



Healing Communities:

A faith-based program for individuals and their families impacted by mass incarceration
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Healing Communities is a social capital framework for a distinct form of ministry to men and women returning from or at risk of incarceration, their families and the larger community. Healing Communities challenges congregations to become Stations of Hope for those persons affected by the criminal justice system through the mobilization of existing resources within the congregation, specifically the formal and informal networks characteristic of congregational life, and the religious ideas of forgiving, healing, redemption and reconciliation. Healing Communities identifies eight basic components of action for congregations, each built upon existing strengths, all performed within the existing ministry structure of the church. As one church official noted in reviewing the concept, "Any church can do this; every church should do this."

The Healing Communities framework responds to the key criminogenic needs of persons returning from incarceration: pro-social thinking/attitudes, social support/families and friends, and impulsivity/decision-making. By building relationships with men and women returning from incarceration- returning citizens- as well helping families to be a support system for their member coming home, Healing Communities congregations gain the trust necessary to impart new values, and the accountability necessary for making good decisions. The same social capital development has been shown to make a difference in children and adolescents as a preventative measure. (Trulear 2000; Branch 2002)

THE EIGHT COMPONENTS ARE:

1. Stigma Reduction and Welcoming Supportive Atmosphere

Through the development of educational and inspirational materials, Healing Communities offers assistance in bringing the issue of prevention, incarceration and reintegration to new visibility in congregations. The aim is to heighten awareness surrounding reentry, help families reduce the sense of stigma and shame over having incarcerated loved ones and create a welcoming environment for returning citizens. Specific resources within the religious tradition (such as the narratives about the criminal behavior or incarceration of Biblical figures) provide content for discussion.

2. Family Identification

With heightened awareness and reduced stigma, congregations identify a family or families within the congregation to participate in the ministry. Often, this is done through having an altar call for families of the incarcerated, member's disclosure of their relationships to incarcerated persons, or going to the correctional facility and having inmates identify their individual or family masjid, church, temple, etc. Creating a culture which minimizes stigma and normalizes social capital resources for marginalized persons and families makes possible such identification

3. Formal and Informal Support

Congregations are encouraged to provide support for the family of the incarcerated and/or at risk persons through pastoral counseling and providing a formal or informal support group to walk with the family and the returning citizen through the period of reentry. Special emphasis will be given to

supporting children of the incarcerated through mentoring and curricular resources (Sesame Street; “Prison Alphabet Coloring Book”) and supportive services to grandparents and other elderly relatives serving as care givers. Preparation should be made for the return of the incarcerated members and the shift in family dynamics.

4. Visitation and Family Connectivity

Congregations are to both assist the family visiting their incarcerated members, as well as keep in touch themselves, through letter writing and visitations. Sometimes families have trouble visiting because of distance. Congregational support can range from something as simple as providing transportation, or even some benevolent support if long distance travel is involved. In addition, congregations can assist families by accompanying them on the trip required in order to visit. Letter writing and sending cards, bulletins, sermon notes and other forms of written communication assist in family and congregational connectivity, which reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Clergy visits and visits from fathers have been documented as the types of visits most likely to reduce recidivism (Minnesota DOC). Finally, congregations can assist in keeping lines of communication open via telephone through financial support for the family.

5. Volunteering

Congregations are exposed to life skill development programs for communities, jails and prisons and encouraged to provide volunteers for these efforts. While many jails and prisons have churches that come in and provide worship services and Bible Studies, their chaplains often cite other needs that are equally as pressing. “I have a long waiting list of churches that want to do worship services,” declared one long time chaplain in Ohio, “What I need are volunteers who will help with life skills – how do you balance a check book, get a driver’s license, read a bus schedule,” he continued. “We need tutors to help with reading and writing, and mentors for good parenting skills.”

6. Mentoring

Mentoring is a valuable component of Healing Communities where volunteers serve as mentors to both youth and adults. These mentors are dedicated individuals that are willing to walk with and coach youth and even adults, some of whom are returning home to a world very different than the one they left. Our program uses the Amachi model of mentoring, which has been in existence for over 10 years and is currently operating in 40 states. Amachi Mentoring uses caring volunteers to mentor youth and adults who want and need another positive role model in their lives. Volunteers are asked to spend at least 4 hours a month with their mentee and commit to mentoring for at least one year.

7. Network of Referrals

Congregations are introduced to and connected with resources available in the community for persons impacted by incarceration. Given the needs of these persons, congregations must identify what organizations providing housing, education and employment training, health care assistance and other services that support successful prevention and reentry, and be ready to partner and/or refer. Having a referral network for services allows congregations to concentrate on mobilizing their assets of values and relationships.

8. *Public Policy*

Congregations are familiarized with organizations that address local, state and federal policies that affect the lives of the incarcerated and returning citizens and their families. This includes legislation and policies at all levels of government concerning such issues as prison and jail conditions, sentencing and available alternatives to incarceration, services and structures related to prevention and reentry, and disproportionate minority confinement.

Branch, Alvia. Faith in Action: Implementation of the National Faith Based Initiative for High Risk Youth, (Public Private Ventures, 2002)

Trulear, Harold Dean. Faith Based Initiatives with High Risk Youth, (Public Private Ventures, 2000)