



NATIONAL NETWORK FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES

NOTES FROM THE FIELD Call-In at Lebanon Correctional Institution, Lebanon, Ohio

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Direct communication and engagement with offenders and potential offenders is a central part of the group violence reduction strategy and usually is conducted in court-houses or other formal settings in the community. At these meetings, known as “call-ins” or notification meetings, a partnership of law enforcement, community representatives and social service providers delivers a unified “no-violence” message to group and gang members (often those members under probation or parole supervision), explains that violence will bring law enforcement attention to entire groups, offers services and alternatives to group members, and articulates community norms against violence.

Cincinnati, a member of the National Network’s Leadership Group, has been at the forefront of designing new mechanisms to communicate directly with offenders. This paper describes one of the first call-ins conducted at a prison, and is just one in a set of innovations developed by the partners of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence. Others include home notifications for impact players, custom legal assessments, and smaller scale community-based call-ins.

When S. Gregory Baker, Executive Director of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), and Stan Ross, its Street Outreach Program Manager, were invited to attend a community seminar at Lebanon Correctional Institute, a maximum-security prison some 30 miles north of Cincinnati, it occurred to them that the prison housed an important but as yet untapped audience for CIRV’s antiviolence message. According to Dr. Robin Engel of the University of Cincinnati, an average of 26,915 people per year has been incarcerated in Ohio prisons over the past five years, with an average sentence length of 2.2 years. Of these, 9.2 percent indicate their home address to be within the City of Cincinnati. Of the approximately 2,430 offenders from

Cincinnati who enter or exit the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction prisons each year, 19 percent were convicted of a violent crime and 12 percent will likely reenter into one of the three identified neighborhoods with the highest levels of gun violence and violent group/gang membership (approximately 300 per year). Based on national averages, 29 percent of these offenders will recidivate within six months of release, and 67 percent will recidivate within three years.¹

With this information in mind, Baker and Ross decided that anyone with a violent crime conviction and with just six months left in their sentence needed to hear that “the game has changed,” that Cincinnati’s police had a new way of doing business, but that there was hope and help available for those willing to leave crime behind. During their visit to the prison, Baker and Ross were introduced to Warden Tim Brunsmann and outlined their idea to him. Brunsmann proved to be well informed about CIRV’s mission and work and offered his full support.

CIRV was launched in 2007 and is designed to quickly and dramatically reduce gun violence and associated homicides in Cincinnati. The initiative is modeled on the group violence strategy pioneered in Boston in the mid-1990s and is implemented by a partnership of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, social service providers, street outreach workers, and representatives of the communities most affected by violent crime. Together the partners directly communicate with violent street groups to deliver a clear message that their violence must stop or legal sanctions will be applied not only to the individual who will next engage in violence but to the group as a whole. As part of this communication, the partners also offer social services opportunities to group and gang members, and particular community members respected by group and gang members articulate anti-violence messages.

After their prison visit, Baker realized that changes to the traditional call-in format had to be made when delivering CIRV’s message to the incarcerated men. First, based on feedback the team had received from participants in Cincinnati’s court house call-ins, it was decided to tone down the law enforcement component of the strategy. “These men are used to threats,” Baker

¹ Langan, P., and D. Levin. 2002. “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994.” *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

explained. “What they needed to hear and see more than anything else at this crucial juncture in their life was that there were other people like them who had been able to successfully transition to a pro-social life after prison.” Based on this premise, the team decided to give the greatest weight in the proceedings to the moral-voice component of the group violence strategy.

Second, it was decided that the meeting, which was to last about one and one half hours, should have less of a scripted format and allow for dialogue between presenters and participants. Third, Cincinnati’s Chief of Police, Thomas H. Streicher, usually represented by the Assistant Chief at the city’s court house call-ins, would attend the meeting in person to make a direct appeal to the men. Finally, Ross selected two members of his street outreach team who not only had experience of incarceration but had in fact served time at the very same Lebanon prison. The involvement of the two street advocates, as well as the presence of the police chief, would prove decisive in making the meeting a success.

Lebanon Correctional Institution houses around 800 men. Based on the criteria set out by Baker, prison administrators identified 26 inmates who would be released back to Cincinnati within the next 6 months, who had served sentences for gun violations, gun violence or other serious violent crimes and who had just 180 days left to serve of their sentences. All of them, with the exception of three potential candidates who, at the time, were held in solitary confinement, volunteered to attend the call-in.

The men were given little information by prison administrators about what to expect in the meeting, which was arranged to take place in one part of the prison visiting area. As they quietly entered the room, they were visibly taken aback to find Cincinnati’s chief of police in full uniform waiting to greet them.

Warden Brunzman, accompanied by other prison senior command staff, opened proceedings with an introduction of the CIRV team. A brief call-to-order was then delivered by Ross, who had been designated to act as a moderator throughout the meeting. Ross’ presence and deliberations “clearly put the men at ease”, Baker said, and helped them to be open to the fact

that the meeting would provide “a rare opportunity for them to listen to some important information.”

Ross touched on the positive changes that had taken place within the Cincinnati Police Department since the city’s infamous race riots in 2001. The measures taken, he said, had led to much improved relations between police officers and the communities they were meant to serve. Introducing representatives of the social service agencies present at the meeting – Urban Leagues and Talbert House – Ross explained that these men and women were there to assist anyone wishing to make a “change in their thinking and behavior” and needing help upon their release. Next, Kirk Bell, one of the two street advocates who had served time at Lebanon, briefly introduced himself and told the men that things were no longer the way they were when they had last been in the streets, that the police were serious, and that they had no choice but to change. “Who is going to take care of your family if you end up back in here? I guarantee you it won’t be your boys,” he told them.

Chief Streicher was the first team member to deliver his full testimony in what was listed on the meeting’s agenda as “Informational Dialogue with Law Enforcement.” Streicher began by admitting outright that the way police used to do business in Cincinnati had failed. He described his own personal and professional transformation over the years, explaining that as a street cop he used to like nothing better but to chase and catch the type of guys he was now working with as members of CIRV’s street outreach team. “It’s nothing personal,” he told the audience, “but how ironic is it that you guys are incarcerated as a result of me being successful in my career?” Asking one of the street advocates to step forward, Streicher expressed the deep respect he now held for men like the advocate who had found the strength to undergo their own transformation. With both sides admitting mistakes and making changes, cooperation between community and police had increased dramatically over the past few years, the chief explained. “We want to help you to get educated and to get the services you need,” he told the audience. “No man was ever meant to live in a box. But if you don’t change you are likely to end up in one of two boxes: back in here or six feet under.”

Captain Daniel Gerard, who had led the award-winning investigation into Cincinnati’s Northside “Taliband” gang, backed up the Chief’s message of change with details of the department’s new

law enforcement strategies. His role was to clearly set out the sanctions the men faced if they returned to their old ways. “I am here to give you the new playbook,” Gerard announced. Firstly, law enforcement was no longer merely targeting individuals but was going after whole groups. “When a shot is fired or a body hits the ground, we are coming after the shooter *and* the entire group the shooter belongs to,” Gerard explained. “Second, we have some high-tech software and other new technology that allows us to do this, and that dramatically raises the stakes for you. You will be caught. We know everything about you: who you hang with, where you hang, where your girlfriend lives, what car you drive.” What’s more, not only would police focus on group prosecutions, they would do everything in their power to prosecute federally as well. Gerard also outlined the kind of sanctions that had been imposed on individuals who had refused to heed this message, stressing the high level of intelligence the department was now using to very strategically remove individuals from the community.

“You could see the guys processing that information very carefully,” Baker said. “And they got the message,” Ross added. While Captain Gerard emphasized that this meeting was not intended as a “scared-straight” session, his delivery left no doubt that the days of vague law enforcement threats and uncertain sanctions were over. Anyone who cared to step out of line should be clear on what consequences to expect.

Ross told the group that everyone in the room was making history together. “You are the first men in prison to be given this message and this opportunity.” He shared a personal story about his father and brother serving time in prison, conveying to the men that he understood the situations they had found themselves in. “You are good at using survival skills, not life skills,” he said. “We are offering you a chance to take a different path in life, so help us to help you.” Steven Tucker of the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati, then gave an overview of the services available and the success the CIRV team had achieved so far. He said in the past year alone, CIRV-associated agencies had been able to place some 300 ex-felons in training or employment, highlighting the story of one former client who was now working successfully as a machine operator. Tucker also relayed his personal story of incarceration and the life change he had been able to accomplish. “You have no excuses anymore; the help you need is in this room,” he told

the men. “You have seen and heard what is going to happen if you continue to commit crimes,” he concluded. “See what happens if you give us a chance to help.”

Baker, Ross and Gerard agreed that the message of hope, which they had decided would be crucial for a prison-based call-in, was most convincingly and movingly delivered by CIRV’s street advocates Kirk Bell and Peter Mingo. “These two men had done the same things and slept in the same cells as the men now sitting before them,” Baker said. What’s more, Gerard added, they could not hide the effect the institution, in which they had been incarcerated more than ten years ago, still had on them. “Watching them was powerful,” Gerard said. Ross explained that while Bell and Mingo had accrued professionalism and integrity from being involved with faith-based organizations and through building strong relationships with the prison’s chaplain and administrators over the years, they had, at the same time “instant credibility with the men in whose shoes they had walked.”

Bell spoke first, reliving his life of crime, his involvement in drugs, and the time he spent at Lebanon. Passages he read from a letter he had received from his daughter while incarcerated clearly moved the men in the audience. Bell’s daughter had told him that her mother was living with a new man. The man was abusing her, and her mother had told her she would turn out just like her father. The daughter begged for her father’s help, which he was unable to provide due to his incarceration. “During Bell’s testimony you could have heard a pin drop in the room,” Gerard recalled.

Pastor Pete Mingo was the last one to speak. He also evoked his criminal past and the time he spent at Lebanon, but his testimony added a spiritual component to the proceedings. “You still have value, no matter your past,” he told the men. “No matter your religion, your God has not given up on you. You were created to succeed.” Pastor Mingo revealed that his criminal record consisted of 27 aggravated robberies. The fact that he had been able to turn his life around was proof that change was always possible, he said, that even people like him still had value.

The pastor asked the men for a show of hands to signal who was ready to make a change. All men raised their hands. “If you mean it and you care, stand up and give me a high five,” Mingo called out spontaneously. All the men stood and responded.

Ross described the testimony by Bell and Mingo as the turning point of the meeting. Baker agreed that the structure of the call-in – call-to-order, law enforcement, social services, street advocates – and its more interactive dynamic had “flowed very well” and had “helped proceedings reach a natural climax.”

While there had been several questions from the audience throughout the presentation, time had been set aside at the end of the meeting for a more structured Q&A. The first man to raise his hand thanked the team for visiting the prison and for the message they had delivered. Another question revealed that the incarcerated men had been closely following news reports about Cincinnati’s financial troubles. Chief Streicher was asked about the potential impact of budget cuts on both law enforcement operations and social service provisions. “Will you guys be around when we get out?” one of the men summed up their concerns. Chief Streicher assured them that Mayor Mallory was strongly committed to the initiative. “CIRV will be here for you,” he promised. Team members gave out cards with CIRV’s hotline number and an overview of available training and employment opportunities and of drug treatment and other services that are part of the initiative’s services component.

Another man asked Captain Gerard to explain social network analysis and how it had been applied to the Northside’s “Taliband” gang investigation. The Captain described in depth the process on which the analysis was based and how these techniques would be utilized in future investigations. He added that prosecutors and judges had also been educated on this process to prepare for the necessary legal applications in future gang cases.

In an email to David Kennedy, co-chair of the National Network for Safe Communities, Chief Streicher described CIRV’s first ever prison call-in as “one of the most powerful experiences in my career.”

“I was shocked to witness the degree of interest in our program, the opportunity for hope in their eyes, and the amount of true appreciation they had toward us for taking the time to visit,” he wrote. “Later in the day,” the Chief added, “we received word from the Warden that they had received ... many positive comments from the prisoners who attended, as well as from other prisoners to whom they had spoken.”

Asked what they considered to be the most important components of the prison-based call-in format, Baker, Ross and Gerard agreed on three: first, the presence of the police chief and his personal testimony, which had demonstrated that he had been the first to undergo the kind of transformation he was now asking of the men before him; second, the street advocates' testimonies that had resonated so strongly with the incarcerated men and had been the most powerful in delivering a message of hope; and, third, the respect all members of the CIRV team had for each other and demonstrated in the meeting. "Everybody involved referenced their respect for each other and talked about each other's work – not just about their own," Baker said.

"For our message to be delivered with credibility, we had to demonstrate a real, unified front," Ross stressed. "Law enforcement, community, social service providers, ex-offenders – all of us working towards the same goals. We were together. We were really together." The group of men to which the message was delivered was a very visual group, he added, not the kind to take notes and carefully weigh the pros and cons of everything they heard. Instead, they would be deciding there and then, based on their survival skills and instincts, whether what they had heard was "real." With one member of the audience commenting afterwards that he never would have expected to see "cops and robbers on the same side," the team's unified message clearly was not lost. "Seeing is believing," Baker said.

The CIRV team delivered a second offender notifications at the Lebanon Correctional Institute in April 2010 and plans to conduct repeat meetings every six months or so to allow for a sufficiently large audience of 20-25 men in pre-release mode and with a history of violent crime to attend.

The team has also conducted several call-ins at the River City Correctional Center (RCCC), a local alternative to prison with the primary purpose of providing rehabilitation services for non-violent felony offenders. The goal of treatment is to assist residents in recognizing and overcoming their substance abuse dependency, criminal thinking, and life skill deficiencies. Given the less serious offenses of the inmates and the rehabilitative emphasis of the prison, the call-in sessions involved approximately 60 inmates, followed a similar format, and were "equally successful" in delivering CIRV's antiviolence message, according to Baker.

A case manager at the facility, who interviewed participants after the call-in, was told that many of the men had felt inspired by the message and the way it had been delivered, in particular by Pastor Mingo and others speaking on behalf of the community. Others said they would have preferred the police to attend in plain clothes rather than in uniform and that the threat of a federal sentence made them pay closer attention to the message. Most of the men said that they would have liked to have had more time to ask questions at the end of the session.