mat-su Reentry Coalition

Newsletter

July 2026
Volume 6, Issue 7

Inside this issue

At this Wasilla ranch, horses are part of the mental health care team.....2-3

Monthly Resource Highlights...3

Reentry, Knik Tribe & Chickaloon Village Events.....3

Mat-Su Job Center Update.....4

Why having mental health support is important to reentry

Approximately 55% of Alaska's prison population lives with a mental health condition. For many of these individuals, the transition from incarceration back into the community is one of the most challenging periods of their lives. Reentry often brings significant stress, uncertainty, and barriers that can worsen existing mental health conditions if appropriate support is not available. Without access to mental health services, individuals are at a much greater risk of experiencing crises that can lead to homelessness, unemployment, substance use, or repeated involvement with the criminal justice system.

The first weeks and months after release are especially critical. Individuals must often find stable housing, secure employment, reconnect with family, meet probation or parole requirements, and rebuild their lives while managing the emotional impact of incarceration. These responsibilities can quickly become overwhelming, particularly for someone coping with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, or other mental health conditions. Without treatment, counseling, medication management, and a reliable support system, these challenges can become difficult to overcome.

Access to both mental and physical health care immediately upon release is essential for successful reentry. Continuity of care helps individuals maintain treatment plans that may have begun while incarcerated and reduces interruptions in medications or counseling services. Connecting individuals with community-based behavioral health providers, peer support specialists, case managers, and primary care providers gives them the resources they need to address both their physical and emotional well-being.

Mental health support also plays an important role in reducing recidivism. When individuals receive appropriate treatment and are connected to community resources, they are better equipped to make healthy decisions, manage stress, and maintain stable employment and housing. These protective factors increase the likelihood of long-term success and reduce the chances of returning to incarceration.

Reentry is about more than simply leaving prison—it is about creating opportunities for individuals to become healthy, productive members of their communities. Providing accessible mental health services demonstrates a commitment to rehabilitation rather than punishment alone. It recognizes that addressing underlying mental health needs benefits not only the individual but also their families, employers, and communities.

Investing in mental health support during reentry is an investment in public safety, community health, and long-term recovery. By ensuring that individuals have access to the care, treatment, and support they need from the moment they return home, Alaska can help break the cycle of incarceration and create stronger, healthier communities for everyone.

Barbara Mongar
Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Coordinator

Note: For more information on the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition see page 4

At this Wasilla ranch, horses are part of the mental health care team

By: Rachel Cassandra, Alaska Public Media, July 1, 2026



An instructor pets Debbie Erickson's horse, Rush, on May 18, 2026

Debbie Erickson opened a gate on the grounds of her horse ranch in Wasilla and walked her tall black horse into a small pasture. "I call her Ana for 'anonymous' because I couldn't think of a name," she said.
Ana is one of 16 therapeutic horses, mini horses and ponies at AURORA Wellness Services in Wasilla, where Erickson works as an equine specialist. When Erickson needs emotional support herself, she visits Ana.

"Sometimes she's laying down, and we'll just sit down on the ground together for a little while," she said, while Ana neighed. "They just have the capacity and don't pass judgment."

Ana is not the first horse Erickson has been close to. At age 5, she said she traded her Schwinn bike for a pony and would roam the streets of South Anchorage. Then when Erickson was 13, her father died. And she said her horse helped her process deep emotions during that fragile time.

"Dusty was probably my counselor," she said. "I could tell him anything. He wouldn't share secrets. He would carry my burdens, so I didn't have to. So I got in the habit of going out and feeding him at 5:30 in the morning before school started, because I just needed that time with him."

Now, Erickson works on a team with a mental health counselor doing equine-assisted psychotherapy. AURORA Wellness Services has been offering the therapy for more than ten years.

The mental health benefits of horse-human relationships are well documented and while there's less research on specific types of horse therapy, it shows promise for treating trauma and at-risk youth.

The type of therapy at AURORA doesn't include riding horses; instead patients spend time on the ground with Erickson, a psychotherapist and a small herd of horses in a corral. Patients can interact with the horses, but they're also meant to watch the animals and notice if there are ways the horses' behavior could be a metaphor for what's going on in their own life.

"It's always through the horse," Erickson said. "The horse makes you think of things or reminds you of things. It's metaphoric, the herd and how they gather, separate- It all relates to what's going on in your life." She gave the example of a patient who was feeling frustrated because the horses weren't moving and then realized, like the horses, she was stuck in a rut and not doing anything about it.

Erickson works alongside licensed professional counselor Laura Condon, who has her own long personal history with horses. "I think I read every horse book that was ever written as a child," she said. She's shown and competed with horses and when she went into the behavioral health field, she started working with Erickson.

Condon said she sees the high impact of therapies like this that tap into more creative areas of the brain. "Most people who engage in either horses or art or music or poetry that they can go deeper within themselves," she said. She said she's seen it help people process things more quickly than if they were just sitting in a room talking about their thoughts and feelings.

Condon said the horses, ponies and mini horses they use in the therapy have their own, sometimes strong reactions to people and those are a part of the therapy.

She said a woman was intensely grieving and there was a horse in the herd that would frequently butt or bump into people. But around this woman, he acted differently. "He circled her about three times, and then he laid down right in front of her and just put his head on the ground," Condon said. "Then she sat down with him for the whole rest of the session and we were just watching this, kind of in awe." **(Continued on page 3)**

At this Wasilla ranch, horses are part of the mental health care team (Continued from page 2)

Horses have been in domestic relationships with humans for thousands of years and their capacity to read and react to human emotion is well researched.

Erickson works alongside licensed professional counselor Laura Condon, who has her own long personal history with horses. "I think I read every horse book that was ever written as a child," she said. She's shown and competed with horses and when she went into the behavioral health field, she started working with Erickson.

Condon said she sees the high impact of therapies like this that tap into more creative areas of the brain. "Most people who engage in either horses or art or music or poetry that they can go deeper within themselves," she said. She said she's seen it help people process things more quickly than if they were just sitting in a room talking about their thoughts and feelings.

Condon said the horses, ponies and mini horses they use in the therapy have their own, sometimes strong reactions to people and those are a part of the therapy. She said a woman was intensely grieving and there was a horse in the herd that would frequently butt or bump into people. But around this woman, he acted differently. "He circled her about three times, and then he laid down right in front of her and just put his head on the ground," Condon said. "Then she sat down with him for the whole rest of the session and we were just watching this, kind of in awe."

Horses have been in domestic relationships with humans for thousands of years and their capacity to read and react to human emotion is well researched.

The stables have run group therapies with first responders, firefighters, at-risk youth and veterans and for many people, it's covered by insurance. Separately, the stables also offer therapeutic riding, which can help people with coordination and movement skills, including for stroke or injury recovery.

Equine specialist Debbie Erickson said equine-assisted psychotherapy can be really great for helping people who may not want to verbalize feelings.

"It's non-verbal, non-talkative, so I think it's great for some of the people that aren't good with talking about their feelings or have hidden them or suppressed them for so long," she said.

She said, like her, those people can tell their horse any secrets they need to share.

Go here for full article: At this Wasilla ranch, horses are part of the mental health care team

Monthly Highlight of Resources in the Mat-Su

July is Make a Difference to Children Month

- **Denali Family Services:** Their mission is to support the wellness of Alaska's youth and families through community-based behavioral health services.
  Phone: 907-376-3275 / Website: Services – Denali Family Services

- **Compassionate Directions Cooccurring Disorders Institute (CODI):** CODI operates a compassionate not-for profit behavioral health outpatient clinic for children (ages 3 through 21) and families in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.
  Phone: 907-745-2634 / Website: Home Page - Behavioral Health Outpatient Clinic

Mat-Su Reentry Events:

- **Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Team Meeting**
  Tuesday, Aug 4, 2026
  9:00 to 10:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition invites you to attend their Monthly Steering Team Meeting via Zoom

- **2026 Mat-Su Reentry Summit Save the date: Sept 15 & 16**

Our annual 2-day Reentry Summit is geared toward individuals who work with reentrants or those that would like to learn more about reentry services. This year's summit will feature compelling national and statewide speakers

Registration will open on August 4, 2026

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

---

Knik Tribe Events:

- **Knik Tribe Family Culture Nights —** Bi-Weekly, Wednesdays, 5:30 - 7:30 PM;
  Location: 758 Shoreline Dr. Wasilla, AK; (Open to All)
  Compact@KnikTribe.org
  907-373-7991

- **Youth Wellbriety Circle**
  Fridays, from 1 to 3PM;
  Location: MyHouse, Wasilla

Chickaloon Village Traditional Council Events:

- **Wellbriety Talking Circle**
  Wednesdays, 1 to 3PM;
  Location: Sutton Library
  More Info: 907-761-3912

Mat-Su Reentry Coalition

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.

Mat-Su Job Center Update

By: **Michele Bentz**, Mat-Su Job Center Manager

Mat-Su Job Center is located at 877 W. Commercial Drive, in Wasilla, Alaska, and we are open Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.– 5 p.m. Stop by or call (907) 352-2500 or email: matsu.jobcenter@alaska.gov

The Mat-Su Job Center provides a full range of job seeker and business services. Workshops are available upon request, including interest assessments through WOWI (World of Work Inventory), WorkKeys testing (required for many apprenticeship programs), and typing/10□key certifications.

Individuals experiencing barriers to employment receive priority for funding under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) Adult & Dislocated Worker program. This funding, administered by our Career Support & Training staff, supports workforce preparation, career services, training, and job placement assistance. These services help participants build occupational skills, earn industry-recognized credentials, and secure employment that leads to family self-sufficiency.

REENTRANT SUCCESS STORY
A returning citizen gained commercial driving experience while incarcerated and, within six months of release, earned a Class A CDL with help from workforce training programs. He quickly obtained driving jobs, later working seasonally for a major employer and continuing to develop his skills.

He subsequently joined a transportation company full-time and progressed into a leadership role. In 2026, he returned to the Mat-Su Job Center as the company's general manager. He partnered with Business Connection staff to establish an employer account and post open CDL-A positions in AlaskaJobs.

His success demonstrates how coordinated workforce development services, training opportunities, and strong employer partnerships support individuals as they reenter the workforce, advance in their careers, and contribute to local workforce needs.

STAY CONNECTED
Keep up with current recruitments, job fairs, virtual job readiness workshops, and training opportunities by visiting Alaska's Job Center Network: http://www.jobs.alaska.gov/
Select from the menu options on the right to get started.



July *Trends:* Inflation held steady in 2025, but early 2026 shows big shifts. **Also in this issue**: Comparing costs between places

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