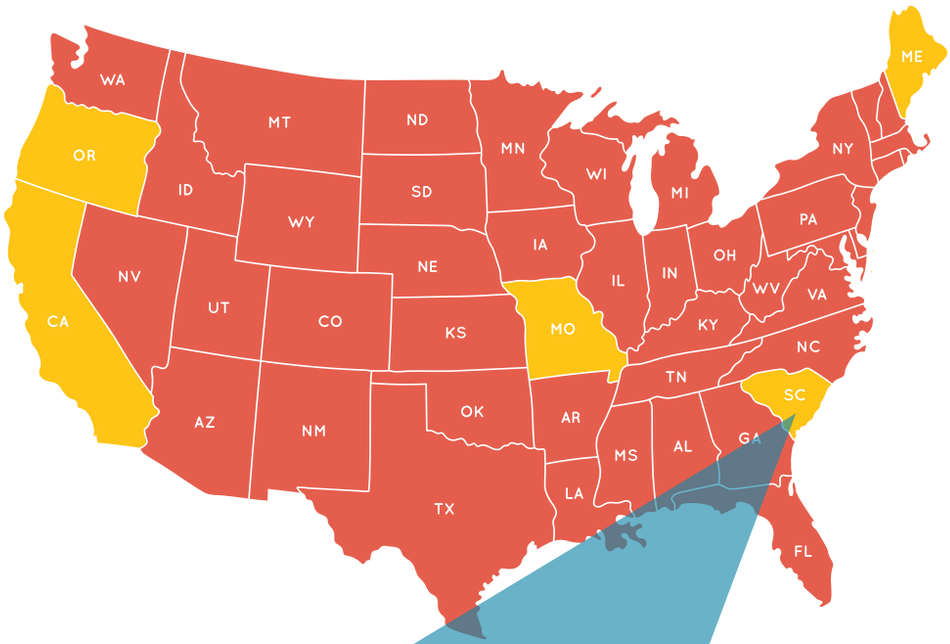
Restoring Promise began as a partnership between The Vera Institute of Justice[1] and the MILPA Collective.[2] It now operates seven young adult housing units for 18 to 25-year-olds in five states, including Colorado, Connecticut, Idaho, North Dakota, and South Carolina. Restoring Promise operates programs across all the states it's active in on a $2.5 million federal grant and an additional $7 million grant from Arnold Ventures.

Housing units are designed and personalized in partnership with incarcerated people. Older incarcerated people acting as mentors and teachers, establish rules and consequences for breaking them.

"It was more or less a culture shock. Bringing something positive to an environment that has so much negativity going on," Mr. Staton said.

The young people incarcerated in South Carolina face environments that are oftentimes punitive rather than rehabilitative, he said, so getting those young people to buy into the program is critical.

"So Restoring Promise was created to shift that reality, to promote spaces where mentorship, healing and accountability replace that punishment and despair," Mr. Staton said. "Ultimately, we want to see young people return home with skills, and not just scars from their time inside...We don't want to be a Crip. We don't want to be a Blood. We don't want to be a Folk. These affiliations. We want to be a community for one."



Ofonzo “Zo” Staton

Once a safe space is created for participants - no violence and no weapons - it can change how they feel about themselves and those around them, he explained.

"When you see an environment that is designed for comfort, designed for someone to treat you as a man, with human dignity grounded in human dignity, it gives you a different purpose. You will walk differently, and try to do things differently," Mr. Staton said. The environment has a positive impact on how those young men respond to other programs as well. "It's all about changing the culture of what prison used to look like, grounded in dignity."

The program does more than positively impact the participants, he explained. The new way of doing things has a real impact on prison staff, although it took focused effort to get staff, especially older staff who were used to more traditional, enforcement-based management, to buy into innovation.

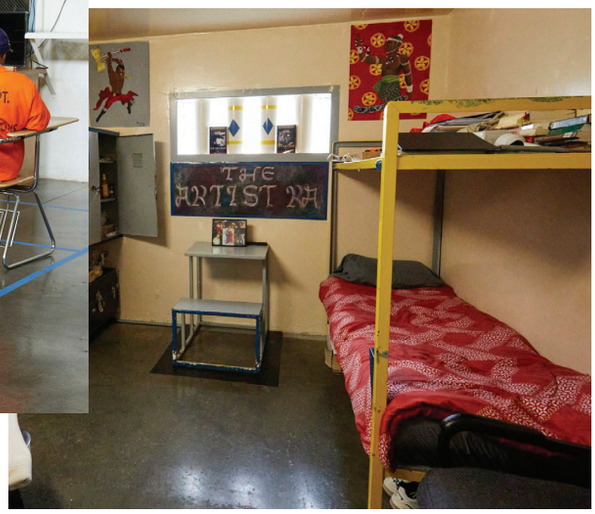
"It was kind of hard in the beginning to have staff buy in, because we were dealing with young people, and the mentality of staff with young people is that, these people aren't going to listen to you. They're going to get over there and mess it up. It ain't going to work," Mr. Staton said.

Once those staff members were trained to work in the new environment, however, buy-in became much easier. It became a community where officers

The common area of the Restoring Promise unit in Turbeville Correctional Institution.
Photo by Jade Wilson for the Marshall Project

Men in class at the Restoring Promise unit at Lee Correctional Institution. *Photos by Wilson for the Marshall Project.*

This cell in Turbeville Correctional Institution's Restoring Promise unit shows how men in the unit can create spaces that reflect themselves and what they care about.



coming in on shift might give a young incarcerated man a hug, he said. That's unheard of in general population, where "you're lucky to get a fist-bump."

"We were a community, and that was really the culture shock and how we progressed," he said.

Mr. Staton's first mentee in the program was a young gang-affiliated man who went by the name "Slim Black." He and other leaders in the program would sit with the young man and talk with him. About two months into the program participants will "circle up" in the mornings and in the evenings to check in with one another. One morning his young mentee told the group that he had something he wanted to say.

"He said that he no longer wanted to be called Slim Black. He wanted to be called Ricky. He went on to say that the last two months of his life in prison he would have never thought that it would have been that productive. That it would have been that impactful," Mr. Staton said. "And from that day on, from the time he went home, he wanted to be called Ricky."

The program remains active in two South Carolina prisons, but constant training of staff is critical to maintaining the positive impacts the program can provide, he explained. Staffing turnover makes that ongoing training challenging, but without it, the program can suffer.

"Leadership turns over so much. Knowing the concepts, the principles, the values. What Restoring Promise stands on. It's imperative those people who are affiliated with the initiative be equipped with that," he said.

But getting that buy-in from staff and doing the work of keeping new hires trained isn't as hard once the benefits are fully understood.

"It was more or less a culture shock. Bringing something positive to an environment that has so much negativity going on."

"The nature of an initiative like Restoring Promise is to decrease violence and increase safety, and that's not just for the residents. It's for the staff," Mr. Staton said. "What I tell them is, if you're looking to retain officers...lean on something like this. Give it a try."

Research conducted by The Vera Institute indicates that Restoring Promise does increase safety, both for incarcerated persons and for prison staff. Findings from a randomized controlled trial conducted in prisons in South Carolina found that the program "significantly reduces violence and the use of solitary confinement."

Researchers found that young participants in the program had a 73 percent decrease in the odds of violent charges while in prison, compared to their counterparts in general population, and reduced the odds those young participants would stay in solitary confinement by 83 percent.

While Alabama's prisons have experienced sustained, intense violence and large numbers of preventable deaths over the last decade, there has never been a riot with multiple deaths in the modern era. Whereas this explosion of violence in South Carolina prompted immediate interventions, the longterm, simmering dysfunction in Alabama has not led to any significant programmatic investments by the state.

"Across the country, states are facing the same issues. Old prisons. Cycles of violence...and a lack of just real opportunities for transformation. Providing a model like Restoring Promise creates opportunities for those transformations," Mr. Staton said. "Change is not only impossible, but it is necessary." Mr. Staton, 42, now works as a program and leadership coordinator for the MILPA Collective in Salinas, California. He spent 21 years in prison before his release in April 2020.

Missouri:
Physical Design Matters

A five-year randomized control research project in Missouri prisons called the Missouri Prison Transformation Project (MPTP) seeks to improve the quality of life and well-being for both the incarcerated people and those working in the prisons.

Funded by a $2.8 million grant from Arnold Ventures, the project is spearheaded by The University of Missouri's School of Social Work. Associate Director of Research and Associate Professor Dr. Kelli Canada and Dr. Beth Huebner, School of Criminology & Criminal Justice Director and professor at Arizona State University, lead the program.

Similar to models in Western European prisons, incarcerated people in the program, referred to as residents by staff, are involved in the physical design process for the living areas, two of which have already opened. The research project is still in early phases, having opened to residents n March.

There's been skepticism from some prison staff, but through training and constant work, most of the employees are becoming believers. "We've tried to think about buy-in as an ever changing factor," Dr. Canada said. Residents and central staff alike were involved in the design process, which she believes helped. "I would say most of the staff are pretty bought into this model."

"There is some healthy skepticism, but I think that's a reflection of lots of things," Dr. Huebner said, noting that one of staff's largest concerns is safety and security. "We've heard that a lot, so we do make sure that that is top of mind whenever we go into a meeting."

The researchers are working with a third party to provide international best practices training for staff, and that training is focused on staff wellness, which they believe also helps ensure prison workers buy into the changes.

When it comes down to the costs of such a program, researchers are also taking into consideration the savings such changes can create. Staff retention

When asked about the most beneficial aspects of the program, one prison official stated that "the number one [benefit] is that use of forces, staff injuries, staff assaults, sick leave usage, and self harm incidents have all gone down."

is a major focus of state prison systems across the country, with many prisons operating well below safe staff levels.

"And there's a cost to that. There's a cost to physical harms that happen due to use of force," Dr. Canada said.

In Alabama, those costs have been high, though largely hidden from the public, until recent reporting by investigative journalist, Beth Shelburne. Since the U.S. Department of Justice sued Alabama and the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) over the state's unconstitutional treatment of men in Alabama prisons in 2020, state taxpayers spent $57 million in ADOC legal fees for 124 lawsuits through 2024, and 94 of which involved complaints of excessive force, Shelburne reported for The Alabama Reflector.

Replication of the Missouri project would be a pittance compared to the tens of millions in legal fees that have soaked Alabama taxpayers.

The $50,000 budgeted to physically convert each prison's areas covered those costs, and that expenditure was kept low by using prison maintenance staff and some volunteer program residents to do the work, and the university's flexibility in selecting vendors to purchase needed items. The project's largest expenditure was the 15-month $300,000 contract with the third party vendor to train staff, and researchers are loowking at ways to reduce that cost going into the future.

"So part of what we're doing is building capacity with the trainers in-house, so that they won't have to rely on a third party to be able to continuously train people in international best practices moving forward," Dr. Canada said.

Training staff is one of the most critical elements to the success of such a program. "You can paint the walls and things like that, but the ideas of normalization and humanizing practices. That's really key," Dr. Huebner said.

What does a successful Missouri project look like? Having residents leave prisons and succeed in their communities is a huge factor in whether such a model works, but so is the wellbeing of prison staff, researchers said.

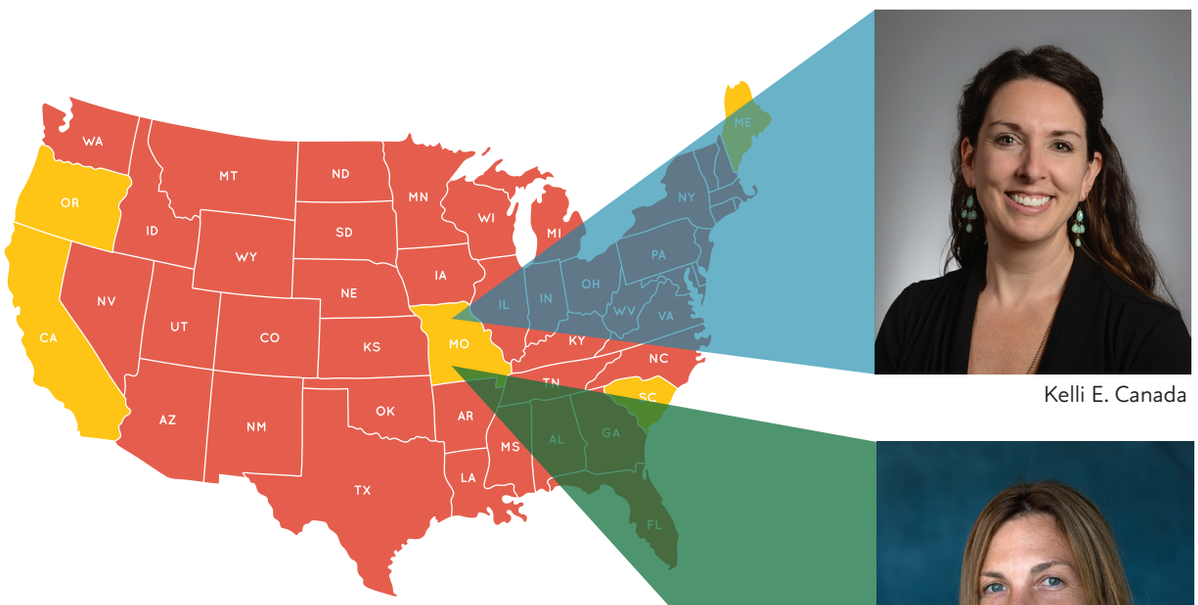
"People who live and work there are hurt, and we have high levels of drug use," Dr. Huebner said, so the hope is that the changes positively impact

the health, wellbeing and safety of the men and women working inside the fences.

Asked what advice they'd give a department of corrections considering piloting such a project, Dr. Canada explained that finding a partner outside of corrections leadership to help design and implement the changes is critical to making the needed changes. "Even some of the things that I think we thought were impossible, you get a whole bunch of people from different institutions, different ranks, different experiences and those things actually aren't that hard," Dr. Canada said. "What's really great is when we can kind of sit back and we can see a sergeant at one of the prisons talking to the assistant warden at another prison, and they're like...actually, we've done this before. We did this back in the 80s and it was actually really successful."

Any department of corrections considering such a program should have goals that impact both the incarcerated people and prison staff. "The goal is for people not to come back," Dr. Canada said of residents in the program. "And the goal is for people who are working in the facilities not to turn over so much."

"Because living conditions are working conditions," Dr. Canada said.



Kelli E. Canada

Beth Huebner

Maine:
Higher Education Options and a Garden

Maine Department of Corrections (MDOC) in 2022 made a large, system-wide reform effort called the Maine Model of Corrections that "focuses on humanizing the correctional experience, fostering collaboration between staff and residents, and preparing individuals for successful reentry into society."

It's a major shift from a traditional punitive system to one that emphasizes a rehabilitative and human-centered approach to incarceration, and is inspired by the human-centered approach to incarceration in Norway. Correctional officers are trained to work more like mentors or social workers, and their new role focuses on building trust, modeling positive behavior, and supporting inmates' rehabilitation.

Maine is changing the physical environment of the prisons as well, incorporating natural light, comfortable communal spaces and private rooms rather than traditional cells. A recent report[3] by The Marshall Project highlighted the many carceral facilities that do not have adequate natural light, which can result in serious medical problems, including "high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and an increased risk of diabetes, as well as a host of mental health problems such as depression and sleep disorders."

The Maine model also introduces comprehensive programming aimed at preparing residents for life after incarceration, including education, vocational training, mental health care, and substance abuse treatment as well as opportunities for restorative justice practices.

Dave Simpson, Director of Evidence-based Practices at MDOC, in an interview with The University of New England in 2023, said prison officials from many other states are visiting Maine prisons to see for themselves how the changes are positively impacting both those incarcerated and the men and women working in the prisons.

"I have meals with them. I always feel welcomed. They make me laugh. They make me think," Mr. Simpson said of the incarcerated people he visits.

"I've seen a shift from us versus them, to us and we. Clearly things move along much quicker when we can partner with the residents, the experts of incarceration."

"We're building a sustainable change. We're changing corrections. We're transforming lives," Mr. Simpson said. "The whole concept of treating people as human beings. Of valuing them as human beings. What a concept, and that's the direction we're going."

Jan Collins, Assistant Director at the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, said Maine prisons are understaffed, "just like every other system that I've heard of" and explained that while the Maine Model of Corrections is only operating in one "earned living unit" in one prison currently, the changes have been positive. "They have perks in there that other people don't have," Ms. Collins said, including weightlifting equipment and more time outside. "They have their own garden, so they can have fresh veggies whenever they want them during the summer. They can grow food. They can grow flowers."

Ms. Collins said that the more programming and time outside of cell "the more things that are setting people up for success when they leave. That's what we want to see more of."

"The other thing that is good about the Maine prison system is there is an active higher education component, and people do have access to computers for those classes," Ms. Collins said. The computers are heavily filtered for safety reasons. But a few selected incarcerated people are authorized to use them to attend virtual meetings with the advocacy group, including taking part in the group's staff meetings.

Resident Darren McKenzie (right) and Jesse Mackin water tomato plants on the grounds of the Mountain View Correctional Facility's garden in Charleston in June 2021. *Photo by Kevin Bennett for Maine Public*

"One of the men who has been a regular at meetings in the last few months said that the meetings showed him that there are people outside the walls of the prison who care and are working actively on their behalf," Ms. Collins said. "That knowledge not only touched him, but gave him hope. Sharing information with others on the inside also gave them hope. The folks who join our meetings, which is at most a handful, gain support, information, and also the courage to continue to be the best person they can be."

Unlike many states, including Alabama, Maine law does not allow for parole and there are no earned time or good time opportunities. The motivation and encouragement from outside can be a lifeline. "You can get a masters degree or even a PhD while being incarcerated and it will not earn you a day off your sentence. That makes these meetings even more important. The need for hope as a motivator for rehabilitation and redemption is universal. Some people can sustain hope better than others, but we all need it."

Resident Julio Orsini harvests tomatoes at the Mountain View Correctional Facility's garden in Charleston in Aug. 2021.

Residents Julio Orsini (left) and Jesse Mackin share a meal together with staff during lunch break in the garden at the Mountain View Correctional Facility in Charleston in Aug. 2021. *Photos by Bennett for Maine Public*

In Maine, as is the case in the other state prisons highlighted in this report, it's the incarcerated people themselves who are helping to lead the charge to change corrections. Just one example, residents in the earned living unit in Maine regularly visit with other incarcerated people in the intensive mental health unit for one-on-one counseling. With mental health care workers constantly in short support in Alabama, having trained, competent incarcerated people to assist in these units would be game changing.

"So the more peer-led work that's done, the better," Ms. Collins said. "[Incarcerated people] love volunteers. They love peer mentors, but they don't want the programming to come from the Department of Corrections."

Jan Collins

Oregon:
Assaults Down 73%

In Oregon, a 2015 investigation into Oregon State Penitentiary's behavioral health units by Disability Rights Oregon found that people were being kept in "tiny, stifling cells" for up to 23 hours per day, receiving few psychiatric services, and that the unit was pervaded by a "culture that promotes unnecessary violence and retaliation by correctional staff," according to a University of California, San Francisco study published in the online journal PLOS ONE in 2023.[4]

UCSF's Amend program began in 2015 and is based upon the Norwegian "normality" principle wherein life inside prisons resembles life outside. Amend staff led immersion programs in Norwegian Correctional Service for U.S. prison leadership.

In 2018, staff from Oregon Department of Corrections participated in Amend's immersion program in Norway and began plans to pilot a resource team at the Oregon State Penitentiary. In 2019, a healing garden was constructed, and officers were trained to refer to incarcerated people as residents or patients. Officers received additional training in de-escalation and communication techniques, and residents and staff alike were encouraged to greet one-another positively, and interact socially.

"It was just transformational in all aspects of my life, both professionally and personally," said Toby Tooley, who spent 14 years working at the Oregon Department of Corrections, including more than five years in the Amend program. The visit to Norway when he was then supervising special housing in Oregon caused a shift in his values. "What the experience in Norway helped me see was the humanity behind all of those challenges. Incarcerated individuals have equal opportunities to be integrated back into the community after they've served their sentences," Mr. Tooley said.

The shift in the way he thought about his role in public safety also opened his eyes to what he explained as some of his fellow officers having

"lost their way" despite many having religious, moral-centered upbringings. The job had caused them to lose a bit of their humanity. "What I really struggled with is the more I would have these genuine conversations, the more I realized so many of the officers were unaware of the change that had occurred in them," Mr. Tooley said.

And it was more than feel-good vibes. All of these changes netted measurable positive outcomes.

The 2023 study found that "there was a 55.7% reduction in mean rate of disciplinary infractions in general and a 73.9% decrease in the mean rate of assaults in particular" among residents in Oregon's program.

"Not surprisingly, then, ORT staff members credited the program with engendering a greater sense of safety in the BHU. When asked about the most beneficial aspects of the program, one prison official stated that "the number one [benefit] is that use of forces, staff injuries, staff assaults, sick leave usage, and self-harm incidents have all gone down," the study reads.

Mr. Tooley said that while every institution or agency is different and "some of them are very dark" while others are positive and want to move forward with impactful changes, each one believes they are unique.

"But their uniqueness does not define their ability to change, and that's the biggest challenge for leaders in corrections across the world," Tooley said. "There's just endless potential. Just bringing back humanity into the prison, I think, is the biggest step. Although the institutions, the agencies operate differently, the functioning of humanity is universal. The principles of humanity are universal."

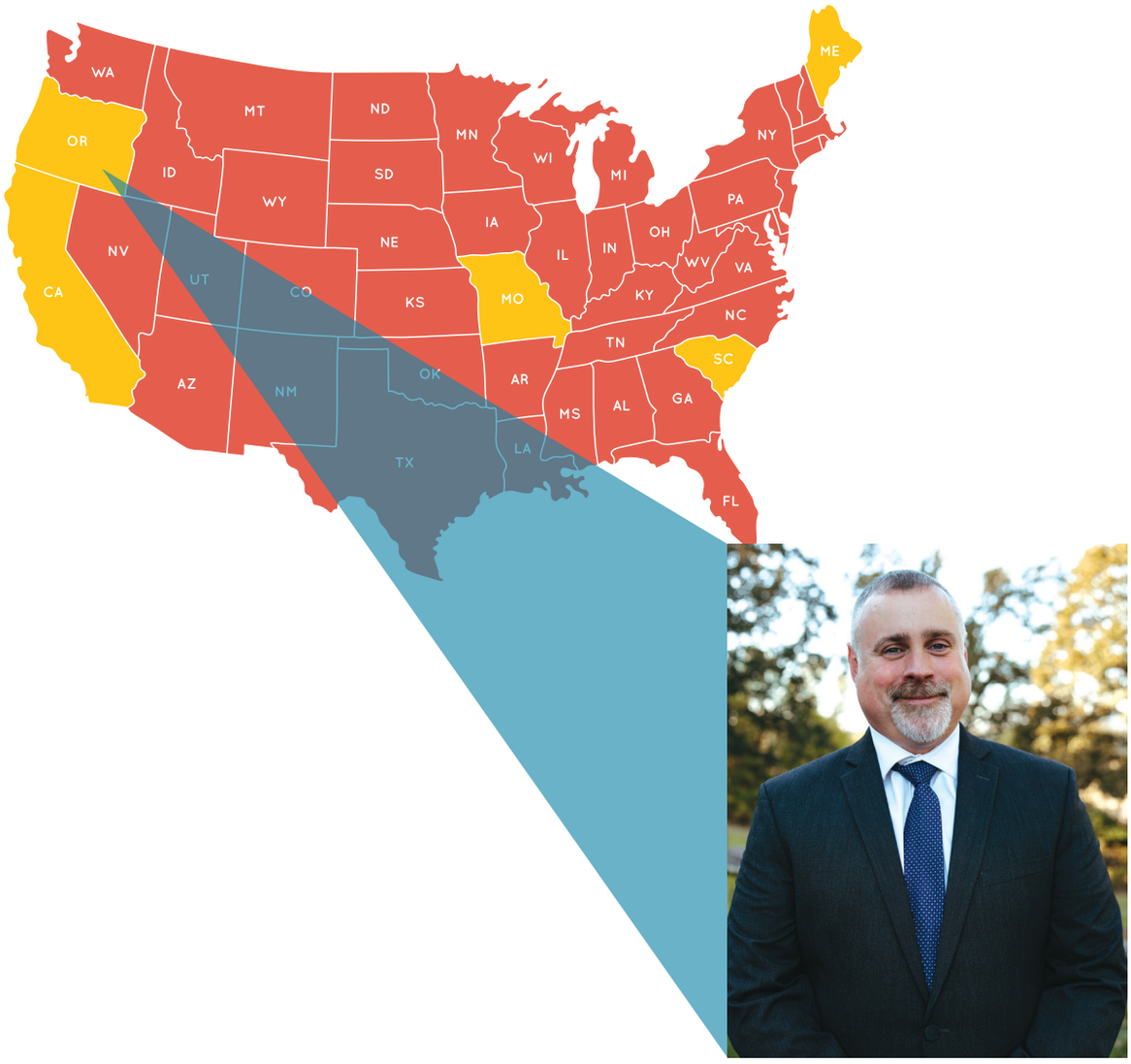
"Some of us work here. Some of us live here. We exist in this environment together. Why in the world would we want to make it more challenging for us to cohabitate in this environment together? Why can't we make it a healthier environment for all of us?,"Mr. Tooley said.

ODOC's The Oregon Way, formed as prison leadership there began rolling out the Norwegian model, states that the division promotes positive and healthy organizational culture within correctional institutions. It empowers staff to engage actively with incarcerated people, "guiding them toward rehabilitation and successful reintegration. By implementing innovative approaches and enhancing conditions, it aims to improve outcomes for both staff and adults in custody."

ODOC partnered with the organization that first shed light on the treatment of those in Oregon's behavioral health unit, Disability Rights Oregon, and for the next six years the group tracked progress and published reports on their findings.

"Incidents of extreme self-harm and traumatic cell extractions that were once common in the BHU were rare by January 2020," The final report reads. "BHU inmates received more effective mental health treatment in a new building with a level of dignity and confidentiality that was impossible earlier."

"At the end of the day, the officers are facing a conflict every single day. Every single moment, every single breath they take is going to be against an opposition of some sort," Mr. Tooley said. "But what if it didn't have to be that way? What if at the end of the day, you didn't feel exhausted, to the point where you feel like you have to drink or that you have to use drugs?"



Toby Tooley

END NOTES

1 The Vera Institute of Justice is a New York-based nonprofit think tank that focuses on criminal justice reform through research, demonstration projects, and partnerships in projects with other organizations.

2 The MILPA Collective is a California-based nonprofit staffed and led by formerly incarcerated people that focuses on social justice and opportunities for youth.

3 The Marshall Project's May 2025 report "The Unbearable Darkness of Jail" notes that jails in St. Louis, Cleveland, and Jackson, Mississippi failed to provide adequate sunlight and fresh air. A federal judge in California in 2023 ruled that San Francisco's jails violated the Constitution's due process clause for just those reasons.

4 The University of California, San Francisco study found that from 2016 to 2021, the rate of assaults dropped nearly 74 percent among residents who interacted with prison staff trained in the techniques.

This report was researched and written by Eddie Burkhalter. Elaine Burdeshaw and Carla Crowder provided editing. Keely Sutton provided copy editing. Boo Gilder provided design services.

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