

Another Chance: How philanthropy can reduce recidivism

THE TAKEAWAY

Just over 40 percent of people released from Vermont prisons go back within three years, a destructive cycle known as recidivism. Philanthropy can intervene and help give former inmates a better shot at rebuilding their lives. Charitable individuals can support efforts that:

- Expand education inside and outside of correctional facilities
- Build employment opportunities for people returning to communities
- Fund supportive and affordable housing



Photo by Molly Walsh

Above: Matt, a resident of the Burlington Dismas House, says the support he has found there plays a big role in his progress.

ANOTHER CHANCE

The good news is that the number of people incarcerated by the Vermont Department of Corrections has dropped 37 percent since 2012, to about 1,315 individuals. The bad news is that even with this lower census, some inmates who leave correctional facilities cycle back. Or they commit new offenses that don't land them in prison, but do hurt communities, and undercut public support for restorative justice. Hanging over all these issues is the sad reality that fatal opioid overdoses nearly quadrupled between 2011 and 2021 in Vermont. Along with this tragic loss of life, substance use disorder continues to be involved in a range of crimes.

So how to help with these big, complex issues? It starts with believing in people and recognizing the importance of persistence. A thirty-something resident of Burlington Dismas House for formerly incarcerated individuals has learned lessons about both in his 13 months at the well-tended Victorian a short walk from downtown. With brightly painted trim and a blooming perennial garden weeded by volunteers, it's one of the nicest houses on the block. The home is part of a broader network of supportive housing operated by the nonprofit Dismas of Vermont, with additional locations throughout the state.

Sitting in the back yard on a warm summer evening, Matt B. talked about how Dismas House has helped him rebuild his life after methamphetamine use threw it into crisis. Flash back to 2020. Matt’s career had vaporized, he’d plunged into debt and despite periodically descending into meth-induced psychosis, he clung to the belief that he could “manage” his use of the deadly and disabling drug. “It’s really easy to get hooked on it,” Matt says now. After he was cited by police in Chittenden County for possessing and dispensing meth, he spent three months at the Northwest State Correctional Facility in St. Albans.

As part of a restorative justice program, he was offered the chance to get out if he agreed to live in a supervised environment. He moved into the Dismas House only because it seemed better than prison, he recounts. A little over a year later, Matt says the programming has been critical to turning his life around. “Having a support system is super important—people who actually care about you.” He’s in recovery and has resumed work in his previous profession. He owns a car, has made progress paying down his debts and saving for an apartment, and enjoys the community service that Dismas House residents do regularly.

All residents are required to pay about \$340 a month in program fees, to help support the program and rebuild their personal budgeting skills. With counseling and the support of Dismas House staff, Matt has come to better understand his addiction triggers and how to avoid them. “It’s people, places, and things,” he said. “There are certain people I just shouldn’t be around.” Matt now believes he needed prison and the pressure to live in supervised housing to pull his life out of what could have been a death spiral. “I think if I didn’t go to prison I might be in a worse off situation,” Matt said. “What led me here is a good thing.”

Matt is fortunate that he had an education and a solid career before his crisis. Many people involved in the justice system do not.

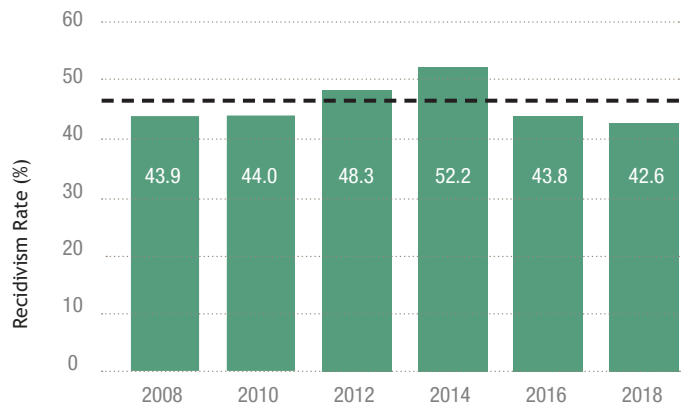
Here’s how funders can help give people another chance and make a difference for community safety.

Expand education and training

Data from the Vermont Department of Corrections (Vermont Corrections) suggests about 75 percent of inmates have a literacy proficiency below the 9th grade level. Sometimes this is true even when they have a high school diploma, noted Dana Lesperance, head of school for Vermont Corrections Education. Many studies have shown that education and employment reduce recidivism. Guided by this knowledge, Vermont Corrections education programs are working to help inmates gain credentials and improve academic proficiency so that they have demonstrable skills. Part of the work is helping inmates see that learning can have meaningful impacts on their lives when they are released. “Applying for jobs, understanding how to read a manual on the job, understanding how to read a renter’s agreement, understanding how to properly use banking—we connect it to life skills and then to education attainment,” said Lesperance.

While Vermont’s recidivism rate is about 20 points lower than the 62 percent national rate reported in a 2021 study by the National Bureau of Justice Statistics, we still have a significant problem.

**Vermont Department of Corrections:
 Recidivism Rate by Calendar Year**



	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
# prison sentence releases	1697	1653	1560	1201	1399	1831
% returned within 3 years for 90+ days (recidivated)	43.9	44.0	48.3	52.2	43.8	42.6



A 2021 survey by the University of Vermont found that few inmates feel prison does a good job preparing them for life when they leave corrections, and many say their time behind bars is unproductive. The survey at the Southern State Correctional Facility in Springfield was conducted as part of a promising effort to promote the well-being of both inmates and correctional officers. The effort is part of a multi-state collaboration spearheaded by the Urban Institute's Prison Research and Innovation Initiative.

"Education technology is a big barrier when it comes to corrections education."

These results are a reminder that there is much work to do to meet the rehabilitative goals of prison.

Still, there are signs of promise. Programs such as Community College of Vermont's ReSET VT at Northern State Correctional Facility in Newport, which received funding from the Vermont Community Foundation and its supporting organization the McClure Foundation, have helped expand access to college and career training while people are incarcerated and when they leave prison. Programs such as this deserve more support, as do efforts to bring corrections education into the modern era. Corrections needs partners that could fill in funding gaps and help improve digital learning in a range of ways, said Lesperance. "Education technology. That is a big barrier in the nation for corrections education."

Build employment opportunities

Many nonprofit and government leaders say that Vermont's low unemployment and strong demand

for workers have made it easier for people leaving prison to find jobs. That's a good development. As the Brookings Institute noted in a white paper, "access to legal employment is key to reducing recidivism and the post-prison social disabilities that returning citizens endure." But there's still work to do—and opportunities for charitable individuals to give—in a way that helps former inmates succeed in the workplace and move up the employment ladder.

Working Fields, a Vermont staffing agency that focuses on helping people who have faced addiction and/or incarceration in their past, is one of the organizations making progress. The certified B Corp, which has received mission investing funds from the Vermont Community Foundation, places workers with 80 employers across the state. For people coming out of corrections, the first step is a good conversation with their account manager. Are they in recovery, and if so, where in the journey? What level of stability do they have in their lives? What might get in the way of them getting a job? For example, some employers won't take someone who has a domestic assault conviction.

"It's really just giving chances."

"Our employers are across the board in terms of what they will and won't take," said Mickey Wiles, founder and CEO of Working Fields. But a growing number of employers are on board with the basic premise of helping formerly incarcerated individuals succeed in the working world, he added. "It's really just giving chances." Working Fields helps people thrive in their jobs by providing peer-coaching, encouragement, and referrals to assist with housing, childcare, and transportation.



The agency also works with employers where the top leadership is on board with the program, but some employees are not. They don't always welcome the person who comes through Working Fields and occasionally some real harassment has occurred, said Wiles. "They say 'how can you be hiring that person; do you know what they've done?'" Wiles explained.

Employers can reduce that problem by working on cultural change and investing time in education for staff about the goals and benefits of the program. "There still is a long way to go," Wiles said. He's also observed the need for funds that help people cover their living expenses as they pursue certificates or education to advance their career. "That's a big gap that we have."

Fund supportive and affordable housing

It used to be that people who lived at the network of Dismas Houses in Vermont stayed a few months. But for several reasons, including the scarcity of affordable and market-rate housing, many residents in the network's five homes across the state are staying two years or even three. Matt hopes to live at the Burlington Dismas House for another year, for example. There are some benefits to the longer stays: People living in Dismas Houses have a very low recidivism rate, between five percent and ten percent, said Jim Curran, executive director of the statewide nonprofit Dismas of Vermont. But as residents stay in place, it creates a "bottleneck" that makes it harder for new residents to move in. Across Vermont there is a general shortage of supervised housing for people leaving correctional facilities.

Dismas of Vermont, which can house about 45 people statewide, recently opened a six-bed facility for women in Rutland, with help from the Vermont Women's Fund at the Vermont Community Foundation. The nonprofit is considering opening additional facilities and is also weighing the possibility of leasing or buying rental property that could serve as the next stop for residents who are ready to leave the group home setting but

have nowhere to go. Someone could be extremely successful for two years at Dismas House but "if they don't have a sustainable income to support a fair market value apartment, where do they go? And that I think is overwhelming. It's just a really hard goal for anybody," Curran said.

People with a criminal record are often denied admission initially to public housing facilities but they can appeal and sometimes be admitted, he added. Still, the initial denial stops many people from pursuing the application further, Curran said. "They've already accepted that they are not allowed, that they are not welcome. Even though that's not always the case." Funding for organizations that provide supportive re-entry housing and affordable housing can go a long way towards the success of people coming out of corrections.

Deeper reading:

[A Better Path Forward for Criminal Justice, Brookings Institution](#)

[Vermont Department of Corrections Fiscal 2023 Budget Presentation](#)

[Second Chance Hiring is a Win Win](#)

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