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The Importance of Mental Wellness

Greetings,

With January being Mental Wellness month, it is a good time to bring awareness to mental health disorders, break the stigma, and encourage individuals to seek help if needed. The fact of the matter is, mental illness is much more common than most people realize. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that one in five American adults experience mental health issues annually. That’s more than 14 million adults. Many of these people have co-occurring disorders, such as substance use disorders or medical conditions, which contribute to their mental health.

Due to the fact that so many adults experience mental health issues, it probably doesn’t come as a surprise that according to the Alaska Department of Corrections, 42% of state prisoners have a diagnosable mental illness or cognitive disability and about 22% of that population is considered to have a severe mental illness. Which is why having services available for these individuals, both inside the correctional facilities while they are incarcerated, and outside the correctional facilities once they are released back into the community, is extremely important.

This is also why the Mat-Su Reentry Program Case Managers work so closely with our community partners to make sure the reentrant's we are assisting received the services they need when they are released in order to be successful. Along with making sure our reentry clients receive the mental health assistance they need, we also want to take this time to remind all of our community partners that service providers should be mindful of their own mental health needs.

Here are a few things you could do to help enhance your mental wellness:

- **Follow an after-work checklist:** Review (acknowledge a challenge you faced, take a deep breath and let it go); Reflect (however small, consider and appreciate positives in your day); Regroup (offer support to your colleagues and ask for help when you need it) and re-energize (turn your attention to home and focus on relaxing and resting).
- **Create a mental health wellness plan:** Create a guide of coping skills, people to talk to in stressful situations, and enjoyable activities to ensure that you maintain the balance between your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
- **Practice self-acceptance:** Use the new year as an opportunity to practice self-acceptance and self-esteem.
- **Put yourself first:** Self-care isn’t selfish, it is important for your mental health. Take time everyday for yourself and engage in something that brings you joy.
- **Get enough sleep:** Most health authorities recommend that adults get between 7 to 9 hours of sleep a day.

Spreading awareness about the importance of mental health and wellness can work to change the stigma behind how individuals think about these issues in our society. The more we talk about mental health, the more we normalize it, and that way people can come to understand that asking for help is not a form of weakness, but actually a sign of strength.

Barbara Mongar

Coordinator, Mat-Su Reentry Coalition

Some Californians Released From Prison Will Receive \$2,400 Under New State Re-Entry Program

By: **Associated Press** / Dec 7, 2023

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hundreds of Californians released from prisons could receive direct cash payments of \$2,400 — along with counseling, job search assistance and other support — under a first-in-the-nation program aimed at easing the transition out of incarceration and reducing recidivism.

Recipients will get the money over a series of payments after meeting certain milestones such as showing progress in finding places to live and work, according to the Center for Employment Opportunities, which runs the program announced this week.

The goal is to give people a chance “to cover their most essential needs” like bus fare and food during the crucial early days after exiting incarceration, said Samuel Schaeffer, CEO of the national nonprofit that helps those leaving lockups find jobs and achieve financial security.

“The first three to six months are the riskiest, when many people end up back in prison,” Schaeffer said Thursday. “We want to take advantage of this moment to immediately connect people with services, with financial support, to avoid recidivism.”

The governor's Workforce Development Board, devoted to improving the state's labor pool, is providing a \$6.9 million grant to boost community-based organizations and expand so-called reentry services for the formerly incarcerated.

About \$2 million of that will go directly to ex-inmates in the form of cash payments totaling about \$2,400 each. The center said the money will be paid incrementally upon reaching milestones including: engaging in employment interview preparation meetings with a jobs coach; making progress toward earning an industry credential or certificate; and creating a budget and opening a bank account.

Schaeffer said the new program is a “game changer” and the first of its kind in the nation, one he hopes other states will copy. He said his group distributes money and coordinates services along with local groups that provide services including career training and mental health counseling.

The program got a sort of test run at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Center for Employment Opportunities was tasked with distributing direct payments to about 10,000 people struggling with financial difficulties.

Schaeffer said to promote equitable access to the funds, the center is recommending its partners impose limited eligibility criteria for receiving payments. Aside from meeting the agreed-upon milestones, there are no rules for how the money can be spent.

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Incarcerated men stand outside the classroom of the Peer Literacy Mentor Program at San Quentin State Prison in San Quentin, Calif., Friday, March 17, 2023. Californians released from prisons could receive direct cash payments along with help in job searches and other support under a first-in-the-nation program aimed at easing the transition out of incarceration and reducing recidivism. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg, File)

Some Californians Released From Prison Will Receive \$2,400 Under New State Re-Entry Program

By: Associated Press / Dec 7, 2023 (Continued from page 2)

Advocates say people returning from incarceration often struggle to find places to live and work as they try to reintegrate back into their communities. Around 60% of formerly incarcerated individuals remain unemployed within the first year of being home, the center estimates.

Assemblyman Tom Lackey, a Republican from Palmdale who often focuses on justice system issues, said he applauds any attempt to reduce recidivism. But he worries this new program lacks a way to track progress and make sure taxpayers are getting their money's worth.

"If we are going to issue stipends without parameters for accountability I worry about the return on our investment as it relates to outcomes and community safety," Lackey said in a statement Thursday.

Schaeffer said he expects his organization will be flexible as the program rolls out, "to keep on refining it and keep on getting smarter on how to use it" and make sure every dollar counts.

"I wish this partnership had existed while I was in reentry," said Carmen Garcia, who was formerly incarcerated herself and is now director of the Root & Rebound, a nonprofit offering legal advocacy for people leaving prison.

She said the expanded program will allow groups like hers to "offer these expanded services to more people who are working to rebuild their lives after incarceration."

Monthly Highlight of Resources in the Mat-Su

January is National Mental Wellness Month

- **Mat-Su Health Services, Inc.- Behavioral Health Care:** 1363 W. Spruce Ave, Wasilla, AK; Phone: 907-357-2588; Clinic Hours: Mon– Fri: 7:00 AM—5:00 PM
Website: [Behavioral Health | Mat-Su Health Services, Inc. | Alaska Health Care \(mshsak.org\)](#)
- **OnTrAK: Mental Health Services for Young Adults ages 15 to 25 who are experiencing early signs and symptoms of psychosis;** 1363 W Spruce Ave., Wasilla, AK;
Website: [OnTrAK MatSu Behavioral & Mental Health Services in Wasilla AK](#) ; Phone 907-352-3238
- **United Way 211:** If you need assistance locating long-term mental health resources, talking through a problem, or exploring mental health treatment options, **call 211 to speak with a person who can help.**
Website: [Mental Health | United Way 211](#)

Mat-Su Reentry Events:

- **Virtual Mat-Su Reentry Services Forum**
Wednesday, January 17
10:00 to 11:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition and Reentry Case Management Program invites you to join us in a virtual Reentry Services Forum every third Wednesday of the month. Service providers, Field PO's, Institutional PO's, Case Managers, and anyone interested in attending are welcome.

- **Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Steering Team Meeting**
Tuesday, Feb 6
9:00 to 10:30 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition has a virtual Steering Team Meeting on the first Tuesday of each month. The next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 6, 2024. At these meetings our partner organizations share updates and we go over our Reentry Coalition Goals and discuss any issues regarding reentry. All community members are welcome.

For questions or zoom links to the above events please contact Barbara Mongar at:
barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org

Knik Tribe Events:

Knik Tribe Family Culture Nights — Every other Wednesday, 5:30 - 7:30 PM; Location: 758 Shoreline Dr. Wasilla, AK; Open to All Food / Family / Fun
Compact@KnikTribe.org
907-373-7991

- **Talking Circle**—Tuesday, at 6:30 and Wednesday at 5:30; Same location above;
Contact Ralph Lewis at 907-841-9773
- **Talking Circle**—Thursday, from 12 to 2PM; Location: Willow Library, Willow, AK

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition is a collaboration of individuals, community stakeholders, public and not-for-profit agencies, faith-based and business partners who are united and committed to reducing recidivism among returning citizens to the Mat-Su community.

Our Mission

To promote public safety by identifying and implementing strategies that increase former prisoners' wellbeing within the community and reduce the likelihood of their return to prison through recidivating.

We will accomplish this by:

- Improved communication and collaboration between Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) and the community.
- Building community partnerships to strengthen local services.
- Identifying barriers for those being released from incarceration and taking an active role in addressing those concerns.
- Promoting community educational and training opportunities for those releasing regarding resources.
- Work in conjunction with Alaska DOC to inform and promote reentry efforts in Alaska.

By: **Amanda Carlson**, Mat-Su Job Center Manager

Happy New Year from all of us here at the Mat-Su Job Center!

We are excited for our upcoming annual Mat-Su Employer Expo, this event is at the Menard center Wednesday March 27th from 10 a.m-3 p.m. This is an amazing community event for the public to meet and network with over 100 local employers, community partners, and vocational program professionals. This event is free, and we could use your help getting the word out. Please post the attached flyer in your businesses and we look forward to seeing you all there.

Individuals who experience barriers to employment receive priority of service for funding under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA), this funding is administered by our Career Support & Training staff. Please reach out so we can assess the needs for employment or training to get a job, keep a job or make more money.

Our office provides WorkKeys testing twice a month, the WorkKeys assessments measure foundational skills required for success in the workplace. Individuals who successfully complete the three WorkKeys assessments in Applied Math, Graphic Literacy, and Workplace Documents earn a National Career Readiness Certificate. The scores can be used for applications with local apprenticeships, community, or technical colleges, this credential can be added to your resume, and can help build confidence in workplace skills, or assist in building up skills in areas needing improvement. The WorkKeys curriculum can also measure interests, values and behaviors that can lead to greater job satisfaction. Contact us for available testing times at 907-352-2509 or matsu.jobcenter@alaska.gov. Our office is open Monday-Friday 8 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Westside Center off the Parks Hwy.

Reentry Success Story: A justice involved job seeker who is co-enrolled with a partner agency True North Recovery came into the job center needing assistance updating his resume and AlaskaJobs account. After exploring his barriers and ways to overcome them, resource room staff Ashley Smith assisted him in building a functional resume highlighting his last two years' work experience using his CDL/A. After researching the local labor market and he was assisted with an online application as a driver for Builders Choice (a subsidiary for ASRC). The customer recently visited the job center to report he had interviewed and started a full-time year-round ASRC Delivery Driver position. He overcame many barriers, completed partner agency programs, and his first day of work was on 12/10/2023 with a starting wage of \$18.00 hourly to include a full benefits package.



[January Trends:](#) Our 2024 employment forecasts for Alaska as a whole, Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Southeast

Note: For more information on the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition contact Barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org or go to our Webpage at [Mat-Su Valley Reentry Program | Valley Charities Inc](#)