

Vincent Lewis
The Exodus Institute
Mississippi Delta Region
April 12, 2003
Woullard Lett, Advisor

Abstract

The Exodus Institute is an offender re-entry organization located in the Delta Region of the State of Mississippi. We worked to achieve two objectives in the development of this project – to start a nonprofit organization and to develop the first program model.

We engaged in many activities in the development of this project, always involving the community in the process. The activities included filing the appropriate documents to start a nonprofit organization, completing the 501(c)3 application, and identifying initial board members and volunteers. We also identified the program development needs of ex-offenders in the target community and developed the first re-entry program.

Summary

Target Community

Thirteen counties within the Mississippi Delta make up our target community. These counties include Bolivar, Sunflower, Washington, Coahoma, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Quitman, Sharkey, Tallahatchie, Tunica, Yazoo, and Laflore.

Problem Statement

If no solution is found, there will be no organization in place to address the 5 percent projected rise in the Mississippi recidivism rate over the next three years as reported by the Mississippi Correctional Budget Review (2002).

Goal Statement

Our goal is to effectively reduce the incarceration and recidivism rates in the Mississippi Delta.

Current Community Conditions

The Mississippi Department of Corrections operates 13 adult correctional facilities, oversees five privately managed prisons, and controls several community work centers. There are currently 20,710 inmates and an additional 19,795 individuals who are on state-supervised probation and parole. It is also significant to note that Mississippi's population does not proportionately reflect those who are incarcerated. Mississippi is only 36.4 percent Black, however Blacks make up 71 percent of the inmate population .

During conversations with deputy sheriff jailers from the county correctional facilities in our target area, the majority of their populations are people that they have seen before. This is consistent with the data provided to me when I was a counselor in Unit 26 at the Mississippi Department of Corrections Substance Abuse Program at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. As a counselor in Unit 26, I also realized that most of the inmates on my caseload were repeat offenders.

Within our project area, there is one state prison and four county jails that house state inmates. These include the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Bolivar County Correctional, Holmes County Correctional, Issaquena County Correction, and Delta Correctional.

Community conditions that further support an increase in the recidivism rate include the fact that high unemployment and high poverty rates mark each of these counties where Blacks are in the majority. For example, Tunica County, which has been called “America’s Ethiopia” by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, has the highest percentage of families living below the poverty level in the state (50.5 percent), and the highest unemployment in the state (17 percent). With the exception of the counties of Humphreys and Yazoo, all counties within the project area are marked by double-digit unemployment rates and high family poverty rates ranging from 27.9 percent in Washington County to 50.5 percent in Tunica County. The majority of the residents in these counties are Black and their current socioeconomic condition can generally be characterized as one of limited economic resources, inadequate employment opportunities, insufficient affordable housing, and poor quality public schools. It is my opinion that the region’s unique history of slavery, with its debilitating legacies – the sharecropping system, Jim Crow laws, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority white population, the political disenfranchisement of Blacks, and the nearly total social segregation of the races – is generally

viewed as the most significant factor in the region's present position as among the poorest, if not the poorest, section of the nation based on virtually every socioeconomic measurement.

Desired Condition

The desired condition sought is the reduction of the projected increase in the recidivism rate. The belief is that this will happen when ex-offenders have access to the services they need to assist them with making a healthy transition back into their communities. Sustainable employment, education, and community involvement are all desired conditions that I believe would strengthen families and ultimately strengthen communities. Another desired condition would be for ex-offenders to realize personal, economic, and social development that is encouraged by both the community and criminal justice system. The reduction of the Black prison population from the current 71 percent is also a desired condition.

Project Objectives Achieved If Project Were Successful

Understanding the institutional development process was critical to the development of this project. We focused on the development phase of this process with expectations of producing the appropriate major outputs that would support the development process that includes visioning, resource development, capacity building, and linkages. Our objectives for this process are as follows:

- *Develop An Organizational Structure* – There is currently no organization in our target community that is addressing the issue of offender re-entry. It was necessary to develop an organization to serve as a vehicle for implementing our re-entry program.

- *Develop A Re-entry Program Model* – It was important for us to tailor our program to meet the identified needs of our local community; however, it was also important to search for existing programs that have a proven success in order not to duplicate efforts.

Objectives Fully Achieved

- *Develop A Re-entry Program Model* – We have fully achieved this objective by acquiring models of successful re-entry programs that are serving similar rule communities. These programs are of similar size and scope as our project and have various combinations of vocational, clinical and educational training for ex-offenders.

Objectives Partially Achieved

- *Develop Organizational Structure* – There is currently no organization in our target community that is addressing the issue of offender re-entry. It was necessary to develop an organization to serve as a vehicle for implementing our re-entry program. We have incorporated as a nonprofit organization and meet all state and federal requirements, which includes having an established board of directors. We have completed this objective with exception of the following:
 - *Obtaining the 501(c)3* – We have not completed this task because of the lack of financial resources.

Objectives That Have no Task Initiated

We have initiated tasks for all our objectives.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Changes

We have experienced some significant changes since the inception of this project. The first was the moving the project from Arkansas to Mississippi. This move was necessary to advance the project forward because of the lack of community participation in Arkansas, having less to do with the community needing, or even wanting, additional offender re-entry programs, but having everything to do with me as the project leader not having the vertical and lateral ties in the community to get the support required. Because I had these ties in Mississippi, I made the decision to move the project.

Two Factors That Would Have Increased My Ability to Complete Project

Two factors that would have increased my ability to do this project would have been to establish a relationship with an existing organization in order to have institutional support for the process. The other factor would have been to develop the initial executive team from Americorps Volunteers so we would have full-time employees assigned to the project.

One Unexpected Thing

The one unexpected thing that occurred that significantly affected my ability to complete the project and achieve the stated goal was the fact that I underestimated the time it would take to actually develop this institution utilizing the participatory development model.

Recommendations

The two things that I highly recommend anyone attempting to pursue a project such as this are:

1. Obtain some sort of institutional support because it is next to impossible to develop an institution from the ground up without some financial resources.
2. Consider your personal schedule before tackling such a mammoth project while attempting to balance work, school and personal responsibilities.

Definition of the Problem

Problem Statement

If no solution is found, the Mississippi recidivism rate will continue to increase.

Target Community

The project target population is predominately poor African-American male ex-offenders between the ages of 18 and 45 that reside in the 13 county area of the Mississippi Delta. The counties that are included in the project area are Bolivar, Sunflower, Washington, Coahoma, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Quitman, Sharkey, Tallahatchie, Tunica, Yazoo, and Laflore. Each of these counties has a Black majority population and is marked by high unemployment and poverty rates. For example, Tunica County, which has been called “America’s Ethiopia” by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, has the highest percentage of families living below the poverty level, 50.5 percent, and the highest unemployment, 17 percent. With the exception of the counties of Humphreys and Yazoo, all counties in the project area are marked by double-digit unemployment rates and high family poverty rates, from 27.9 percent in Washington County to 50.5 percent in Tunica County. The majority of the residents in these counties are Black and their current socioeconomic condition can generally be characterized as one of limited economic resources, inadequate employment opportunities, insufficient affordable housing, and poor quality public schools. It is my opinion that the region’s unique history of slavery, with its debilitating legacies – the sharecropping system, Jim Crow laws, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority white population, the political disenfranchisement of Blacks, and the nearly total social segregation of the races – is generally viewed as the most significant factor in

the region's present position as among the poorest, if not the poorest, section of the nation based on virtually every socioeconomic measurement.

The problem addressed is that there is no organization that currently addresses the problem of recidivism in the Mississippi Delta. According to the Mississippi Department of Corrections website, the recidivism rate is 38 percent. However, this rate only measures how many ex-offenders return to prison in a particular time frame, typically 24 months. According to the U.S. Department of Justice studies on recidivism, the longer period measured, the more ex-offenders recidivate. Therefore recidivism in Mississippi is likely to be much higher over a five-year period. Inmates are being released back into the community with inadequate life skills, minimal education, and modest vocational training to obtain sustainable employment. Also, most ex-offenders have to return to socially- and economically-depressed areas, drastically reducing their chances for successful re-entry into the community.

The Mississippi Department of Correction operates 13 adult correctional facilities, oversees five privately-managed prisons, and controls several community work centers. There are currently 20,710 inmates and an additional 19,795 on state-supervised probation and parole. It is also significant to note that the Mississippi state population does not proportionately reflect those who are incarcerated. Mississippi is only 36.4 percent Black, however Blacks comprise 71 percent of the inmate population. The vast majority of them have less than an adequate education or marketable job skills. These men and women are faced with enormous social and economic hurdles that many of them will not be able to overcome without assistance. It has been my experience as a counselor in the prison system that poverty, lack of education, and unemployment breeds hopelessness and defeatism which are common traits among the many people that populate the Mississippi correctional facilities and probation and parole systems.

Project Goal

Our goal is to reduce the projected 5 percent rise of the Mississippi recidivism rate over the next three years. We will focus on addressing the myriad of issues faced by ex-offenders in our target community. Although this project is focused on the development of the institution itself, we will increase our impact by seeking input from offenders about to receive probation or parole and those offenders who have violated the conditions of their probation or parole. Those offenders who have multiple violations are given a choice of participating in an alternative program or returning to jail. We will work with ex-offenders to identify what their needs are and work hard to identify programs to meet those needs.

Current Conditions

The Mississippi Department of Corrections operate 13 adult correctional facilities, oversees five privately-managed prisons, and controls several community work centers,. There are currently 20,710 inmates and an additional 19,795 individuals state-supervised probation and parole. It is also significant to note that the Mississippi state population does not proportionately reflect those who are incarcerated. Mississippi is only 36.4 percent Black, however Blacks make up 71 percent of the inmate population

During conversations with deputy sheriff jailers from the county correctional facilities in our target area, they reported that the majority of their populations are people that they have seen before. This is consistent with the data provided to me when I was a counselor at Unit 26 at Mississippi Department of Corrections Substance Abuse Program of the Mississippi State Penitentiary. As a counselor at Unit 26, I also realized that most of the inmates on my caseload were repeat offenders.

Within our project area, there is one state prison and four county jails that also house state inmates. These include the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Bolivar County Correctional, Holmes County Correctional, Issaquena County Correction, and Delta Correctional.

Community conditions that further support an increase in the recidivism rate include the fact that high unemployment and high poverty rates mark each of these counties where Blacks are in the majority. For example, Tunica County, which has been called “America’s Ethiopia” by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, has the highest percentage of families living below the poverty level in the state (50.5 percent) and the highest unemployment in the state (17 percent). With the exception of the counties of Humphreys and Yazoo, all counties within the project area are marked by double-digit unemployment rates and high family poverty rates, from 27.9 percent in Washington County to 50.5 percent in Tunica County. The majority of the residents in these counties are Black and their current socioeconomic condition can generally be characterized as one of limited economic resources, inadequate employment opportunities, insufficient affordable housing, and poor quality public schools. It is my opinion that the region’s unique history of slavery, with its debilitating legacies – the sharecropping system, Jim Crow laws, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a minority white population, the political disenfranchisement of Blacks, and the nearly total social segregation of the races – is generally viewed as the most significant factor in the region’s present position as among the poorest, if not the poorest, section of the nation based on virtually every socioeconomic measurement.

Desired Conditions

The desired condition sought is the reduction of the projected increase in the recidivism rate. We believe that this will happen when ex-offenders have access to the services they need to

assist them with making healthy transitions back into their communities. Sustainable employment, education, and community involvement are all desired conditions that we believe would strengthen families and ultimately strengthen communities. Another desired condition would be for ex-offenders to realize personal, economic, and social development that is encouraged by both the community and criminal justice system. The reduction of the Black prison population from the current 71 percent is also a desired condition.

Project Objectives

The project product will be an offender re-entry agency, The Exodus Institute, that will create opportunities for ex-offenders and assist them with realizing personal, economic, and social development through participating in an integrated array of training, employment, housing, and rehabilitation services. Our project objectives are as follows:

- *Develop An Organizational Structure* – There is currently no organization in our target community that is addressing the issue of offender re-entry as part of their primary purpose. It was necessary to develop an organization to serve as a vehicle for implementing A re-entry program.
- *Create A Successful Re-entry Program* – It was important for us to tailor our program to meet the identified needs of our local community; however, it was also important to search for existing programs that have proven success in order not to reinvent the wheel.

Background

The Exodus Institute is a new organization formed to address many issues ex-offenders face when re-entering their communities in the Mississippi Delta. A group of community volunteers and I initiated this project. We have worked hard to contact stakeholders such as ministers,

political leaders, and residents to get their input and participation given the lack of financial resources or institutional support. The other major players involved in this project are as follows:

- Andrea Payne – Ms. Payne is Executive Director of Families of Incarcerated Individuals has given us valuable information about the criminal justice stakeholders in the Mid-South. And she serves on our board of directors. Ms Payne also has hopes of partnering with the institute in the future to develop a social enterprise that will become a source of funding for both Families of Incarcerated Youth and Exodus Institute.
- Rev. James Wilkerson – Rev. Wilkerson is Assistant Director of Mississippi State Penitentiary Alcohol and Drug Program and has given us complete access to interview staff and inmates to further develop this project. Mr. Wilkerson wants more programs in the community to which to refer clients after they are discharged from the state's program.
- Senator Willie Simmons – Senator Simmons is currently the Vice-Chairman of the Mississippi Corrections Committee. As an Exodus Institute board member, he has given encouragement and has pledged to assist with finding funding for the project. Senator Simmons wants to affect change in the community through his support for this organization.
- Sheriff H.M. Grimmit – Mr. Grimmit is the current Bolivar County Sheriff and has given us access to interview his staff and inmates to further understand the problem of offender reentry in the Mississippi Delta. Sheriff Grimmit has long searched for a program to assist ex-offenders leaving the county jail.
- U.S. Congressman Bennie G. Thompson – Congressman Thompson has pledged to support our efforts to develop this institute. His office manager in the delta, Jerri Langly, is also a member of the board of directors. Congressman Thompson is a long time advocate for the

poor and disadvantaged in the Mississippi Delta and supports the institute because of its location and mission.

Institutions and Organizations

- Bolivar, Laflore, and Washington County Sheriff Departments – They have also granted us access to their staff and inmates to further understand the issues we will need to address in order to be an effective organization. County Sheriffs have a vested interest that is centered in support for those ex-offenders in their counties. These county jails are frequently overcrowded because of repeat offenders.
- Families of Incarcerated Youth – This organization is headed by Ms. Andrea Payne who is one of our board members. The organization has agreed to serve as our fiscal agent until we acquire our 501(c)3. They have also agreed to partner with Exodus Institute in the future to develop a mentoring program for ex-offenders and hopes to develop a social enterprise with Exodus Institute in the future.
- Mississippi Department of Health and Human Services – Hubert Loving, the director of substance programs in the Department of Health and Human Services, has agreed to certify our substance abuse program upon completion of meeting the minimum standards. This is significant because even when programs meet the minimum standards, they often do not receive certification. Certification is required to receive state funds for the substance abuse component of our program. This organization's vested interest is to fill a needed gap in treatment services for ex-offenders.
- Mississippi Office of the Governor – The Governor gave his support for my enrollment at the School of Community Economic Development at Southern New Hampshire University and has pledged to support the development of this project. We will pursue this support upon

further development of the agency. The Governor's office vested interest is to support rising minority-managed agencies because they represent a significant percentage of their constituency.

Results

Project Objectives Achieved If Project Were Successful

Understanding the institutional development process was critical to the development of this project. We focused on the development phase of this process with the expectation of producing the appropriate outputs that would support the development process. These outputs include visioning, resource development, capacity building, and linkages. Our objectives for this process are:

- *Develop An Organizational Structure* – There is currently no organization in our target community that is addressing the issue of offender re-entry as a primary part of its mission. It was necessary to develop an organization to serve as a vehicle for implementing our re-entry program.
- *Develop A Re-entry Program Model* – It was important for us to tailor our program to meet the identified needs of our local community; however, it was also important to search for existing programs that have a proven success in order not to reinvent the wheel.

Objectives Fully Achieved

- *Develop A Re-entry Program Model* – We have fully achieved this objective by acquiring a model of a successful re-entry program that is serving a similar rural community and adapting the program to meet local needs.

Objectives Partially Achieved

- *Developing An Organizational Structure* – We have incorporated as a nonprofit organization and meet all state and federal requirements, which includes having an established board of directors. We have completed this objective with the exception of obtaining the 501(c)3 status. We have not completed this task because of the lack of financial resources.

Objectives That Have no Task Initiated

We have initiated tasks for all our objectives.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Changes

We have experienced some significant changes since the inception of this project. The first was the moving of the project from Arkansas to Mississippi. This move was necessary to move the project forward because of the lack of community participation in Arkansas. This lack of participation had less to do with the community needing, or even wanting, additional offender re-entry programs, but had everything to do with me as the project leader not having the vertical and lateral ties in the community to get the support required. Because I had these ties in Mississippi, I made the decision to move the project.

Two Factors That Would Have Increased My Ability

Two factors that would have increased my ability to do this project would have been to seek to attach myself to an existing organization in order to have institutional support for the process. The other factor would have to be to develop the initial executive team from Americorps Volunteers so we would have full-time employees assigned to the project.

One Unexpected Thing

The one unexpected thing that occurred that significantly affected my ability to complete the project and achieve the stated goal was the fact that I underestimated the time that it would take to actually develop this institution utilizing the participatory development model.

The two things that I highly recommend anyone attempting to pursue a project such as this are:

1. Obtain institutional support because it is next to impossible to realistically develop an institution from the ground up without some financial resources.
2. Consider your personal schedule before tackling such a mammoth project while attempting to balance work, school and personal responsibilities.

Works Cited

Cobb, J. *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Housing Assistance Council. (2001). Mississippi Delta Housing Statistics. Retrieved December 15, 2002. from a discontinued website.

Mississippi Correctional Budget Review (April 2002). Retrieved June 10, 2002 from <http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/>.

Mississippi Department of Corrections Inmate Data (2002). Retrieved November 9, 2002 from <http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/>.