

Redefining Justice: A Pilot Initiative for Front-End Rehabilitation in Mississippi

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Abstract

This paper explores the urgent need for front-end rehabilitation programs in Mississippi's criminal justice system. The discussion begins by illustrating the devastating cycle of poverty, addiction, and incarceration and examines the history and policies that have perpetuated mass incarceration due to Mississippi's adherence to punitive justice practices. While notable reforms like House Bill 585 have made progress in addressing systemic issues, they remain insufficient for tackling the root causes of recidivism and crime.

The proposed pilot program uses already established community resources for mental health services, addiction recovery, education, and job readiness training and connects them with the local county jail. Drawing from successful models like Northeast Mississippi Community College's inmate education programs and Lafayette County Detention Center's mental health initiatives, the program seeks to equip inmates with the tools to rebuild their lives. Key components include peer-led addiction support groups, GED and vocational education, and a work placement initiative that allows inmates to gain employment while serving their sentences.

The paper outlines the challenges of implementation, such as funding and inter-agency collaboration, and proposes sustainable solutions through grants and reinvestment of savings from reduced incarceration costs. By transforming jails from punitive holding centers into hubs of opportunity, the program aims to break the cycles of incarceration while fostering safer communities. This pilot initiative in Pontotoc County has the potential to become a scalable model for systemic change across Mississippi.

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Introduction

Emily is a 19-year-old single mother balancing the demands of college classes and raising her two-year-old daughter. Her life is far from easy, but she's determined to build a better future for both of them, so she spends all of her time studying for exams and working part-time as a waitress. Then, her world takes a sudden turn after a car accident leaves her with a fractured femur that requires surgery. Her doctor prescribes pain medication to help her recover and for a while, she believes the worst is behind her. But once the prescriptions stop, the pain lingers.

Desperate for relief, she turns to a friend who offers her a few pills to get by. Over time, the pills become the only way she can pull herself out of bed and before she realizes it, she's buying them regularly on the street. Now hooked on oxycodone, her addiction siphons away what little income she earns as a waitress. She drops out of college to work full-time, but her meager paycheck barely covers rent and necessities, and the mounting expenses of her addiction push her into financial ruin.

On an especially cool day in October, in an act of desperation, Emily tries to shoplift her daughter a jacket, socks, a pair of tennis shoes, and a Hershey's chocolate bar from the local Walmart. When she's caught, the officers find three oxycodone pills tucked into her bra -- pills she had bought with her last \$30 just hours before. That money could have purchased the items she tried to steal, but her addiction clouded her judgment. Now, instead of a warning or a chance to make things right, she's charged with shoplifting and felony drug possession. Her bond is set far beyond what she or her family can afford and her already crumbling world falls apart.

Her daughter is placed into CPS custody, and the rent on her apartment goes unpaid. Within weeks, she is evicted from her apartment and her car is repossession. When she's finally released on probation eight months later, she has nothing. No home, no car, no job. She is unable

to find work without transportation, cannot get transportation without a job, and her ruined credit and eviction disqualifies her from getting housing. The cycle of punishment did not end with her release, but rather it extends into every aspect of her life. Her plans for college and a better future are now a distant dream.

This story is not unique. It illustrates the devastating ripple effects of a criminal conviction and the justice system's failure to account for the complexities of life. The system punishes without addressing the root causes and continues the cycles of poverty and addiction. To change this, we must re-evaluate our focus to provide individuals like this young mother a second chance.

The Lasting Impact of Incarceration

Imagine a fleeting moment of poor judgment unraveling the fabric of your life. In the United States today, a criminal conviction, even for a minor offense, becomes a permanent mark that shadows a person long after the bars have closed behind them. It lingers and shapes every decision, every opportunity, and every connection from that moment forward. A single criminal conviction has the power to upend a life by severing ties with family, derailing career prospects, and creating barriers to basic needs like housing and education. The rising wave of incarceration in the country has created a cycle where individuals are punished and then stripped of the tools they need to rebuild their lives once back in society.

Our justice system is a relentless pursuit of punishment that too often neglects the potential for redemption. Jails were once intended as temporary stops for those who have drifted but now have become overcrowded warehouses of despair where rehabilitation is little more than a forgotten promise. Opportunities for growth such as mental health support, education, or job

training are left untapped and those inside are left to return to the world no better equipped to navigate its challenges than when they entered. The system takes away more than a person's freedom, it also takes away their hope.

This problem is not confined to the sprawling prisons of Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York which are each known for their high crime rates and overwhelmed justice systems. It also reaches into the smallest corners of America through the small-town county jails where one can find mothers and fathers or sons and daughters often detained for minor, non-violent offenses. These people will encounter the same systemic neglect as those who have committed acts of repeated violence. The justice system fails to differentiate between those who need help and those who pose a genuine threat because the end result is the same: punishment.

Background of Mass Incarceration

The United States' unrelenting pursuit of its tough-on-crime approach has led to a staggering phenomenon so extensive it has earned its own term: "mass incarceration." David Garland coined the term "mass imprisonment" in 2000 to describe the drastic expansion of incarceration in the United States from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s. This era marked a departure from historical norms of punishment and introduced what Garland described as a "systematic imprisonment of whole groups of the population" (Garland 2001b, 2; Feeley and Simon 1992). According to Garland, this approach disproportionately impacted African American and Latino males who had lower levels of education. Instead of addressing individual circumstances, mass incarceration broadly targeted specific demographic groups and directly embedded systemic inequalities into the fabric of the criminal justice system.

The term “mass incarceration” not only defines the sheer scale of imprisonment in the United States but also reflects how we in America have shifted our beliefs on punishment. Historically, incarceration was reserved for the most severe offenses but, beginning in the mid-1970s, the United States began its shift from the land of the free to the land of the incarcerated. This transformation was fueled by a series of policies and declarations that tried to address societal issues through punitive measures, with one of the most pivotal moments marking the dawn of a new era in American criminal justice.

President Richard Nixon

June 17th, 1971, is a pivotal moment in American History. It was the day Disneyland welcomed its 100-millionth guest, the day Carole King's album "Tapestry" reached number one on the U.S. album charts, and the day that President Richard Nixon stood in the West Wing of the White House and delivered a statement that would change the course of American policy for decades. Standing beside his newly appointed drug authority, President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse "public enemy number one." He stated

"To fight and defeat this enemy, it's necessary to wage a new, all-out offensive" (Barber, 2016).

After this announcement, there was no shock, no panic, nor mass fear sweeping the nation. The stock market did not plunge, and protests did not erupt in the streets. There was simply acceptance- a quiet, almost indifferent reception to what should have been a monumental declaration. Looking back, it was hardly even seen as a moment of significance. However, the reality is that Richard Nixon had just made a declaration of war, one which would be considered the most expensive in American history- the “War on Drugs.”

Nixon justified the necessity of this war by pointing to the alarming rise in drug abuse across the country (Ahn-Redding, 2019). His concerns were already being echoed by other political figures such as Governor Ronald Reagan, who in his 1970 "State of the State" address warned of the growing "problem of drug abuse." That same year, Congress passed the Federal Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, laying the legislative foundation for a nationwide crackdown on drugs (Farber, 2021). Nixon strategically aligned his anti-drug rhetoric with his more accepted "law and order" agenda by capitalizing on public fears of rising crime rates

This alignment towards "law and order" was part of a large political shift within the Republican Party during the 1960s and 1970s that used concerns about crime and public safety to gain political leverage. Before this period, criminal justice was not a typical issue spoken about in the public eye until the Republican Party began to see it as an opportunity. Barry Goldwater was the 1964 presidential candidate who saw the escalating crime wave of the 1960s as a golden opportunity. While his campaign failed nationally, Goldwater's emphasis on crime as a wedge issue resonated in the Deep South where he was able to gain traction in five states. Success here was remarkable since, at the time, southern states were traditionally Democratic strongholds known as the "Solid South." This demonstrated to Republicans that crime could be weaponized politically to challenge Democratic dominance in the South.

Building on Goldwater's strategy, Nixon fully embraced the "law and order" narrative during his 1968 presidential campaign. His focus on crime and public safety became a cornerstone of his platform. In his Republican National Convention acceptance speech, Nixon underscored his message by invoking the words "law" and "order" 21 times, warning that "the nation with the greatest tradition of the rule of law is plagued by unprecedented lawlessness"

(Trautman & Rizer, 2018, p. 3). This approach not only secured Nixon's victory but also cemented the Republican Party's tough-on-crime approach as a central feature of its political identity.

The Nixon's "War on Drugs" had two key objectives: first was to expand the enforcement of existing drug laws to reduce the supply of drugs and second was to increase public awareness which would reduce the demand for drugs. This was a multifaceted effort performed by federal, state, and local governments that authorized harsh anti-drug laws and pushed to prosecute those who would have previously been considered low-level offenders. (Shanahan & Kurti, 2019). Despite these goals, the "War on Drugs" never actually managed to impact the use of drugs and is today remembered for criminalizing drug use and locking away addicts.

President Ronald Reagan

Although Richard Nixon's declaration of the War on Drugs began the steep rise of incarceration, President Ronald Reagan significantly expanded the anti-drug crusade. Reagan's administration pushed the message of the dangers of drug use as more than simply a public health issue but as a threat to the nation's moral and social fabric. By using the groundwork laid by Nixon, Reagan amplified the fear of drugs and made it clear it was a dire threat to the nation. During Reagan's Address to the Nation on September 14, 1986, he said, "Drugs are menacing our society. They're threatening our values and undercutting our institutions. They're killing our children" (Reagan, 1986). He warned Americans that their values, institutions, and even their children were under siege, and by fostering a climate of fear, he positioned the "War on Drugs" as a battle to save the very soul of the country (Hawdon, 2001).

The Reagan administration was aggressive in how it approached the “War on Drugs,” illustrated by the passage of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984 (Ahn-Redding, 2018). This legislation expanded federal powers to address drug trafficking and imposed more severe penalties for related offenses (Pascual, 2021). In 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act furthered these efforts by establishing mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses as well as creating disparities between crack and powder cocaine offenses (United States Department of Justice, 1986). Mandatory minimum sentences emerged as a cornerstone of the tough-on-crime era as a policy pushing justice as unwavering and absolute. These sentencing laws were designed to deliver swift and certain punishments and advocates heralded them as a necessary tool to deter crime and ensure fairness (Red, 2019). Mandatory minimums require judges to impose a minimum prison sentence for various offenses, such as drug and gun-related offenses, without allowing individual circumstances to be considered. (Cheap on Crime, 2015).

One of the significant achievements of Reagan's anti-drug initiatives was the creation of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in 1988. This agency was designed to coordinate the nation’s drug control efforts by bridging gaps between federal agencies and ensuring a unified strategy to combat the growing drug crisis (Wray, 1993). Domestically, the focus went on prevention and public awareness, as shown by the "Just Say No" campaign led by First Lady Nancy Reagan. This became one of the most recognizable symbols of the War on Drugs which aimed to educate young people about the dangers of drug use and empower them to make informed decisions (Bourne, 2008). Internationally, Reagan attempted to address the global dimensions of drug trafficking by fostering partnerships and alliances with other nations. These efforts included providing military and financial support to countries involved in combating drug

cartels and disrupting trafficking routes positioning the United States as a leader in the global fight against drugs (Crick, 2019, pp. 152-153).

Reagan's time in office is now remembered as the "tough on crime" era that redefined the American justice system. Built on a foundation of fear and control, this period is known for punishment over prevention and policies that strip away judicial discretion. The federal initiatives trickled down to states and began shaping local policies. In Mississippi, the tough-on-crime philosophy meshed seamlessly with preexisting practices and as the federal war on drugs gained momentum, Mississippi saw a surge in incarceration rates that perpetuated the cycles of poverty and inequality. Mississippi not only adopted these presidential policies but amplified and weaved them deeply into its own criminal justice system. The influence is unmistakable and over four decades later, Mississippi still clings to strict sentencing practices which has propelled the state to the forefront of incarceration rates in the United States.

Background of Mississippi Policy

Mississippi's criminal justice policies have evolved over decades, but the core belief in punitive punishment has remained deeply rooted as the foundation of the system. This groundwork can be traced back to the early 20th century when the state's justice system was heavily influenced by practices that emphasized retribution. The mid-20th century saw Mississippi doubling down on this approach by using incarceration as a means to enforce social control with prisons functioning more as warehouses for individuals deemed undesirable by society. The introduction of chain gangs and harsh practices was seen as beneficial to the state since it provided a source of free labor (Wilson, 1933).

By the 1980s and 1990s, federal initiatives such as the War on Drugs and the tough-on-crime movement began influencing state-level policies in Mississippi. The state adopted harsh sentencing laws, mandatory minimums, and truth-in-sentencing policies that required offenders to serve significant portions of their sentences before becoming eligible for parole. These measures reflected the era's national shift toward prioritizing public safety and deterrence at the expense of individualized sentencing. Mississippi also mirrored the federal trend of incarcerating individuals for minor, non-violent offenses which are particularly drug-related crimes. The punitive philosophy of this era has left a lasting legacy that has created systemic challenges that continue to shape Mississippi's justice policies today.

Background of Mental Health Policy

The history of addressing mental health disorders in prisons is deeply troubling in its long-standing failure to provide adequate care. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mental health services in prisons were virtually nonexistent. Prisoners suffering from mental health issues were often subjected to cruel and inhumane punishments like prolonged solitary confinement or physical restraints. These harsh practices not only failed to address their underlying conditions but often exacerbated them by pushing the prisoners towards violence and alarmingly high suicide rates (Goffman, 1961).

By the mid-20th century, the civil rights movement began shedding light on the inhumane treatment of prisoners with mental health disorders. Advocates stressed the need for prisons to acknowledge mental health as a component of inmate welfare. As awareness grew towards the importance of providing humane treatment, many prisons simply lacked the necessary funding and trained personnel to implement mental health treatment (Rothschild & Allen, 2003).

The deinstitutionalization movement of the 1960s and 1970s further complicated the issue. As psychiatric hospitals closed their doors and community mental health services failed to meet the growing demand, most individuals with mental health disorders found themselves funneled into the criminal justice system based merely on the lack of other options. Although prisons were ill-equipped to serve as de facto mental health institutions, they still became filled with individuals whose main need was mental health treatment. The lack of trained mental health professionals and effective treatment options created a revolving door for individuals cycling in and out of incarceration without receiving the support to manage their conditions.

Current State of Policy

Policy Reforms

With nearly two million Americans confined behind bars, "the United States has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world" (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). Leading the charge, Mississippi stands at the peak of this crisis, unmatched in its commitment to punitive justice. According to the World Population Review, Mississippi incarcerates more people per capita than any state or nation across the globe (Mitchell, 2022). These statistics show how reform is a necessity. Without drastic changes, these numbers will continue to increase.

Mississippi's prison population has skyrocketed by an astounding 396 percent between 1980 and 2022 (Criminon, 2022). By December 2022, the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) reported a record-breaking inmate population of 24,106, marking an alarming 11.4 percent increase in just one year (Mississippi Today, 2022). This relentless rise has placed the state under immense pressure by straining already overcrowded facilities and reducing access to the few rehabilitative and educational programs available.

The consequences of this growth are devastating. Overcrowded prisons are not only ineffective but also unsafe by creating environments where rehabilitation becomes an afterthought to survival. In a world divided by race and dominated by gangs, Mississippi's justice system perpetuates the cycle of crime rather than breaking it. Meanwhile, the financial toll on the state and its taxpayers is staggering. Housing, feeding, and supervising tens of thousands of inmates demands an enormous amount of resources from the state budget.

The financial burden of Mississippi's incarceration system has grown substantially between 1977 and 2019 with local and state expenditures increasing by a staggering 347 percent. This took spending from \$18 billion to \$82 billion “surpassing growth in education, police, highways and roads, health and hospitals, and housing and community development” (Urban Institute, 2020). When looking at per-person funding, the disparity becomes even more obvious. From 1979–80 to 2012–13, per capita corrections expenses in Mississippi increased by 185 percent per pupil while expenses in PK–12 education grew by only 73 percent during that period. (State and Local Expenditures on Corrections and Education, 2016).

This system has become an insatiable black hole where billions of dollars are poured annually and yields little more than overcrowded cells and broken lives. Legislators are forced to divert critical funding away from areas that could uplift the state to sustain a system that offers no meaningful return. Instead of investing in the future, Mississippi spends its resources warehousing its citizens. This prioritization of punishment over rehabilitation preserves the cycle of poverty, crime, and despair.

Mississippi Reforms

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, Mississippi has made strides in implementing diversion programs, including drug courts, mental health courts, and veterans' courts along with the Mississippi Pre-Trial Diversion Program that was initiated in 2009 by the Mississippi Department of Corrections. These programs offer resources such as substance abuse treatment, mental health services, job training, and education and have shown remarkable success at over 80 percent.

Substantial reforms were introduced in 2014 when then-Governor Phil Bryant signed House Bill (H.B.) 585 into law. This legislation aimed to reduce prison admissions and address the root causes of crime through front-end reforms. Among its provisions, H.B. 585 expanded the use of drug courts and non-adjudicated probation which would allow more individuals to benefit from alternatives to incarceration. It also introduced a tiered structure to the controlled substance statute to differentiate between higher and lower-level drug offenses and revised penalties for simple drug possession to better align with the severity of the offense (Khalid et al., 2023).

The bill made a significant reform in that it increased judicial discretion by empowering judges to order drug court participation for individuals convicted of certain commercial drug offenses. It also allocated \$10.85 million in reinvested prison spending to strengthen accountability courts to strengthen the state's specialty court system (Pew, 2014). H.B. 585 also established presumptive parole for statutes related to drug and property offenses in hopes of promoting more refined sentencing practices.

Mental Health Reforms

In recent years, there has been a focus on reforms intended to improve mental health care in prisons such as the enactment of the Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) of 1996. This federal legislation was designed to address the treatment of incarcerated individuals with mental health issues while also providing prisoners with access to mental health services. The PLRA requires prisons to ensure that inmates have access to qualified mental health professionals and mandates the availability of essential medications and treatments for mental health disorders.

Under the PLRA, prisons are required to offer a range of mental health services, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychopharmacology, and substance abuse treatment programs (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996). Reforms like the PLRA have laid the groundwork for progress, but the journey toward comprehensive mental health care in prisons is far from complete. Expanding funding for mental health programs and increasing the hiring of qualified professionals is essential to bridge existing gaps. By prioritizing the mental health of incarcerated individuals, correctional systems can reduce recidivism and contribute to safer and healthier communities upon inmates' release.

Front-End Rehabilitation

The undeniable cost of mass incarceration has pushed criminal justice reform to the forefront of policy initiatives. However, many of these reforms have predominantly focused on the “back end” of the system by addressing issues such as sentencing reductions, parole reforms, and prison conditions. While these efforts are important, they largely fail to address the root causes of crime and often come too late to disrupt the cycles of addiction, mental illness, and

poverty that funnel individuals into the system. To create lasting change, it is crucial to shift focus toward prevention and early intervention.

House Bill (H.B.) 585 marked a significant step toward the concept of front-end rehabilitation by focusing on reducing incarceration rates through the entry points into the criminal justice system. By pushing measures such as expanding drug courts, introducing tiered penalties for drug offenses, and reinvesting savings into accountability courts, H.B. 585 sought to divert non-violent offenders away from prison and into treatment and rehabilitation programs.

The impact of H.B. 585 has been substantial. According to an evaluation by the Urban Institute, the reforms contributed to a 16 percent reduction in Mississippi's prison population between 2014 and 2021 which saved the state an estimated \$40 million in avoided prison costs. There was also a 24 percent reduction in prison admissions for drug-related offenses during the same time along with a drop in the overall incarceration rate which fell by 11 percent in the years immediately following the bill's enactment. These changes not only helped alleviate overcrowding in the state's prisons but also saved millions of dollars in corrections spending (Khalid et al., 2023).

However, H.B. 585 is just a starting point. For individuals like Emily, the 19-year-old single mother introduced at the start of this paper, the limited scope of existing reforms would not be enough to stop the cycle of incarceration. Although her time in county jail kept her temporarily off the streets and sober, it failed to address the root causes of her struggles- her addiction, lack of coping skills, and limited job opportunities. She was released on probation with no parenting or anger management skills, no help completing her education, and no tools to secure meaningful employment. Emily, like so many others, is now thrust into a world where the barriers she faced before incarceration have only multiplied.

If Emily's life was challenging before her arrest, it is almost insurmountable now. Her brief stint in jail did little more than delay her downward spiral, as it provided none of the resources or support, she needed to change her trajectory. She was unable to complete her education, received no therapy, and considering her job skills are limited to her brief waitressing position, she is left to face the same obstacles that led to her incarceration in the first place. Without intervention, individuals like Emily are set up to fail and will inevitably cycle back into the justice system.

This is where the concept of jails as places for healing, training, and education becomes not only relevant but essential. We must begin to view jails not simply as warehouses for the incarcerated but as opportunities to intervene and provide the tools necessary for successful reintegration into society. For non-violent offenders like Emily, incarceration should be more than a punishment; it should be a turning point.

It is important to acknowledge that not all incarcerated individuals have the same needs. There are those who commit violent crimes, whose primary interaction with the criminal justice system must be to protect society and impose appropriate consequences for their actions. However, we must distinguish between violent career criminals and individuals who have made mistakes and need help. The latter group, those who could benefit from education, support, and rehabilitation, represents 41 percent of Mississippi's current prison population and should be treated as such (The Oversight Task Force, 2023).

By reimagining the role of jails, we have the power to create a justice system that not only enforces the law but also provides opportunities for change. Punishment and protection will always have a place in criminal justice, but for those who are ready to rebuild their lives, we must offer more than confinement- we must offer hope. Imagine a system where jails are places

where addiction is treated, mental health is prioritized, parenting skills are taught, and futures are forged through vocational training and educational programs. By embracing the concept of front-end rehabilitation, we can give people the tools to break the cycles that have ensnared generations. Only then can we create a justice system that serves not only its laws but also its people.

Pilot Program in Pontotoc County Jail

The Pontotoc County Jail is located in Pontotoc, Mississippi, and serves as a detention facility for individuals awaiting trial or serving sentences for lesser offenses. According to Jail Exchange (2024), the facility has a capacity to house approximately 115 inmates and per direct communication with the jail, it typically maintains an average population of around 80 inmates which is a manageable level of occupancy relative to its total capacity. Inmates detained at the Pontotoc County Jail typically fall under two categories: those awaiting trial for offenses or serving short-term sentences for violations (Pontotoc County Jail, 2024).

The inmate population at Pontotoc County Jail mirrors the demographics of the surrounding community but with a disproportionate representation of individuals facing socio-economic challenges. The majority of inmates are male and are incarcerated for property crimes, drug-related offenses, or probation violations (Pontotoc County Jail, 2024). Violent offenses are less common among the inmate population here, which aligns with the county's overall lower rate of violent crimes (Neighborhood Scout, 2024). This demographic profile shows the need for rehabilitation programs aimed at addressing underlying factors such as poverty and substance abuse that contribute to criminal behavior.

Why Pontotoc County Jail

Pontotoc County Jail's relatively small size makes it an ideal candidate for implementing a pilot rehabilitation program. With its modest capacity and consistently manageable population, the facility offers a model environment for testing new initiatives without the challenges associated with overcrowding. Its size would allow for close monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes while the modest inmate population size would support personalized intervention strategies. The demographic makeup of the inmate population at Pontotoc County Jail further strengthens its suitability for a pilot program since the majority of inmates are non-violent offenders which is the target population for front-end rehabilitation programs.

Beyond benefiting the local community, a pilot program at Pontotoc County Jail has the potential to serve as a scalable model for other counties in Mississippi. If successful, the program's structure and strategies could be adapted to larger facilities or tailored to meet the needs of different communities. By setting a precedent for innovative rehabilitation, Pontotoc County Jail could lead the way in modernizing correctional practices across Mississippi.

Program Components

Rehabilitation programs within correctional facilities have the potential to transform lives, reduce recidivism, and strengthen communities. As of now, local jails in Mississippi have been seen as mere holding centers when they have the opportunity to be so much more. By shifting this perspective and implementing targeted rehabilitation initiatives, jails can work closely with their own local communities to grow long-lasting relationships that will rid the stigma of inmates while creating a successful path forward for those who will be released.

The objective of the proposed programs at Pontotoc County Jail is to address critical areas that often contribute to incarceration and recidivism, such as mental health struggles, addiction, lack of education, and limited job skills. These initiatives are grounded in the principles of rehabilitation by equipping inmates with the support and knowledge necessary for successful reintegration back into society. By focusing on these key factors, the program is designed to not only reduce the jail population over time but also empower individuals to build a stable, self-sufficient future once released.

Mental Health Services

The proposed rehabilitation program at Pontotoc County Jail would take inspiration from the successful mental health initiative at Lafayette County Detention Center (LCDC) in Oxford, Mississippi. LCDC has been able to give inmates access to comprehensive mental health care through a partnership with CommuniCare which provides services such as behavioral therapy, crisis intervention, and access to the Mobile Crisis Response Team for twenty-four seven assistance to inmates experiencing mental health emergencies.

Lafayette County Sheriff Joey East discussed the significance of addressing mental health in a detention setting, stating, “We ensure that inmates with mental health issues are stable and receive the care they need” (Schnugg, 2024). He further explained the program’s dual focus by stating, “We have more people dealing with mental health issues than addictions, so we can address both here now. We can start their care here while they’re with us until they are moved to another facility or released” (Schnugg, 2022).

Implementing a similar mental health program at Pontotoc County Jail in partnership with a local mental health care facility would be transformative for inmates with untreated or

even undiagnosed mental health issues. A collaboration with a community-based provider similar to Lafayette County's partnership with CommuniCare would ensure access to essential services for inmates while assisting jail staff by reducing stress and potential conflicts within the facility. Partnering with a local mental health care provider in Pontotoc would also strengthen community ties for inmates by ensuring continuity of treatment after release. Ultimately, such a program would position Pontotoc County Jail as a leader in rehabilitation-focused corrections and would demonstrate how community-oriented facilities can make meaningful changes in the lives of those they serve.

Addiction Services

Addressing addiction within the incarcerated population is crucial for breaking the cycle of recidivism and promoting successful reintegration into society. However, financial constraints limit the availability of comprehensive on-site substance abuse counseling in correctional facilities. While incarceration may appear cost-effective in the short term, the long-term expenses associated with repeated offenses and re-incarceration place a significant burden on taxpayers. To mitigate these challenges, implementing peer support groups facilitated by Certified Peer Support Specialists (CPSS) can serve as an effective and cost-efficient alternative.

Certified Peer Support Specialists (CPSS) are individuals who have lived experience with mental health challenges or substance use disorders and have undergone specialized training to support others in their recovery journeys. In Mississippi, applicants must successfully finish a training program provided by the Mississippi Department of Mental Health (DMH) which includes education in recovery concepts and skill-building for effective peer relationships. After training, candidates must pass a written examination to demonstrate their competency (Mississippi Department of Mental Health, 2022).

Integrating CPSS-facilitated peer support groups within jails can be a cost-effective alternative to traditional substance abuse counseling. These specialists can facilitate programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings, as well as conduct relapse prevention workshops and substance abuse education sessions. Their firsthand understanding of addiction and recovery enables them to connect with inmates on a personal level by fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding. This peer-led model not only provides emotional support but also equips inmates with practical tools and strategies to manage their recovery.

The benefits of integrating CPSS-led programs extend beyond the immediate support provided during incarceration because completion of these programs can serve as a powerful testament to an inmate's commitment to change. Inmates will be incentivized to participate in and complete programs for certificates of completion that can be offered to judges during sentencing hearings as well as for parents who have lost custody of their children, as it demonstrates proactive steps toward sobriety. However, the most important aspect of these programs is to help inmates establish a healthy and supportive community necessary to maintain sobriety upon release.

By participating in peer-led groups like AA and NA, inmates build connections with others who understand the struggles of addiction and recovery. These relationships will extend beyond incarceration and provide immediate access to sponsors and a network of healthy, sober individuals after release. This sense of belonging and accountability can be a cornerstone of sustained recovery as it offers a safety net during moments of vulnerability after release.

Education

Education is a cornerstone of rehabilitation. Studies consistently show that access to educational opportunities significantly reduces recidivism rates, improves employment prospects, and increases an individual's likelihood of reintegration into society. For many inmates, earning a GED can be the first step toward rebuilding their lives by giving them the confidence and skills to pursue stable employment or further education upon release. Because of this, several Mississippi jails have already implemented successful education programs in partnership with local community colleges.

Northeast Mississippi Community College (NEMCC) has taken a proactive approach to inmate education by providing GED and HiSET classes to jails within its district, including Alcorn, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo, and Union Counties. These programs offer inmates the opportunity to earn high school equivalency diplomas through structured classes and testing. NEMCC collaborates with the Mississippi Department of Education to ensure its programs meet state standards by providing inmates with access to qualified instructors, study materials, and testing services. Per Ms. Carla Faulkner, project coordinator for the Mississippi Humanities Council (MHC), NEMCC also participates in the "Jails to Jobs" program in Alcorn County which combines education with vocational training.

In contrast, Itawamba Community College (ICC) oversees the Pontotoc County Jail's region under the five-county district agreement and currently does not provide GED or other educational classes to the jails within its jurisdiction. This lack of educational programs leaves a significant gap in services for inmates who could benefit from such opportunities. While ICC's absence of programs creates a barrier, it also opens the door for collaboration with NEMCC which has the expertise and resources to bring its proven model to Pontotoc County Jail.

For NEMCC to provide educational services at Pontotoc County Jail, several logistical challenges would have to be addressed. The five-county district agreement, established in the mid-20th century, restricts community colleges from operating outside their designated regions. For Pontotoc County Jail, this means that any educational initiative must involve ICC rather than NEMCC unless specific permissions are granted. To overcome this hurdle, the jail administration would need to work with ICC's president, Mr. Jay Allen, to establish a customized program that would permit NEMCC to extend beyond the typical location requirements to offer programs such as HiSET and GED at Pontotoc County Jail.

In addition to GED preparation, the program would focus on inspiring long-term educational goals through college planning support. Advisors from the community college would visit the jail once a month to host group information sessions and individual consultations for inmates interested in pursuing higher education. These sessions would introduce inmates to college enrollment processes, available programs, and financial aid options like Second Chance Pell Grants. Advisors would help inmates establish personalized education plans by setting actionable steps for applying to college and securing funding after release. This approach equips inmates with both immediate educational achievements and a clear pathway to further their education.

Earning a GED can be transformative for inmates academically, but also by providing a vital boost in confidence. For many, achieving this milestone is the first step in realizing their potential and breaking free from the limitations of their past. Equally important is the impact of setting education goals as part of a broader reentry plan. Inmates leave jail with no clear direction and return to familiar environments and behaviors that led to their incarceration. Introducing the possibility of higher education encourages them to consider alternative paths and

take proactive steps toward changing their life. By simply equipping inmates with a plan, county jail will reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

Job Skills and Job Readiness

One of the most significant barriers to successful reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals is the lack of job skills and employment opportunities. Without the ability to earn a stable income, those who are released return to what they know and find themselves trapped in cycles of poverty and recidivism. The implementation of a job skills and readiness program, called Community Career Placement (CCP), at Pontotoc County Jail could serve as the means in breaking this cycle. While such a program presents challenges in terms of implementation, its potential benefits for the inmates, the jail, and the community far outweigh these obstacles.

The success of Community Career Placement (CCP) would hinge on collaboration with local businesses and shops local to Pontotoc County since it would allow eligible inmates to work for these local businesses while residing at the county jail. This style of work program would provide them with the opportunity to build valuable job skills, establish a work history, and earn an income for themselves as well as the jail. By creating relationships with community employers, the jail would be integrating inmates into the workforce by getting them a job they could keep once they are reintegrated into society.

Eligibility for the program would be carefully determined to ensure that participants pose minimal risk and have demonstrated a commitment to rehabilitation. Inmates who have completed four months in the facility maintained good behavior and participated in all other rehabilitative programs offered would qualify. This ensures that the program prioritizes individuals who are actively working to improve their circumstances. Moreover, businesses

participating in the program would be vetted and provided with clear guidelines to foster a productive and safe work environment. The goal is to create opportunities for inmates to establish relationships with employers who are willing to offer them continued employment upon release.

To ensure sustainability, a percentage of the inmates' earnings would be allocated to cover the costs of the program. This approach not only reduces the financial burden on the county but also allows participants to actively invest in their own transformation by creating a sense of accountability and empowerment. The inmates participating in the program would be required to work for local businesses at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour to incentivize local business owners to participate. To help sustain the program and reduce financial burdens on the county, 45 percent of their earnings would be allotted to the jail to cover costs such as extra staff hours and transportation. Of the inmate's portion, 30 percent of the income would be deposited into their commissary account for the inmate to have immediate access. The remaining 25 percent of their earnings would be deposited into a personal savings account for the inmate which would ensure they have financial resources upon release to secure housing, transportation, or other essentials.

By implementing this work release program, Pontotoc County Jail has the opportunity to redefine how local facilities approach rehabilitation. The initiative not only helps inmates gain job skills and financial stability but also strengthens the local economy and reduces recidivism rates. With careful planning, collaboration, and transparency, this program could serve as a model for other counties by showcasing the power of rehabilitation-focused approaches in transforming lives and communities.

Addressing Potential Challenges

Funding

Funding is often one of the greatest obstacles in implementing new programs and this is especially so in correctional facilities and jails where budgets are already strained. However, the proposed initiatives at Pontotoc County Jail can leverage a variety of funding sources to ensure financial viability. State and federal grants aimed at reducing recidivism and supporting rehabilitation programs will be the first step toward receiving the necessary funds to implement this pilot program.

The Second Chance Act is a federal program designed to support initiatives that improve outcomes for incarcerated individuals and will be a primary target for funding this program. This pilot program will pursue grants under this act by submitting detailed proposals that emphasize how the program will focus on reducing recidivism and fostering successful reintegration into society. The alignment of the program's objectives with the Second Chance Act's mission will be outlined in measurable goals such as reduced repeat offenses and increased employment rates among participants to strengthen the application.

A direct funding source for the program would come from the inmates' earnings in the Community Career Placement (CCP) initiative. If six inmates participate in the program, working full-time at \$7.25 an hour with 45 percent of their earnings allocated to the jail, the facility could generate approximately \$40,716 annually. This calculation is based on inmates working 40 hours per week for 52 weeks a year, with each inmate contributing \$130.50 weekly to the jail. This revenue would cover operational costs like transportation and supervision for CCP with the remainder of the budget going to support the other three branches of the program.

While \$40,716 may not cover all expenses, it represents a significant contribution that can be combined with external funding sources. Furthermore, the program's long-term impact of reducing recidivism and preparing inmates for successful reentry would translate into substantial financial benefits for the county. Fewer repeat offenders mean lower incarceration costs which will cause less strain on local law enforcement and improved community safety.

Once the program has been implemented, continued funding would come from a reinvesting of savings generated by reducing incarceration costs. By focusing on rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rates, the county jail can lower the financial burden of housing repeat offenders. Incarcerating one individual in Mississippi costs an estimated \$18,000–\$20,000 annually. These savings could be redirected into expanding and sustaining this pilot program into other target facilities by creating a cycle of reinvestment.

Ultimately, addressing funding challenges will be a multifaceted approach that combines innovative revenue streams, external funding, and cost-saving measures. However, by demonstrating the potential economic and social benefits of the program, Pontotoc County Jail can secure the support needed to implement and sustain these initiatives. With careful planning and collaboration, this program can become a model for other counties in Mississippi.

Conclusion

The proposed pilot program at Pontotoc County Jail offers a transformative opportunity to redefine the purpose of incarceration by prioritizing rehabilitation over mere punishment. Through initiatives targeting mental health, addiction, education, and job readiness, the program seeks to address the root causes of criminal behavior while equipping inmates with the tools necessary to reintegrate into society successfully. By leveraging partnerships with local

businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations, this program fosters collaboration and shared responsibility for improving public safety and reducing recidivism.

Mississippi has long been burdened by the challenges of mass incarceration due to the focus on punitive measures that fail to address systemic. This pilot program aims to break that cycle by providing inmates with structured pathways to self-improvement and societal contribution. From implementing Certified Peer Support Specialist-facilitated addiction services to offering GED programs and connecting inmates to stable employment through Community Career Placement (CCP), this initiative represents a forward-thinking approach to corrections. The program's success would not only benefit the inmates and the Pontotoc County community but also serve as a scalable model for jails across the state and beyond.

While challenges such as funding and logistical hurdles remain, the potential rewards far outweigh the costs. Pontotoc County Jail has the opportunity to become a leader in criminal justice reform by setting a precedent for how local facilities can meaningfully invest in the incarcerated individuals of Pontotoc County. By shifting the narrative from punishment to opportunity, Pontotoc County Jail has the chance to prove that when a community comes together, it can create a justice system that serves not only its laws but also its people.

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