

**The National Trust:
Offering a New Vision for Reintegrating
Returning Ex-Offenders into Productive
Community Life**

Written for

**The National Trust for the Development of
African-American Men**

by

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When you're sitting in the training session, sometimes, man, you get some really profound responses and have some really poignant moments. There were times in the Trust that a lot of us would be there, in tears – prisoners with tears in their eyes, and it wasn't really no big deal. Because it was the reality of our situations that someone came and brought to our attention that, "listen, you guys are important."

n Una – Inmate, Eastern Penitentiary.

I. INTRODUCTION: Our Intent and Direction

This paper is about the work of Dr. Garry Mendez and the National Trust for the Development of African-American Men and his underlying vision for reintegrating ex-offenders into their home communities upon their release from the nation's state and federal prisons. It was commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of its explorations into the issues of prisoner reentry and as part of its efforts to better understand the challenges that prisoner reentry poses to the community improvement efforts underway in distressed, urban, poor, and minority communities similar to those it is supporting under its Neighborhood Development/Family Transformation portfolio of initiatives.

Briefly described, the work of The National Trust offers a view of reentry that challenges the goals of our current pre- and post-release interventions. Rather than focus on preventing re-offending and on how communities can cope with large numbers of returnees, Dr. Mendez stresses that communities should harness the resources these new residents possess and find ways to deploy them to assist in ongoing neighborhood improvement efforts.

All of us had marketable skills if we just would have thought about some of the things that we could do. During our asset mapping in the Trust, we'd go around the room, we'd say, "Well, what can you do?" When you add up all the things the men could do, you'd have a house that could be built here, or we'd have a youth program that could be put together, we'd have certain other things, a law firm. So I realized we could go home and do some significant things, and I've gotten a lot of that from my relationship with Trust.

n Una – Inmate, Eastern Penitentiary.

As we will discuss below, Dr. Mendez's strategy for successful reintegration involves an in-prison program of leadership training and community building combined with an in-community effort of reconnection, civic engagement, volunteerism and networking. The outcomes of these efforts are expected to be a more stable integration of ex-offenders into their home communities, a reduction in negative impacts of reentry within the community, and a net gain to neighborhoods in terms of an influx of redemptive role models of civic engagement and community leadership.

Our objective in the following pages then will be three-fold, namely to: (1) describe the rationale that has guided this vision and the National Trust's 20-year history of community building with prisoners in the State of New York; (2) provide anecdotal evidence of the difference its leadership training has made in the lives of its Trust Fellows; and (3) offer a vision for how this work might be expanded to targeted "home communities" in ways that can create a supportive interface with local community-building efforts.

We will set the stage for those discussions by backgrounding the magnitude and nature of the prisoner reentry challenge. In that introduction, we will attempt to provide the reader with a sense of the scope of the incarceration phenomenon and its reentry consequences as well as with a sense of the men who are returning and the experiences they are likely to bring back with them. Where appropriate, we will intersperse comments from three ex-offenders who participated in Trust programs and who were interviewed for this report. By taking this approach we hope to provide a better contextual understanding in which the reader can assess the work of the National Trust and its potential promise as an intervention strategy for addressing the challenge of returning ex-offenders.

II. BACKGROUND: Incarceration – A Tidal Wave Washing over Distressed Communities

A newly released study suggests that, over the last quarter century, the number of persons who have spent time in the nation's state and federal prisons has burgeoned.¹ For example, it suggests that during 1974, state and federal prisons housed an average total of 216,000 persons over the course of the year. The report goes on to estimate that the number of persons in 1974 who had *ever* been incarcerated in prisons stood at 1,819,000 – roughly 1.3% of all persons then living in the U.S.

By 2001, however, the count of then-currently incarcerated persons was six times greater at 1,319,000. And the corresponding number of ever-incarcerated living persons stood at 5,618,000 – more than 3 times the number of persons recorded in 1974 and more than twice (at 2.7 percent) the 1974 proportion of an even larger 2001 U.S. population. Today, incarceration figures continue to rise. Close to 2 million people, almost 1% of the U.S. population, are *currently* incarcerated in federal and state prisons (1,355,748) and local jails (665,475).² (Estimates of ever-incarcerated persons in 2001 are not available.)

While this incarceration data is itself alarming, it is the tail end of this imprisonment phenomenon that is of increasing concern. Current data suggest that upwards of 600,000 inmates will be released from state and federal prisons in 2003 – a rate of more than 11,000 per week. What's more, upon release these (mostly) men will return to a relatively small number of home communities. In fact, in 1996, two-thirds of released prisoners, or about 400,000, were returned into the few “core counties” that contain the states' central cities.

A look at the prison population itself provides additional clues as to the particular kinds of communities that are most highly impacted. At mid-year 2002, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that one in every eight black men and one in 25 Hispanic men, compared to only one in 63 white men, were in prison or in jail. Moreover, it is predicted that, if incarceration rates remain unchanged, 1 in every 3 black males, 1 in every six Hispanic males and 1 in 17 white males will be expected to go to prison in their lifetime.³

¹ *Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report. Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. August 2003, NCJ 197976.

² Harrison, Page M. and Jennifer C. Karberg. *Prison and Jail Inmates at Mid-Year 2002*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. April 2003, NCJ 198877

³ *Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001*. Op. Cit. Pg. 1.

As these data clearly indicate, the communities most heavily affected by incarceration, and hence, most challenged by the return of ex-offenders, are urban, minority and particularly African-American. Many of these “receiving communities” are the same poor, distressed enclaves that the federal government and other public and private community investors have been assisting with community development and family strengthening services. But a full appreciation the reentry challenge requires some understanding of the returning population. Who are these men? And what is their experience?

Background: The Men – Who Are They

In the beginning of 1983, I was convicted for a manslaughter in a robbery case. And I was given 12½ to 25 years as a result of that. I wind up doing 18 years in regards to the whole case. They gave me CR, which is a Conditional Release. In the course of those 18 years I think I have maybe checked into basically all the maximum facilities in New York State. I’d say in total, at least eight or nine of them – Mediums about three of them – but I did most of my time basically in the maximum facilities.

n **Justice – Former Inmate, Auburn Penitentiary**

I was born January 3, 1960, so I’m 43 years old now. I’m presently serving time at the Eastern Correctional Facility. I was sentenced to 25 years to life for a murder. At the time I was married – had two children. I was working and going to school. And I got arrested and was incarcerated. I’m presently in the 16th year of that 25-year sentence. So I’ve been incarcerated since October 1987. And it’s had a traumatic effect on my family, and on my wife. She was strained because I was like the breadwinner.

n **Kenny – Inmate, Eastern Penitentiary**

This is my first incarceration. I’m in prison for several charges. The main offense that I’m in prison for is attempted murder – three attempted murders. I was involved with a gun case and a drug offense and those charges together got me the sentence I have now. So I’m serving a sentence of fifteen to 45 years. I am 34 years old now. And currently I have eleven years in. I’ve been in about four or five maximum security prisons – got moved around about every three years or so. I go to the parole board in 2007.

n **Una – Inmate, Eastern Penitentiary.**

For most prison inmates, the offense that resulted in their incarceration was not their first infraction of the law. Indeed, American inmates, especially those who are urban, minority and poor, are usually men who, from a young age, began a pattern of disconnection from main stream aspirations and pursuits. A root cause of their disconnection was that these men had little or no positive social capital – resources that they could access from positive social networks – that could sustain them in positive endeavors such as education, faith-building, or job training.

For men like these, the support systems in the home and in the community at large were not sufficiently strong to prevent their treading a path leading to prison. As young men, they were lacking in positive role models, in mentors, and sadly and all too frequently, they missed growing up in households with positive male influences. And typically, the social networks they form during their incarceration are similarly devoid of positive main stream supports and consequently present more of the same disconnected behaviors and worse. There can be little wonder then why recidivism rates are so high – guys go to prison with negative social capital and maladaptive values that remain unchanged by a prison environment whose primary purposes are confinement, containment and preserving order within the institution.

Increasingly, the results of their disconnection and imprisonment are affecting the long-term well-being and life prospects of entire neighborhoods of children and families. And without some effort to deliver positive interventions, confinement in prison will not prepare these men for reentering civil society. The following view of life “on the inside” will help make the point.

Background: Living In Prison – An Unnerving Marriage Of Monotony And Peril

While the structures and schedules for daily life will vary greatly both within and across states, prisons in general offer a highly regulated, confined, yet still very dangerous, living environment. Many prisons house men in “doubles” – 8 by 12 foot cells, for two men at a time. Some prisons will, on occasion, put men up in open dorms of up to 200 men. In any event, living conditions are usually both sparse and small. Cells are normally equipped with a toilet, a sink, a single cot or bunk beds and some minimal storage for a few personal effects. Inmates are allowed toiletries and some personal property: radios, televisions, books, magazines, board games but are generally not allowed any implements (excepting tooth brushes and “safety” razors), tools or other items that can be weaponized or otherwise hazardous.

Daily life is highly regimented. In New York State, it begins around 7:00 or 7:30 a.m. when inmates awake and attend to their personal hygiene – usually at the cell sink. (Inmates are typically allowed only two or three showers per week taken in scheduled, supervised groups.) The inmates stay “locked down” until breakfast while the prison conducts the day’s first “count.” The counting ritual occurs four times each day. (The state of California performs this counting procedure at the exact same moment in every prison statewide.) The lockdown is released and cell doors are allowed to open only after the count is completed and all prisoners are accounted for.

Breakfast, a scheduled 30 minute activity, is served in shifts that begin at 7:00 a.m. in a well-guarded 300 – 500-seat cafeteria. By 8:45 or 9:00 a.m. or so the day’s first module begins. New York prisons offer two, 2½-hour modules of activities each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, five days a week. These modules are state organized programs of work, education or other activity for which prisoners are paid between 10 and 15 cents per day not to exceed \$1.50 per week.

After the first module, prisoners are returned to their cells for the day’s second count. Then there is lunch, the second module, a return to the cells for a third count and then dinner. After dinner (4:30 to 6:30 p.m.) there is free time during which the inmates may return to their cells, take recreation or participate in other approved “elective” activities such as organizational meetings of NAACP or other programs such as the National Trust meetings. The final count begins at 9:30 p.m. and the lockdown continues until the next morning’s first count when the sequence begins all over again.

To be sure, prisons are places no one would or should ever want to be – people warehouses characterized by highly-regulated and scrutinized, monotonous routines; which nonetheless can occasionally and spontaneously erupt into violent confrontations with little or no provocation – places with distinct hierarchies that distinguish the old from the young, the “lifers” from the “short-timers,” and the predators from the prey. Indeed, prison is a hostile, negative place with a social order determined by strength and by the fear of strength – where violence and the fear of violence promote exploitation and govern much of human behavior.

Honestly, it’s a scary situation. It’s very scary. It’s to the point where you have to be on pins and needles all the time. A person has to learn a lot of discipline in there. That doesn’t mean everyone does this, but it’s a wild and scary environment. You have those that are in the mindset like myself who know when you go there that you don’t want to come out the same way that you went in. Then you have those who don’t care. You know? And they’re all over the place. It doesn’t make a difference what they do or who they do it to. And these are the guys that everybody else worries about. You have to worry about them because, if they’re not caring for themselves, how do you

think they're going to be feeling about the next person? There's no morals, there's no values you know? That's the type of atmosphere.

A guy will say he don't care and he really doesn't. Like, I might have a pair of sneakers or, you know, my family may have afforded to buy me a little more-so than some other prisoners whose families don't come to visit them. And it got to the point where they would say well I have to just try to get it on my own. They would actually try to take it from the next person. So it's a real pins and needles type environment. You don't know what the next person is thinking or how they're going to come at you.

At the same time, you know, there is a lot of respect amongst those who understand what prison life is about, especially if you've got to be there for years and years. You have to have a certain amount of respect amongst each other because I've seen them get hurt. I've also seen brothers, not seen personally, but seen where brothers have gotten killed just because they disrespect other people... for very little things.

And you have to cope with that – you just do. It's not like you're in a free society where you can say, "Okay, this is happening over here ...and ... you know what? I can go over there and rid myself of that." You can't do that in a prison environment because you're caged in. You're all boxed in. So you have to live with it. You have to respect every man's space and you try to make sure that every man respects your space also. However, there are times when that doesn't happen. So, you know, if you're put in a position where you have to demand your respect, then sometimes you have to do what you have to do. You've got to go to war.

In my case, I think I had maybe two or three fights over the 18 years. One time it was like I had to say, "You know what? My manly pride is on the line." It was a thing where the person was trying to – the term we use is, "punk me" – trying to take advantage. And when you try to do that then, it's almost like backing a cat in the corner. The cat is going to fight his way out. It's like having no choice 'cause you have to do what you have to do – even knowing, that in doing stuff, not only do you stand to hurt someone or someone hurting you but, once that's over with, you still have to face the administration because there's a penalty to pay from them. And they're not going to cut you any slack because the other person started it.

n **Justice**

Now I'm kind of adjusted. But when I first came in it was kind of traumatic because it was my first time and I was used to working and going to school. Life on the outside was a lot faster pace. You come "inside" you really don't know what to expect. And you know you're kind of fearful because you don't know what to expect being that it's a new situation. It's kind of like – you try to go along to get along. You know, you have your values but you've got to get along.

It's a dangerous environment. A lot of times things go down that's not right. But you don't say nothing. You don't say nothing because it's not affecting you. You just hope that everybody would try to stand up for themselves and not be preyed upon. Even though nothing happened to me I was around, I was in the environment where it happened to other people – you know, predatory behavior. Down to Riker's Island, you know the Riker's Island Prison Complex? It's bad down there.

n **Kenny**

Well, being in prison is sort of tough. The fact that you're deprived of your liberty is the first thing. You have to get used to dealing with authority figures, especially when you come from a society, like I did, where we have disregard for authority. So you have to get used to that. You have to get used to the loneliness at times. – to the being caged in, to the solitude. Over all, it's like a lot of turmoil that you go through as a prisoner. But the more people that you interact with throughout your incarceration, the better it is. I've met some really decent people through my incarceration. They tell you to be strong – just try to develop some skills. The best thing to do is to come in, to get educated, to develop some marketable skills, to try to go out there a better person than you was when you came in.

n **Una**

It should be clear from the above that prison is not an environment that encourages a positive re-socialization in preparation for an eventual return to a home-community life. There is no social

or ecological dynamic here that will, on its own, encourage or support the kinds of positive personal transformations that can lead to a larger appreciation of community. To the contrary, prison culture is strongly oriented to individual gratification and to individual strengths, needs, and circumstances. It is not a culture that encourages inmates to think beyond themselves to the well being of a larger community. Neither is it one that encourages inmates to take personal responsibility and/or be accountable for their behaviors. Indeed, the discipline and self-regulation that the inmates do exhibit – for instance, to be civil, to be punctual, or to be productive – is largely externally imposed by the institution as opposed to being a matter of personal values and commitment.

Such is the nature of the “community” from which ex-offenders return. It is estimated that, on average, “returnees” will be 34 years of age⁴ at the time of release and will have spent an average of 2 ½ years in prison. Twenty percent of them will have spent 5 or more years living in this kind of environment.⁵ And yet, in preparation for their release and reentry, prisoners are generally given fewer than 60 days of pre-release services that focus largely on a variety of “coping strategies.”

The National Trust believes that the challenge of reintegration will not be met by such narrowly focused, tail-end services. Instead, its work is aimed at changing this prison culture – at reorienting the value system that permeates this environment in ways that will provide ongoing encouragement for personal growth, reflection and responsibility throughout the duration of an inmate’s incarceration.

III. THE NATIONAL TRUST: A New Vision, a New Rationale, a New Approach

The National Trust challenges conventional wisdom by viewing prisoners as assets -- to their community inside the prison walls and the one outside. The National Trust also challenges those currently or recently in prison to reorient their value systems to help, not harm, their community. This strategy can provide the framework for new responses to the troubling realities of imprisonment in America.

n Jeremy Travis, The Urban Institute

Propelled by a vision of redeeming ex-offenders, reorienting their value systems, and reconnecting them to community improvement efforts, The National Trust has fashioned a new and creative approach to the prisoner-reintegration/community-return challenge – one that differs completely with most current thinking on the subject. Much of today’s prisoner reentry discussion is cast in terms of public safety, recidivism and law enforcement – we must provide jobs and services to former inmates to prevent them from re-offending. The Trust’s approach asserts that these narrow formulations are wholly inadequate.

According to Dr. Mendez, the challenge of returning ex-offenders is much more than their physical *relocation* into their home community *places*. Instead, the real challenge is *reintegrating* former prisoners into their home community *fabrics*. It is more than a matter of providing assistance that will prevent recidivism. Rather it is providing the encouragement, the opportunity and the structures through which they can function as full and bona fide members of the community and as positive contributors to community life.

⁴ Travis, Jeremy; Amy Solomon and Michelle Waul. 2001. *From Prison to Home: the Dimension and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. Pg. 9.

⁵ Ibid. Pg. 11.

These reintegration aspirations are built on two premises: first, that ex-offenders have skills, abilities and talents that can and should be marshaled for the benefit of the residents and neighborhoods to which they return; and consequently second, that rather than seeing them as community liabilities, communities should view them, and enlist and deploy them, as community assets. A few further assumptions provide the rationale for the Trust's strategy. For example, The Trust believes that what is needed for successful reentry is providing what has been missing in the lives of most of the prospective returnees – a strong sense of, connection to, and respect for their communities as places where their children and families will either flourish or founder. That so, the Trust further believes that involving returnees in comprehensive community building efforts, such as those being supported by many national foundations and local governments, offers the perfect foil for instilling these new values.

Additionally however, the Trust believes that, to achieve this new community awareness and appreciation, offenders must first undergo personal transformations that will give them a better sense of self, of their personal responsibilities, and of their potential contributions to their children, families and neighborhoods. That is why the Trust's traditional in-prison program has historically focused on asset-based leadership development designed to alter inmates' value orientations.

In summary, the Trust's vision is that, to promote a successful, positive return of ex-offenders to their home communities, we must first change their value systems in ways that will increase their appreciation for the challenges facing their children, families and neighborhoods and then connect them to real and meaningful opportunities to make a difference and affect positive change.

The History of the National Trust and the Evolution of a New Paradigm

This vision of the reentry challenge has evolved from many years of work in the field. Dr. Garry Mendez began working with prison inmates in 1980 – before the explosion in incarceration rates among African-American men had been documented – as a special initiative he started while at the National Urban League. In a major public address, shortly after his inauguration as the new president of the National Urban League, John Jacob announced that the Urban League was going to clear up black on black crime. The assignment to do so fell to Dr. Mendez as NUL's Director of Criminal Justice.

Noting that "Crime is not a part of our Black heritage" Dr. Mendez began to formulate an approach to dealing with urban, African-American criminal behavior. After studying the issue, he concluded that the field of criminal justice was subscribing to a "social ills" theory for crime in the black community. According to this theory the combination of racism, unemployment, poor health care, housing and education and other phenomena associated with poverty, are what give rise to the disproportionate levels of black on black crime. He further concluded that many African-Americans liked this theory because it displaces blame: "we are not responsible for ourselves, white folks are; and if they would just change – be nicer and give us what we need – crime and other negative aspects of life in our community would go away."

As a counterpoint, Dr. Mendez created a concept he called "The Cultural Equation." It states that History plus Culture equals Values and that Values – not circumstances – in turn, determine Behavior.

I put forth the theory that all behavior is driven by values. Those values, in turn, come from ones understanding of one's history and culture. Unfortunately, in the case of African-Americans, that is

exactly what was taken from us when we were brought here. The question then becomes how these men learn their history and culture. The answer is that they don't.

Despite higher incarceration rates, mandatory sentencing, lowered ages for adult prosecutions and other "get tough on crime" policies" today's black community feels no safer. Why? Because these strategies are not directed at the core problem of values. And in any case, the state is not the right agent to address this problem. Preserving one's history and culture is a family and community issue and not a state issue. Adults in the African-American community have left the job of educating and guiding their children – teaching their history and culture – to the public schools and the schools are not equipped to do this. Absent this exposure, our young people are left to create their own value system – aided by a sensationalist media, "Madison Avenue," and the street life – and that is what has gotten us into this mess.

(Of course, I realize that no culture has a monopoly on positive values. You can substitute the native culture of any people and the point is the same. But the relative lack of an historical and cultural focus in the black community leaves us particularly vulnerable, and, I believe reflects itself in our disproportionately high crime rates.)

n Dr. Garry Mendez

In 1981, Dr. Mendez began traveling to Urban League cities around the country disseminating this new message about crime – particularly crime in the African-American community. This basic message – that values, not circumstances, dictate human behavior – was both controversial and hard-hitting. African-Americans, he argued, had been poor throughout their entire history in this country without resorting to the level of violence and criminality that most social scientists now want to attribute to poverty. And, if that is true, then conditions of poverty, by themselves, can not be an adequate explanation for the level of crime and violence in our African-American communities. Therefore, he asserted, it stands to reason that efforts to eliminate poverty will fall short of achieving our goals to eliminate black crime.

The In-Prison Program

In 1980 Dr. Mendez took his teachings into the prison setting to demonstrate how properly ordered values can turn *Liabilities to Assets*. An invitation to speak to a group of inmates at Green Haven State Penitentiary, a maximum security prison in New York, created so much enthusiasm for more exposure that Green Haven's Deputy Warden asked Dr. Mendez to start a program of regular instruction and training at the facility.

In the inaugural effort, Dr. Mendez chose to limit the program to 25 inmates. For this first cohort of participants, the program specifically targeted the more mature long-termers – guys who had been "in" for a while and were not expected to ever win release – to form the on-going leadership infrastructure for what would become the Green Haven Trust Program. This population was chosen for several reasons: first because they would constitute a durable, stable leadership cadre. Their lifetime confinement would ensure program permanency. Secondly, and relatedly, it is precisely because Green Haven is their permanent home that they are the largest stakeholders in quality of life issues such as promoting order and cooperation within the facility. Third, maturity and longevity are attributes that do convey a level of trust, respect and "authority" among many members of the prison community.

This initial cohort launched the effort. Teaching that you must lead yourselves before you can lead others, Dr. Mendez began delivering an innovative asset-based leadership development model. In the first six months Dr. Mendez conducted meetings four times per week to do the trainings, to create opportunities for bonding and to establish a group identity and process. Many of the meetings involved other outside speakers addressing topics chosen by inmates. A fifth

meeting each week was held by the inmates alone. It was during this meeting that they were to establish themselves as an organization – drafting a set of bylaws; establishing their leadership and organizational structures, committees and committee memberships; setting agendas; and eventually organizing and conducting projects.

As part of their participation, the inmates kept personal journals to record lessons and important moments in their Trust experience. Among other lessons, the Trust training teaches inmates the value of maintaining close personal relationships and encourages them to confide in each other and share their feelings and personal experiences as a means of strengthening the group as a supportive community. Doing so in a prison environment without the support of such a group is normally both foolish and dangerous. Each of the ex-offenders interviewed for this paper expressed a need for this kind of positive personal connection that can offer them support and guidance.

Because we come up with a lack of a good firm value system, a lot of us get caught up in our negative thinking. I first saw it here in prison and I said, “Wow! I never realized how ignorant our people were until I came to prison.” You sit down and you have a general conversation with individuals in prison, Black men, and you say, “Well, damn!”

You know, when you’re out in the street you don’t really have time to sit down and converse with these individuals. But you go to prison and you start talking about the better things in life and what could you do to help yourself as far as education, or obtaining a better future for yourself, or your family relationships. You know? Or any relationships for that matter. You start talking on these levels.

But you’ve got other guys that walk around the yard and the only thing they’re talking about is what they used to do on the outside and what they’re going to do when they get back out there. And they’re still in that same circle. That’s not the circle you want to be in. So you know that they need help.

n **Justice**

This first cohort also took responsibility for identifying and recruiting new members to the Trust core group of 25 as well as the more general recruitment of guys into Trust classes, programs and projects.

What we did was we would try to pick out guys who we felt were willing to take the extra step to try to learn some things that would help them remain in society – try to develop multiple skills, things of that nature. So guys who showed an interest in this, they came and became Trust members. We’d try to bring them into the core group. And this was done on a regular basis because we would have like a cycle of men constantly coming into the group.

n **Una**

Moreover, when members of the core group were transferred to another facility, it became their responsibility to set up a new Trust program there.

But how we went from a very small core of men, maybe 20 or so, to hundreds of men, was that several guys were able to leave the Trust at Green Haven and go to other facilities and start the Trust program there. Because Dr. Mendez had been coming in for so long, we had learned a great deal of things from him. We took what we got from him – took the things that we knew – and we just went out to other facilities and started Trust programs.

n **Una**

In a sense then the state corrections system itself played a very large part in the growth and expansion of the Trust program. In fact, Interviews with current inmates have led some of them

to speculate that the Trust has probably reached more than 1,000 men in New York prisons, through this mechanism, since its origins at Green Haven more than 20 years ago.

In the beginning they started with about 15 guys and then the next year we expanded I think another 15 guys. We started a computer lab and that really got a lot of guys interested. It got their attention. We were able to work with the guys on developing leadership potential or just self esteem – value systems – things of that nature. But then, you know, guys get transferred in, go home, or what have you. In the last ten years or so, I've been in three or four different prisons. When I went to another prison, I always met somebody I knew or somebody who's been involved with one of the Trust programs at one of the other facilities. So we'd try to keep a certain core number. And as guys got moved, we'd try to expand the program. So a guy could start in the Trust at Green Haven and go to another prison like Clinton or Auburn and he impacts another ten or twenty guys. And it has like the exponential effect. So I'm pretty sure about, I would say in the last ten year period it's close to 1000 guys that's been impacted by the Trust by some form or another.

n **Kenny**

The following gives a sense of how the continuing enthusiasm of participating inmates still fosters the spread of the Trust's message.

I found out about the Trust in the year 2000. When I was transferred to Auburn, the name National Trust was going around and there was some individuals there that I knew and they was a part of the National Trust. I had seen one of their newsletters. And one of the things that stood out and made me want to get involved was an article written about history plus culture equals values. How values equal life styles and behavior. That in itself made me want to get involved with the National Trust. But once I met Garry Mendez and I started reading more about the literature and how long they'd been around, I was surprised that I didn't know about this before.

n **Justice**

The men interviewed for this paper believe that the Trust program has spread to at least thirteen of New York's seventy prison facilities (Arthur Kill, Auburn, Clinton, Eastern, Fishkill, Great Meadow, Green Haven, Mid-Orange, Otisville, Shawangunk, Sing Sing, Sullivan, and Woodbourne). Eastern Penitentiary is one of the latest facilities to be impacted by the National Trust. The facility has no prior history with Trust programming but is nonetheless being approached by inmates to sanction an organization to offer Trust programs and conduct Trust training. While at this date official action to sanction the Trust has still not been taken, inmates are nonetheless spreading information about the Trust and its message.

What we're doing is talking about the program. We're talkin' to a lot of guys that have been affiliated with the program at Green Haven and other facilities and they're asking us what's going on because they want to get up and running. This facility here's got a lot of organizations and a lot of them aren't really doing what we were doing. We kind of miss that. We miss that component. And we really want to get started on doing it. I have guys coming to me practically every day asking me what's happening with the Trust? We have to get up and running. But the Trust is not an official organization yet.

n **Kenny**

The inmates' enthusiasm for the Trust's program appears to stem from its ability to reach inmates at a very personal level – in ways that alter their views of themselves and their understanding their relationships with and responsibilities to others. For instance, the Trust model begins with inmates conducting their own personal assessments – writing lists of the skills, talents, and abilities they possess and sharing and discussing them amongst the group. This exercise is one of several designed to establish a new self concept. But the “inventory” it produces also begins the process of documenting the social capital within the group that can later be deployed on in-prison and external community projects.

The Trust's approach treats the prison as its own community and develops the participating inmates so they will accept responsibility for their behaviors as well as for the health and stability of their community.

The Trust helped me see my life in prison differently. I didn't have to just look at myself as a single individual. It wasn't just a focus on me; it was a focus on us. Because we were all in the same situation by being in prison,

n **Justice**

III. OUTCOMES: Individual and Community Transformations

As stated in all of the earlier discussion, The National Trust work is geared to one major goal – changing the value orientations of ex-offenders in ways that will encourage them: (1) to take personal responsibility for their conduct and behavior; and, (2) to use of the talents, skills and abilities that they possess to sustain themselves, support their children, families and contribute to their communities. Below we paint a portrait of the impact that exposure to the National Trust has had on men who have participated. Insofar as these observations reflect the views and experiences of a very limited number of inmates, we must view them as anecdotal. Still, given all we have presented above, the transformations implied in their testimonies are encouraging. Here is what men who were interviewed had to say about what their experiences with the Trust have meant to them.

Personal Reflections on the Impact of A Caring Presence

We got a devastating issue that we're dealing with in here – the impact of incarceration. And Garry showed some serious concern about wanting to do something about that. So we started to feel a connectedness. I don't know. When you have somebody who was willing to sacrifice their weekends and to come inside and spend time with us – developing and working on some things we need to work on – I mean this has a profound effect. You have somebody that's in your corner, really wants to help you. What else can I say?

n **Kenny**

To me it's like the Trust validates what I do in here. Because it stayed, it's dedicated and it stuck with it. It's not like a Garry was here today and gone tomorrow. You've got like a backbone, somebody who's committed, so it gives you the wherewithal to keep on – like there is some meaning in what you're doing. And every once in a while you need strength, energy and some love and Garry brings that. It rejuvenates you.

n **Kenny**

The Trust had a very major impact on my life. At the time that I was involved with the Trust I was sort of straddling the fence. It was like you haven't really decided which way you want to go – it's that good/bad pull. I had to come to a new realization and I was able to do that based upon the assistance and the mentoring that I received from some of the older brothers that were involved in Trust. So that had a major impact on my life.

I believe that it could have a major impact on the lives of others. You've got to look at the transition that I've made in my life – like having my mother be proud of me because of the things that I'm doing during my incarceration – things that I could have done when I was in society. It's just that sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees. But now that I'm doing these things, it's like there's no way that I can revert back.

n **Una**

Increased Self-Reliance and Improved Self-Concept

I had already been involved with other organizations in penal institutions because I wanted to do better for myself. However, when I came in contact with the Trust, the Trust just really lined me up

a little more with things that I really wanted to do. The other organizations, never really focused me on self improvement and self-reliance – on not worrying about what the system was going to provide me with but what I'd provide my own self with. And then it was self realization, self esteem, and all those things. So the Trust kind of aligned me with that. Basically that's what everybody was involved with in the Trust. The value system that we got as a result of being in the Trust gave us self pride, you know? Self-pride or self-esteem. It made us want to teach that to younger brothers.

All of us were focused in that manner – whereas it wasn't what another person could do for us, it was what we had to do for ourselves. So that was one of the things that the Trust did for me. It made me see that I couldn't wait for somebody else to do anything for me. I had to want to and do it for myself.

n **Justice**

Like one of our guiding principles, we say, you know, we try to strive for excellence. And I thought about that, because I used to work in the auto body shop and I used to only do enough to get by. I didn't see the need – 'cause I'm in prison, and I'm doing this work for these people – I didn't see the need to strive to give them my best. But your best is a reflection of you. So you try to do your best. And you try to be respectful, responsible; you try to uphold your integrity. You try to have a dedication to human life. So you kind of like break some of those conceptions, you know, the stereotypes of men in prison or Black men in general as being just predatory.

n **Kenny**

I'm going to tell you something. We've had some tough guys as members of the Trust. Some of the brothers that have been involved for years, are some of the toughest brothers that you can imagine. I mean, one of the guys who was involved with the Trust was probably one of the toughest guys that you have in the whole New York State correctional system. What happens is that those brothers just decide that they've come to a point in their lives where they have to give up the façade that goes along with being tough and "catching tickets" for assault inside and so forth. .

n **Una**

A Beacon for Fellow Inmates

There's many a brother whose heads are not very straight. I hear the conversations on a daily basis. But how we eliminate some of that is we go around the brothers and we speak in regard to what the National Trust is about. And we live it by example. So they can see it. That we're not just talking the talk but we're actually walking it. And we're actually living it now – I'm talking about while we're incarcerated – now.

n **Justice**

You've got groups of men in prison who want to gravitate towards something that is positive. We try to pull guys one way but you have the negative energy pulling guys another way. Some guys they want to get high, and so on and so forth. We talk about not getting high, about the body being a temple and so on and so forth. But I do believe that with the work we have done over the years we have pulled some guys out of the rut. I was pulled out of a rut in so far as my thinking was concerned. So I know that it can be done because it happened to me.

n **Una**

The Trust makes a difference in the way you relate to other inmates because, you know, I'm a representative of the Trust. That's meaningful to me. I think it has a major impact on the prison environment. Once you're involved in something like the Trust, you're kind of like accountable. You say you're about self development and you've got to be a model of self development. And then the other peers start to see you and they start to look up. Not that you're looking for anybody to be looking up to you. But they respect the fact that you're trying to be the living example of what you're professing to be – because a lot of times they want to come aboard. There's some things that they want to deal with.

So, a lot of guys would see me and other Trust members as role models that they might like to emulate. I think that if you look at our whole group, everybody has guys that are kind of drawn to them because of their style, the way they might reflect on a particular point of view, or whatever. They pull up to you on the side and they'll want to discuss a serious issue. They might not want to talk openly around a group of men but if you get like eight, ten of us together there's always going

to be somebody, even whether it's white or Latino, it really doesn't make any difference. Somebody will come up and want to talk to us and seek out mentoring.

n **Kenny**

Reexamining the Home Community Street Culture

Some guys I talk to are still stuck to the old criminal behavior so they've got to understand the need to kind of like purge yourself into human behavior – leave to the cycle of destruction and incarceration. It don't do anybody no good.

n **Kenny**

Dr. Mendez wrote a paper that said that crime is not a part of our heritage. And that's absolutely true. There was a time in our history, when we were not always the people that were coming to prison. It takes a lot of soul searching to come to the realization that, listen, this is not who I am. And we try to get guys to do some serious introspection, to come to the same type of conclusion that a lot of men in the Trust have come to.

n **Una**

Rethinking Relationships With Children And Families

In prison we can talk amongst ourselves until we're blue in the face. But when we have like an outside connection to people that are dedicated and sincere, that just brings more meaning to whatever it is you're trying to do. We're trying to combat delinquent behavior and crime. Because now what we see is a lot of our sons and daughters are coming to prison and we want to stop the tide.

n **Kenny**

We got to just make a change. And that was the most important thing that the Trust did for me. I look at things, the relationship I have with my mother, for example. I came from a single parent home. When I was born my mother was just barely sixteen, my father was incarcerated. Growing up, my mother was only sixteen years older than I was so it didn't take that much time for her to lose control over the relationship. She didn't want me to be in the streets. You know, I ended up going anyway. So it's like now I try to focus on that with my son. It's kind of difficult parenting from prison, but the things that I learned through the Trust, the assistance that I'm getting from Dr. Mendez help me do this. And I actually speak to my son about certain issues.

n **Una**

I look at the relationship that I have with my mother, the relationship I have with my sister, the relationship I have with my son. I've been in prison for eleven years, but they come see me regularly, they appreciate the transition that I've made. My mother has in her mind that "I don't see why there's a need for you to still be in prison."

n **Una**

And Their Neighborhoods

Guys in here never thought much about the community while they were on the outside. I think we just took it for granted. You're more concerned about yourself – not really caring. You don't have that sense of community. So that's what's been enhanced, really, from in here with the Trust, is that sense of community. You become aware that you have a responsibility to give something back to help uplift your community... or those that need help.

n **Kenny**

And I think a lot of guys don't really know how much our communities are impacted. We see children coming in here we know from the neighborhood, but then the guys might not see it as being like really devastating to that community. Like they think well, it's my homeboy. They roll out the welcoming committee.

n **Kenny**

Preparation For a Successful Return Home

Some of the things that we speak about in the Trust deal with fellows when they're getting ready to come out – being able to plan, you know, in coming home. How would you deal with family relationships? How is that going to impact on your life? And your family? A lot of guys have been there for so long that they don't know how to live with a family once they come home, so that is a transition. Work ethics which we teach is also a part of the transition. Again, like I said, a lot of guys who are uneducated prior to going to prison are coming home now. They may not even know how to write a job résumé. So part of the Trust was about that also.

n **Justice**

You have a lot of guys in prison who are recidivists. A lot of guys go back out to society and they feel like, if they don't get what they need to get in a few months, they just gravitate back toward the things that they knew that brought them into prison in the first place. That's one of the things I think is very important and needs to be addressed much more in prison.

n **Una**

Guys who've had Trust training when they get out are not likely to come back. I have not seen any of the guys I knew who had Trust training coming back and I've met quite a few since I've been out. I'm going on my third year on the outside. All the ones that I've seen, they're still out here. And I would like to form an actual National Trust chapter out here as a form of backup for them. Not only for them but those that are still coming out.

n **Justice**

When guys come in prison, like some guys just feel like this is me. I don't want to change. And I really have a problem with that because I know that people, lot of guys have potential from the prison. You see guys doing some things. You see artists, you see guys doing sculptures, guys doing all type of magnificent things that they were not doing when they were in the streets. They have this artistic ability and whatever other abilities. But sometimes it's like it just doesn't transfer over. Guys get back to society and they revert back to the same thing they did in the first place.

n **Una**

IV. A Plan for Expanding the National Trust into Neighborhoods

I'm one of those individuals who's been pushing a lot of the Trust issues out here amongst other organizations, because I see things that can be done, not just amongst the Trust Fellowship but amongst my peers out here also. A lot of those same values we learned in the Trust... these brothers can use out here. I got a lot of young brothers who are listening. I also have a couple young brothers who are working as a result of things that I've said to them. There's no one out here that's saying these things.

If Dr. Mendez could get something going on out in the communities it would make a difference for a lot of these young brothers. I know it would make a difference because I've been a part of it since I've been home and I've seen how it's made a difference in my own individual spot as well as for some of the friends that are around here.

n **Justice**

Our discussion to this point has attempted to foster an appreciation of the reentry challenge facing poor and minority communities as well as the dynamics of life in prison for the men (and potentially for the women) who return. In the process, we have also shared insights, gleaned from personal testimonies of Trust "Fellows," about the possibilities for inmates to reorient their value systems and to undergo personal transformations – transformations that can: encourage them to take responsibility for their behavior and to become active in the lives of their children and families – transformations that can: help them exercise positive leadership and enable them to make contributions to their prison and/or home communities.

We have fashioned the discussion in this way in order to make one fundamental argument. That is, that the reentry challenge need not be greeted with fear and alarm. It can be approach with a positive agenda. Communities can embrace a positive vision for reintegrating ex-offenders using the principles and precepts that guide the work of the National Trust. In this final section of our paper we will describe how Trust principles and methods can be instituted within communities to accomplish this goal.

Designing A Community-Based Trust Program for Reintegration

Simply stated, the National Trust's community reentry strategy pairs highly impacted reentry communities with their principal "feeder" prisons and targets inmates who have those communities as likely home destinations. The reintegration effort would then combine Trust training and support to those inmates, during their incarceration, with community-based supports upon their release. The community-based supports would provide continued post-release Trust training and would deploy ex-offenders talents and abilities, in service to the community, by placing them in paid and/or volunteer slots in community-based organizations and/or on community improvement projects.

The Trust believes such a strategy will provide ex-offenders a much better, and much needed, "grounding" and sense of belonging in, and commitment to their home communities. It believes there is great promise in this approach. The inmate testimonies, cited above, themselves suggest that Trust-trained ex-offenders can act as powerful redemptive role models for the community's most at-risk young people as well as for other returnees who have not had the Trust experience. And the Trust believes there are ample opportunities to deploy ex-offenders in other similar areas of great community need in which they are uniquely qualified to contribute.

Complicating this issue, however, is an understandable and well-justified ambivalence in returning communities as to whether or not these guys and gals should even be released. Not everyone will be anxious to see some of these ex-offenders come home. For this reason, the National Trust believes that communities, like the inmates themselves need to be trained to see ex-offenders as potential assets rather than liabilities. Thus, there is a need to work with community members and leaders as well as with ex-offenders in cultivating this reintegration vision.

The structure for this kind of reentry initiative then has two principal components: an in-prison institutional component (i.e., the Trust training regime that has been described above) and a community component. Because we have already outlined the former we will devote the remainder of this discussion to what needs to happen in communities to make this strategy work.

The National Trust's vision for the in-community effort has three components. The first addresses the need for increased community awareness and community preparation. The second stresses the need to provide on-going reinforcement and support for the personal transformations and the home transitions the Trust Fellows are striving to make. And the third component focuses on fostering the civic engagement and community deployment and providing opportunities for the returnees to contribute to community improvement efforts and to the well-being of their children, families and neighborhoods.

Community Preparation and Planning. In each targeted community, the National Trust will work with other community organizations to establish a common table at which the challenges and opportunities related to reentry can be identified, discussed and coordinated. This will also be a table around which, communities can create a vision and comprehensive model for:

delivering reentry services; for integrating returnees into the fabric of communities and neighborhoods; and for mobilizing them for the benefit of children, youth and families. To facilitate this preparation and planning, the National Trust is establishing a working relationship with the Urban Institute and its Reentry Mapping Project. Specific activities would include:

- *Forming a community coalition* to work with ex-offenders in refocusing the reentry discussions away from a mostly corrections and law enforcement perspective and into a community change perspective – one that, if managed well, will improve public safety and contribute to community well-being.
- *Developing concrete action strategies* that will mobilize former inmates to make a positive contribution to children, youth, families and neighborhoods hardest hit by the removal, incarceration and return of large number of ex-offenders.
- *Providing data* to insure that city policy makers, community leaders, residents and other community stakeholders have the best available information about the reentry challenge facing the community and about the returning population, available local programs and services, and promising practices.

In-Community Ex-Offender Supports. In each targeted community, the National Trust will establish a support vehicle for former inmates to reinforce their positive personal transformations and assure their successful transitions back into their home communities. Two components are envisioned.

A capacity for *In-Community Trust Training* will be established. Its function will be to continue the Trust experience for those who participated, while in prison, as well as offer first-time training and exposure to others who are returning from facilities where they have not had Trust training. In establishing this capacity, the Trust will look to “franchise” an existing organization with ex-offender experience where possible. Franchising priority will be given to organizations with track records of connecting ex-offenders to housing, education, job training, and other important post-release services.

The second component is *Ex-Offender Peer Support*. In this effort, the National Trust will work with its community franchise and with other local ex-offender organizations to create and/or strengthen a support group structure that will be a vehicle for Trust Fellows and other ex-offenders to network, share experiences and broker the notions of community contribution as a means of personal redemption. It is the Trust’s intent to use these types of networking opportunities and structures as means of outreach to the larger population of former offenders cited in the introduction. The notion here will be to spread the contagion of community connectedness and community contribution.

Civic Engagement and Community Contribution. The local Trust franchises will be expected to connect to organizations and entities at the center of the communities’ community-building efforts. In so doing, these franchises will play a lead role in brokering opportunities for the returnees to become engaged, alongside other community residents, in the ongoing change efforts. To enhance the civic engagement experience, the project will also work through the communities’ agenda setting processes to identify priority projects and initiatives in which to engage the reentering ex-offenders on a paid or volunteer basis. Candidate areas for this kind of project involvement could include:

Positive Youth Development. The project can provide ex-offenders as “redemptive role models” for young people in the following areas.

- **Responsible Fatherhood:** to reconnect and/or strengthen the ties between men who have been incarcerated and their children; and to offer counsel and support to young, current and expectant fathers about accepting their responsibilities for supporting and parenting their children.
- **Youth Mentoring.** The project will have an ample supply of men and women returning to economically depressed and crime-ridden neighborhoods where the challenge of positive youth development is greatest and where middle-class mentors may be less effective, and, in any event, may be scarce.
- **Gang Intervention and Crime Prevention.** Public safety is another area where ex-offenders are uniquely qualified to make a positive difference. The Trust expects them to be a major resource in: (1) advising on questions of violence reduction and on safety in public spaces; (2) moderating gang activities and mediating gang disputes; and (3) providing counseling and role modeling for neighborhood youth who may be engaged in high-risk behaviors.

Family Strengthening. The focus on families is that: (1) ex-offenders have opportunities to bring added supports rather than added burdens to their family structures, however configured; and that (2), the families themselves can provide the kind of “re-grounding” and reintegrating support that will facilitate the successful return of ex-offenders to community life. At the center of these concerns is a focus on family serving systems and the degree to which they function well in the service of ex-offender families. Two main thrust will govern this aspect of the project.

- **Family Reunification.** A primary thrust for the family strengthening strand of the Trust’s project will be to work collaboratively with the family support agencies and programs to assure that they are responsive to the needs of these more fragile families to which the ex-offenders return.

- **Family Economic Success.** The project will also focus specific attention on how to assure that the Casey Foundation’s vision of FES is functioning for the benefit of the reentry families specifically through:

Workforce Development: connecting ex-offenders to jobs that pay family-supporting wages and provide opportunities for advancement. The project will work with county employment and training systems to pursue neighborhood-based employment strategies that combine extensive case management, assessment, support and basic education.

Family Economic Supports: enhancing people’s ability to increase their personal and family income and to build their asset base. These strategies include access to tax credits, consumer financial services, credit repair/debt services, and asset-building tools such as individual development accounts (IDAs) and homeownership.

Community Investment: investment in such things as housing, business and/or facilities development that are synergistic and offer multiplier effects on perceptions of quality-of-life improvements in communities and neighborhoods.

Neighborhood and Community Development. It is the Trust’s strong belief that neighborhood and community development are primarily about enhancing the strength and well-being of a community’s youth and families. But, in addition and as stated, the project will strive to help returning ex-offenders connect to the larger, ongoing improvement efforts in community-building neighborhoods where additional issues of public safety, employment, economic development, housing and many others are the focus of neighborhood nonprofits, residents and public and private sector leaders.

We're not all predators. And we hurt. A lot of the men, brothers here is hurting. All we want to do is we want to be understood and to know that we've got some type of support in terms of a voice that can say, "you're incarcerating too many people for too long. We can go home and we can do good things if you will only let us."

n **Kenny**

V. CONCLUSION: The Need for New Approaches

The reality, for today's urban, poor and minority communities, is that state and federal prisons are releasing ex-offenders at a rate of more than 11,000 per week and the large majority is headed their way. Like it or not, most of the communities now struggling to improve conditions for their children, families, and neighborhoods are now, or soon will be, sorely pressed to respond effectively to this annual influx or risk a possible degradation in the outcomes of their community-change efforts.

The National Trust for the Development of African-American Men offers a powerful vision and positive strategy that it believes will help communities effectively address this challenge. This vision and strategy is premised on the belief that we need to change the direction of our thinking on this issue – to move the reentry discussion: away from what communities *must* do to *prepare* for them (the ex-offenders); and more towards what the returnees *can* do to *contribute* to them (the communities). If indeed the game is community building then it is the entire community that must be built and it is the entire community that must do the building.