

Roger Jarjoura: My name is Roger Jarjoura. I'm a principal researcher at the American Institutes for Research and a senior advisor for the Corrections and Community Engagement Technical Assistance Center. On behalf of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the American Institutes for Research, we welcome you to Second Chance Month 2023. And thank you for all of your efforts to improve the lives of young people returning to our communities from incarceration.

This podcast is episode two in the series on practitioner researcher partnerships for the evaluation of Second Chance Act programs. In this episode, I am talking with a representative from the division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in North Carolina and their evaluation partner from RTI International. In this conversation, we are discussing their current Second Chance Act grant and the evaluation that is underway through this strong partnership.

Okay. Welcome to both of you. Let's start. I'm going to have each of you introduce yourselves. Tell us who you are, what your position is.

Brittany Schott: I'm Brittany Schott. I work for the Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in North Carolina, and I'm the state contracts manager in our community programs division.

Debbie Dawes: And I'm Debbie Dawes. I'm a social science researcher at RTI International, where I direct the court systems research program and the Center for Criminal Legal Systems Research. And I'm leading the evaluation of R2R.

Roger Jarjoura: Thank you. So let's hear about what R2R is. So maybe Brittany, if you want to tell us a little bit about R2R and then Debbie, I'll ask you to talk about what the methods you're using to evaluate that. Start with you, Brittany.

Brittany Schott: Sure. R2R stands for Reentry to Resilience, and it's a model that was kind of co-created and developed and thought through by a team of people, some who work at juvenile justice or worked at juvenile justice. And its intent was to really focus on North Carolina's juveniles reentering from our youth development centers, which are our highest secure facilities for youth who have committed crimes.

And so what we've noticed in North Carolina was that there was a high recidivism rate for juveniles who exited youth development centers. And we needed a model about reentry, how reentry should be approached and what that needed to look like to try to reduce that recidivism rate, meaning they were committing crimes pretty soon after they were released. And so R2R was kind of born out of how we thought we could impact that. So including having workers who are more on an advocacy role as opposed to our court counselors who are really more responsible for compliance with the law and enforcing court orders.

So we wanted the youth to have somebody who was advocating for them. They go into the youth development centers, they start working with youth while they're there in order to build up, one, a relationship and a trust level that we thought may impact their ability to transition back into home communities easier. And two, that

person is looking for those resources, working with families, really preparing the community for that young person to come back. Because one of the biggest barriers for anybody reentering from a secure facility is that the community has to accept you back.

So you've gone, you've done your work, you've tried to change and you've used the tools while you were wherever you were, but there's harm that you did to your community in the process. And that can include your family members, your school, if you're from small towns, the police remember what you did. There's a lot of impact there. And potentially it's your neighbors, it's your business owners, it's your siblings. There's a lot of things that factor into how well someone can reenter a community. And so part of that prep is making sure that the schools are aware that those youth are coming home. What does that mean for the school? What does that mean for the youth? What did they do while they were gone? And so in some of the cases, R2R will take the kids on tours of the schools. So it's those steps that we kind of wanted in place where if you're sent to a facility and then you just come back to your community, there isn't much of a transition there that preps both parties, any parties for that reunification.

And then R2R right now keeps the youth on caseloads for about 12 months after their discharge. Continuing to work with them on connecting to resources, finding jobs and in some cases, the resources are individualized, obviously. So some youth may have graduated school by the time they come back and now they're at a place where they're supposed to be employed. And that may look very different than a 15 year old coming home who needs to finish their education. And so they work to build those relationships and connections in the community with the youth and make referrals for services that may also help increase those youth skills. And so it's really based on this idea that's how we thought re-entry should be approached. And now we're at a point of looking at the implementation of that model and what about that model seems to be working and potentially what do we want to add or take away from that model that could be more impactful for the youth that we serve. And I think Debbie can talk more about how we're doing those types of investigations.

Roger Jarjoura: So Debbie, over to you then. So tell us about what methods are you using as part of your evaluation of this program?

Debbie Dawes: Yeah, thanks for that question. So I think we started off with the idea that we wanted to honor the pilot nature of R2R. So this was a program model that was just getting off the ground, I guess mid 2017. And when we came with this evaluation in 2019, they were still very much in pilot phase. So they were, yes, delivering services but not fully baked yet, still in pilot phase. So we kind of took a learning approach to this. So a lot of evaluations, evaluators will come in, they'll collect some data, you'll see them in a couple years when those outcomes are ready to look at and you get a report. But we felt this was a real opportunity with this pilot nature of R2R to sort of embed sort of traditional program evaluation activities. I mean, obviously looking at implementation, looking at outcomes, but feeding that information back in near real time.

So almost embedding with R2R to see what we're learning and share what we're learning because no reason in pointing reporting back in three years, something you could have changed two years ago. So that was our approach. So again, traditional program evaluation activities, talking with stakeholders who are familiar with R2R in the facilities. Also court counselors in the field, talking with youth themselves, obviously talking with the youth, success coaches who are delivering reentry services. Looking at program information, programmatic information that is collected by the program, assessing fidelity of implementation. And then of course, looking at programmatic outcomes, primarily recidivism, because this is a Second Chance Act grant that we're working on. So outcomes in recidivism, definitely of interest, but we are also seeking to look at outcomes in school and education and other types of programmatic outcomes. So the feedback loop was really important to this design.

Roger Jarjoura: Great, thank you. Brittany, how did you come to find your evaluator and how did you build that partnership with the evaluator?

Brittany Schott: North Carolina as a state has had a large push of really increasing the relationship between state government and universities and research partners. As a matter of fact, there's a whole new office about it called the Office of Strategic Partnerships. RTI has actually been a long-standing partner with Juvenile Justice, and I think, looking back, RTI was part of those initial conversations where the state was trying to figure out, how do we do that? Because most people know state government tends to operate on its own over there, away from universities and research partners. I think RTI and Juvenile Justice's relationship was really born out of Juvenile Justice's desire to talk more about re-entry. We had a reform act that came. There's impacts anytime laws change, and so I think what we were starting to realize was we were doing a great job providing services on our continuum, trying to meet kids' needs and we can see the outcomes and good of that, but RTI got involved in doing North Carolina's baseline study about recidivism way back in I think 2015 or '16 and helped us really look at what was re-entry in Juvenile Justice.

From there, that partnership has just continued to grow. We haven't really shifted because we still are really focused together on a lot of re-entry things. RTI helped us do a planning grant as well where there were a lot of breakout groups and different work groups that were focused on different aspects of re-entry. That partnership has just blossomed because RTI was in there on our base level, and what it's really encouraged us to do is get more partners involved at the beginning. So if we're looking at a certain kind of model or we're looking at trying a new program, it's important that we bring in our partner before we get down the road and say, [inaudible] it working, but how can we more strategically build the plane as we're flying, but not feeling like we are just making it up as we go with no real data or support there? And I think that's how we've cultivated this relationship with RTI that's been really fruitful for North Carolina citizens in general.

Roger Jarjoura: That sounds great. Debbie, from your perspective, what have you appreciated about this evaluation experience, and are there things you would do differently if

you could go back in time and start some of this over again?

Debbie Dawes: Yeah, so much appreciation. One of the things I've appreciated most is the deep engagement of the program. Beyond this instrumental help that our team needed to carry out program evaluation activities like providing data which we needed and access to stakeholders and participants for interviews and focus groups, the program really embraced the evaluation and the learning opportunity we hope that we're providing. Putting your program out there for evaluation can be daunting and feel scary, so I really appreciated the willingness of the program to dig in with our team and the openness to the feedback we're providing and to making changes for program improvement.

If I were to do it again, I would spend more time and attention on understanding where in pilot development the program was. We assumed that because the program was up and running, it's delivering services, we're anecdotal, good feedback. We thought they were further along in the development process so we jumped straight into evaluation activities, when in fact the program had not fully developed some infrastructure, like standardized data collection practices. So I think if we had spent more time upfront understanding this, we could have shifted some of our project a little bit earlier than we did to focus on some data capacity building, which we ended up doing, but it would've been great to do that earlier.

Roger Jarjoura: Thank you. Brittany, for programs that are watching this and thinking about wanting to have a relationship with an evaluator, what should they understand? What is it going to take for them? What do they have to do to make this work?

Brittany Schott: Debbie said it, I think the word evaluation is always scary for people. I think it's because most of us view it, and especially if you're state government and it's something either you're funding is being evaluated or you're being evaluated, or if you're a program that's funded by the federal government, state government, the expectation feels like if we didn't perform, our evaluation is going to tell everybody that our program is terrible. That's what I think. When you hear evaluation, you think, wow, we better do a good job. It better say that our recidivism rates are super low or everybody's going to say, why are we funding you? And so it's, to me, really important that if programs or state governments or anybody is looking to do evaluation, that they look for a partner where they can really be a team.

We have a really unique team in the sense that myself, Debbie, and the program all meet together. We're very transparent and build trust among each other so that we can really be clear about what are our needs, what are we trying to get out of this evaluation, and what are we going to do with that information? What we've been able to do, and Debbie is saying, we would've loved to have done it earlier, but I think moving forward we'll be sure to do it more frequently in future projects. It started to become more of a co-developed evaluation. Obviously RTI is the evaluator and we provide information to that, but RTI has been really responsive if there was a shift in needs or if I had a question about what any of this means for Juvenile Justice, not just this program, but what does it mean for our re-entry, then we can craft some of the evaluation questions data collection to inform both parts

of what we want to get out of that.

I think you just want to find a partner in your research and your evaluation that you feel confident has your best interest at heart, and that you really feel like they're trying to help you achieve that. And I think that can really help evaluation feel less like, this researcher's going to tell us whether we should be funded, and more like, what can we learn here? How do we grow? We're doing a good job, we want to do better, and you can't do that if you're afraid of what the evaluator is going to say to you.

Roger Jarjoura: So this sets up then... So Debbie, let's hear from you. So what have we learned so far?

Debbie Dawes: Well, we're still waiting for those awesome recidivism measures, so that'll have to be for another podcast, but do have a couple of main findings that we've taken away so far. So, first, people familiar with the program see that the advocacy role that these youth success coaches play as hugely valuable to youth as they transition to the community, largely because they're not juvenile justice staff, like Brittany was saying earlier. They don't carry the compliance responsibility that Juvenile Justice staff do, which folks that we talked to felt contributed to coaches being able to establish a really strong, deep rapport with youth and their parents and really be there for them as they navigate the ups and downs of reentry.

And this is not to say that Juvenile Justice staff can't have strong relationships with the youth. They most certainly can and do. I think the feedback we heard very clearly was it was more about the degree of that relationship cultivation that was sort of qualitatively different and helpful.

The second thing is that the R2R model uses an evidence-based practice, where youth success coaches engage youth shortly after admission, so they're doing that quick engagement after admission. So those reentry conversations are starting quick. And then, further, their engagement occurs at least monthly with youth, often with their parents, during the entire stay, entire time a youth is in the facility.

And evidence from the evaluation suggests that this early and lasting engagement during that commitment period has an effect on reducing youth criminogenic needs above and beyond those of other youth who aren't engaged with a coach. So we see that criminogenic needs among all youth improve during commitment, but we see more improvement among youth who are engaged with a coach. And so I think if I were to generalize what we've learned so far, I think evidence suggests that R2R is a promising reentry program here in North Carolina. It's highly valued by Juvenile Justice staff, and the perception is that it does contribute to successful reentry for youth who are participating.

Roger Jarjoura: So, Brittany, I'm curious. So are there things that you can point to that say, "This is how we've used these findings and we've made some changes," or do you have plans that you're going to apply some of these findings?

Brittany Schott: Yeah, so I think Juvenile Justice really wants to use this opportunity to determine what about this model is working. And I hear Debbie alluding to some of those things. And so we want to make sure that, as we're going, we refine it, we shed anything that may feel beneficial, but isn't necessary. So, for example, there's still some question around if a youth is in a youth development center for two years because of whatever crime they committed or whatever's occurring, is it necessary for the program to engage from the beginning of that two years?

And so I think some of that is informing our system about how we determine when kids should re-enter, what decision points are there for that, and then how do you make sure programs are effective and can serve all the youth that need it for sustainability purposes? So I think we just really want to look at our policy and our reentry model and say to ourselves, "Are we really approaching reentry and ensuring that we're impacting the juveniles that we serve? Are we setting them up for success, and what are some ways we could enhance that? What are some other resources they may need?"

Because no one model is probably the answer to all reentry needs. There has to be an ability to access resources, housing, jobs, tutoring, whatever that may be. And so this is really helping and the partnership is really helping because the youth success coaches are also on the ground in the communities and they can feed back to Juvenile Justice, "Here's the type of youth that are reentering and we have no resource here for them for this need."

And so we've really used it in that way, and then we can take that back and create a plan and strategic approach to our continuum of services here in North Carolina to make sure that we're doing the best we can to connect people with either resources that are available or create resources, if we're able to, as much as we can to save our youth from coming back. We really don't want those recidivating events. We really don't want youth to come back through the system. And we just recently had a study that showed every time that we avoid a recidivating event, we're saving North Carolina about \$120,000 on each event.

That was the price tag put on one recidivating event by one kid in North Carolina. And our Secretary likes to say, "You could send a kid to Harvard for that." So we'd love to make sure that we are sending people on the right trajectory. It's what's best for those juveniles, but it's also what's best for the communities we serve. And since we're the Department of Public Safety, there's no other answer, but we have to make you safe by creating citizens who are fruitful who grow into people you want to be neighbors with. And it is our job to help do that. And so that's what we're really going to start to use this to breed more evaluations, but also to design additional programming to make sure that we're really helping youth reenter the right way.

Roger Jarjoura: Fantastic. So, Debbie, last question to you. So for evaluators that are watching, listening, what advice do you have for them? What advice do you have for other evaluators or even program staff who want to look for somebody to do an evaluation for them?

Debbie Dawes: All right, well, some general advice is what I touched on earlier. Spend that time upfront understanding the program model and implementation of the model, including some fidelity assessment. So often, we jump into looking at outcomes. Everybody wants to know outcomes without really understanding how well a program is being implemented or whether it's being implemented as designed. And not taking that time and not being strategic about understanding implementation is really a missed opportunity for providing helpful feedback to program implementers about the ways in which a program is running as designed or if or how to improve quality of implementation if it's not running as designed.

Also, when we don't understand quality of implementation, we really lack important context for understanding the outcomes we ultimately observe at the end. And I also suggest that evaluators plan to include the voices of youth participants. This can be challenging to do, but it's so important to hear from youth who are experiencing reentry, to ask for their feedback about the program and their programmatic experiences. This can be so key to understanding and developing greater program effectiveness and a more responsive reentry system as a whole. And then this sort of leads to my last suggestion, which is when it's possible, evaluators should look to ways to help reentry programs sustain some of the monitoring and performance evaluation activities, so the program can continue these activities on their own after the project and the evaluator ends.

So for R2R, we helped develop a participant satisfaction survey to capture ongoing feedback from youth, and that's going to live on beyond the evaluation. That's something that R2R will be able to launch on their own. Also before the end of the project, we plan to move our fidelity reporting to program staff so they can continue to monitor implementation, and again, that's capacity building that we're trying to do along the way. Thankfully, program staff are really, again, willing to take on these activities and learn how to do them and be good consumers of their own data and users of their own data.

Roger Jarjoura: Wonderful. So any final words from either of you? Anything we haven't asked about that you'd like to tell us about?

Brittany Schott: I think my last suggestion would be around finding an evaluation partner. I always tell people things like grant work, or evaluation studies, or implementation studies, or whatever you want to call all of this good work that we're doing is a year round job. So RTI and I and other partners that I work with, we constantly talk about where do we want to go, what are some future goals we have, where is the need in the system that we might want to take a look at?

Because we have those ongoing relationship building brainstorming sessions, one, it builds that relationship, but two, then when the opportunity arises, we're ready. So you feel less, I think, pressure about, so there's money available, what do we want to evaluate? We're already talking about that. Where are we going next? So after we finish this evaluation, what else do we need to talk about, because there's always more to learn? I think if people can start reaching out, having those

relationships, having lunches together, discussing those things, then when it comes time to implement the project, it feels like it's been in development for a while. It, I think, makes the projects feel like they're purposeful and you get out of them what you need.

So it's a year round job, I think, finding and cultivating those relationships with evaluation partners. It's not something that is easy to do if you're just going to ask for resumes and pick them, as you would from a job or a posting. I think you really want your evaluators to be understanding of your system and for you to feel comfortable that they understand where this project's supposed to be going, and the only way to do that is to really try to start working on it before you need them.

Debbie Dawes: Yeah, Brittany, I really don't even know why I'm talking, because you said that so wonderfully. I think this example of first engaging on that first Second Chance Act grant with OJJDP back in 2015 and how this has been such a great relationship in terms of its intentionality and purposefulness from that first reentry planning grant to an implementation grant, which grew into this reentry project we have now and then beyond. I think the intentional nature of this, because we are building from everything that we're learning from one project to the next, is really borne fruit in terms of actually improving the system.

So yeah, I think this partnership has definitely been more, from my perspective, more than a partnership just on paper, but really is a true... You were talking about co-design earlier, I feel a lot of that, co-design on the program piece, co-design on the evaluation piece. I think it's really born fruit for the reentry system and hopefully reentry youth here in North Carolina. Yeah, it's been a pleasure.

Roger Jarjoura: All right. Thank you both. Great conversation.