



Transcript: Justice Matters—Advancing Corrections Through Justice Reinvestment: An Interview With Director A.T. Wall

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Justice Podcast Series is designed to provide the latest information in justice innovations, practices, and perspectives from the field of criminal justice. In this edition, James H. Burch, II, Acting Director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, talks with Ashbel T. Wall, II, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, about the concepts of reentry and justice reinvestment, and how these two practices are connecting the field of corrections with the law enforcement profession. If you find this podcast interesting, we encourage you to attend the *Corrections Information Sharing to Improve Reentry* workshop at the BJA National Conference, being held December 6-8, 2010, at the Washington Hilton, where Erin Boyar with the Rhode Island Department of Corrections will further discuss Rhode Island's information sharing efforts.

Jim Burch: Hello friends and colleagues. I'm Jim Burch for the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and welcome to another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series. Today we invite all of you to join in our conversation with Director A.T. Wall of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, as we discuss with him the concepts of reentry and justice reinvestment and how these two concepts are shaping or influencing the face of the corrections field today. Earlier this year, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections was approved as a pilot site for a Department of Justice Reentry Information Sharing Project, and they were one of only two states¹ in the nation that were afforded this opportunity.

Through this initiative, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections has worked successfully to design, develop, and to implement a set of electronic data sharing capabilities, or tools if you will, to exchange information among agency partners about returning offenders so that they can be successful. I am also excited to be here with A.T. to learn from his great leadership and experience in this field of reentry and corrections and to talk more about how the concept of justice reinvestment has the potential to connect together the fields of law enforcement, corrections, and human services to enhance our work together and to enhance community safety.

So A.T., I want to thank you for being here with us today and for agreeing to give us some of your time and to talk a little bit with us about how the fields of corrections and reentry are

evolving. So the first question that I want to throw out to you to start this conversation off is what do you think is the current state of reentry in the U.S. today? In other words, where are we now? And then if you could, I'd like to hear a little bit from you about where you think we're headed as a nation with regard to reentry and corrections, a little bit looking into the future?

A.T. Wall: It's hard to believe that prisoner reentry only emerged as a major approach to corrections about a decade ago. It feels to me as if it is not a fad, it is not temporary, it's put down roots. And it's become an organizing principle for the corrections profession and for our mission of public safety. I think that we have now begun to harness a lot of good will and good intentions, and the field of prisoner reentry is maturing. I think we are going to see more practices based on evidence; deeper, stronger collaborations; and a continued development along those lines.

Jim Burch: And we see this too—and with our recent good fortune to receive appropriations under the Second Chance Act, we're seeing a lot of energy, a lot of movement around the country, and a lot of mobilization around evidence-based principles related to reentry and corrections. And so we see this really as a very large change movement in the country to be smarter about how we're doing reentry and how we're doing corrections policy. You are familiar with the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), which is something that we've been funding for several years, together with some organizations in the private sector as well, including Pew Charitable Trusts [www.pewpublicsafety.org]. The Justice Reinvestment Initiative is something that is an initiative where we go into states and talk with them about how to restructure the way their systems are currently designed and to move away from an over-reliance on just corrections as the solution to crime problems. What, in your view, what does justice reinvestment add to this movement that we are seeing across the country with regard to reentry?

A.T. Wall: Our state was fortunate to be one of the early justice reinvestment jurisdictions funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and also some foundations. And I found that it added two very important dimensions to the work. One is that while prisoner reentry is a lot about practice and

¹At the time of this recording, Rhode Island was one of only two states participating in the pilot program. To date, there are three states participating in the program—Kansas, Maryland, and Rhode Island—and one county, Hampden County, Massachusetts.

strategy, justice reinvestment is about data, and evidence, so that it lends a policy perspective to the work of prisoner reentry. Second, it helps get jurisdictions out of the box. The box being—corrections has become very expensive and the outcomes have traditionally not been very good in terms of recidivism. At the same time, people are reluctant to advocate for decreasing prison populations. Justice reinvestment is based on the premise that those dollars will be reinvested in public safety strategies so that, in fact, this is not simply a question of releasing more inmates. It's a question of making sure that when they are on the streets, the public is safer. That's the second piece that I think is so important. The money is reinvested in public safety.

Jim Burch: That's a great point. And so, what I hear you saying is that we're taking this approach in a way that will help us ultimately be more efficient in terms of how we spend our resources, but we're not willing to jeopardize public safety in doing that.

A.T. Wall: I agree with you, and I think that's one of the beauties of justice reentry married to justice reinvestment.

Jim Burch: Absolutely, and I've referred to these two things coming together at the same time with funding that's now available for both the Second Chance reentry efforts as well as the justice reinvestment effort. I've referred to both of those recently as the perfect storm in helping communities reshape the way corrections is done.

A.T. Wall: It's a great alignment.

Jim Burch: That's great to hear. You know that you and I are together today at an event talking about the use of data-driven strategies and predictive analytics and trying to understand how best to prevent crime and sort of get ahead of these problems, and we're talking about it today in the context of law enforcement, but it's so encouraging that you are here representing the corrections world. In your view, what or how can technology in efforts like we're talking about today—data-driven strategies—help us be smart about crime prevention and crime reduction within the corrections or the reentry environment?

A.T. Wall: It's interesting, because as I recall the beginnings of the prisoner reentry movement, it had its origins in data. We knew that very large numbers of people were getting out of prisons and jails, flooding back into communities, but what really got our attention and the attention of policymakers was the early mapping that was done. Technology was used to actually identify where in communities former inmates were going, what the economic burden was, what the reliance on incarceration meant in terms of taxpayer dollars by million dollar blocks. And so it had its birth in the kind of data that identifies effective strategies, and I think that that continues to this day. Now, through the unprecedented amount of collaboration with law enforcement, those returning offenders can be monitored and strategies developed to support and supervise them through technology. The kind of predictive policing that's being discussed is based on knowing where ex-offenders are, knowing their relationship to certain communities, what their categories of offense are, and how to

be effective about providing public safety and working with them.

Jim Burch: And so one of the things that I've heard you say thus far is that the data and the technology that we're talking about here today—although we're talking about it generally today in the policing context or law enforcement context—is easily applied and adaptable into the corrections setting. And I think what is really important, that I heard you say as well, is that that data and that technology helps you in terms of accountability, but it also helps you as a corrections administrator in providing the supports that are needed so that people can effectively reenter communities and live pro-social lives.

A.T. Wall: Absolutely. In fact, the data that is being used here in Rhode Island, and that's been mentioned in the course of this conference, includes data drawn from police departments across the state, particularly in the city of Providence, but also, data drawn from the corrections department and integrated with law enforcement data so that we are able to take advantage of what each other has in terms of information and evidence. Furthermore, at least here in Rhode Island, that same database includes maps of all the community-based agencies, even the bus routes that lead to those agencies, so that not only is it being used to provide supervision, it is absolutely being used to facilitate service provision.

Jim Burch: That's great. And I'm sure, as a corrections administrator, you are facing some of the same budget constraints, if you will, that folks in law enforcement are facing. And so being smarter about how you do your business is the name of the game for you as well as anyone else.

A.T. Wall: One of the biggest challenges that we face right now are the relentless fiscal pressures on the states, and in almost every state, corrections is the largest consumer of taxpayer dollars. Prisons and jails are necessary, but they're expensive and the states don't have the funds right now. This kind of work that is being done, these collaborations, the sharing of data, the drilling down into what really does work in terms of supervision and support are, I think, essential to continuing to provide public safety as these resources diminish.

Jim Burch: Well that's music to our ears and it sounds like to me [like] you are essentially saying "we're all on the same team and public safety and justice and we all have to leverage each other's resources to do better."

A.T. Wall: Well put. And after 34 years in the corrections profession, it feels really good to be in these kinds of partnerships.

Jim Burch: It's a great time in that respect. Now, you have really come up through the ranks, a success story really within the corrections world and the justice and public safety world. So you've been in this business for some time, and so having that experience, what do you think are the biggest—just one to two of the biggest—challenges that are facing corrections administrators today?

A.T. Wall: Certainly the consequences of the financial crisis that has been occurring over the last several years. There is no money and no appetite to build and run prisons, and yet, we are responsible for providing a significant portion of public safety. And that balancing those two competing considerations is tough, and it's one reason why I think reentry and reinvestment are so important now. I think as we develop greater expertise in the area of reentry, we are facing the challenge of what I would call "the deep end." There are certain categories of populations which are particularly difficult to transition back to the community. They're people who inspire anger, fear—difficult populations. I think about reentry as regards mentally ill offenders as an example. The sex offender population is absolutely an example. And the challenges of how to provide public safety when people in those categories are leaving jails and prisons is a tough one.

Jim Burch: Absolutely, it is. One of the things that we've constantly tried to remind ourselves at BJA is that we have to always—we say internally anyway—always have our ears on, always be listening to the field, and seeing what it is that they're seeing around the country that holds the most promise for developments in our field and improvements in justice, and that it is our role to—after identifying those things through the lenses of the field—to then help others replicate those [improvements]. In your view, what are the most promising developments or efforts that you see today in terms of corrections policy and reentry in particular? Who's doing it right? What's happening that's right?

A.T. Wall: One of the things that I've always loved about my profession is the diversity of corrections. I say we're the hinge between law enforcement and human services. We derive our authority from law enforcement. We have no business being involved in someone's life unless they have violated the criminal law. The solutions often lie in human services. So we are a hinge between the two. And for many years, it felt as if we didn't really belong anywhere. Now, I feel what's especially promising is the sense that we have a stake and a role in both law enforcement and human services. So I think one of the most promising developments has been that sense that all parties have a meaningful stake and can collaborate together and achieve the common goal of public safety, be it police on the beat, be it correctional staff in the institutions, probation and parole officers, community providers of services—we're all in it together. That feels like a very important development.

Jim Burch: Yes, I agree with you. We see that really coming out of this effort to collaborate better across institutional lines, and we've tried to support that through our funding this year. For example we had a solicitation that was calling for projects that would allow information sharing or promote information sharing across not only jurisdictional boundaries, but across professional domains so that we can improve information sharing, for example, between public health and justice or between law enforcement and corrections. That's the kind of thing you're talking about.

A.T. Wall: Yes. Justice's policy of issuing grants and applications for grants that require that kind of partnership

and that kind of boundary spanning are a very effective way of promoting a public policy that makes a lot of sense. We've seen it as you described. We've also been fascinated when Justice issues a solicitation in combination with say the Department of Labor or the Substance Abuse [and Mental Health Services] Administration. It's sending us a message, all of us, "you need to work together."

Jim Burch: And I think, finally, we're not only talking the talk, but we're walking the walk and trying to collaborate on our side as well as expect collaboration at the local level.

A.T. Wall: Certainly. Our sense is that we pay attention to what happens at the federal level, and that's certainly the message that we're getting from you.

Jim Burch: Great to hear. That's great to hear. Just again, in terms of the . . . you know, you've talked about promising developments and how we're all working together. Is there any place around the country that you've seen in particular that you think are really doing something innovative or cutting edge to put that collaboration mindset into practice?

A.T. Wall: One of the things that's interesting to me about the model of government we've got in the United States is the notion that there are 50 "laboratories," each of which can do things a little bit differently, and that within each of those states, there are also numerous jurisdictions with their own culture and their own governmental structures. So there are lots of points of light out there and in order for me to give you some examples, I'd have to sort of scroll through my mental Rolodex, and I'm not sure I'm well equipped to do that right now. I will tell you that I am forever . . . whenever I go on the web, or I'm reading something in the professional literature, and I pick it up and I say, "that's something that they're doing that is interesting," I like to take it home and see what we can do with it.

Jim Burch: Absolutely, and that's what you know events like this are really all about, is bringing people together and hearing what other places are doing then going back and implementing. And we were fortunate last week in May in Washington, D.C., to have the Second Chance grantees initial conference where we brought everybody together to talk about the different things that they're doing. And I was encouraged to sit in some of those sessions and hear folks talking about what they're doing, for example, in risk assessment and needs assessment. And to me, that is such a huge area for us to move into and, for places or communities who have gotten a grant to now come together and hear what 25 other communities are doing around the country, and the process they use to implement new risk assessment measures—to me, that's what it's all about and that's where we are going to get our best opportunities for success, is in settings like that.

A.T. Wall: What I've discovered from attending meetings of that nature is that everybody does something well. Some places do a lot of things well, but everyone does something well. And you might pick up from one place something about a parenting program that was innovative. In another place, you might learn about the way in which risk assessment is

being done both in the institutions and as part of the transition to the community. In still another place, it's a creative partnership in job development. There is always something to learn.

Jim Burch: And that's what it's all about. Words of wisdom from A.T. Wall. Thank you so much for being with us today.

A.T. Wall: The pleasure was mine. Thank you, Jim.

Jim Burch: Thanks, A.T.

Thank you for taking the time to join us for this conversation. If you found the discussion interesting, we encourage you to visit the BJA web site for more innovative ideas and best practices at www.ojp.gov/BJA. From all of us here at BJA, thank you for tuning in to today's podcast. We hope you will join us again for another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series.

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