



# Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development  
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## BUILDING TRANSFORMATIVE RELATIONSHIPS, ADVANCING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

BY BETH GRIFFIN

“Mass incarceration is a crisis in this country. There are nine million people in some kind of carceral control, including jail, prison, probation, parole, or community supervision. About two-thirds of all people currently incarcerated are there for a non-violent offense. And when they get out, it’s not over. They face another set of challenges.”

That’s how Paul Graham describes the scope of a problem very few people consider. He is the national coordinator for the Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project of the National Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The five-state program receives funding from a Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) Strategic National Grant.

“The situation is staggering,” Paul says. “One in 28 American children has at least one parent incarcerated and the ratio leaps to one in nine for black children. Incarceration impacts the whole family. When a man is released from prison, his annual earnings drop by 40 percent,” he describes. “That’s among the many reasons why 20 percent of poverty is directly attributable to mass incarceration.”

Once people have served their sentences and satisfied the conditions of their release, they nevertheless encounter significant obstacles to reentry into the local economy and their community.

“They are seen as felons, not fully human, not trustworthy. That’s what keeps them from proving they are worthy of the same respect and dignity as others who are trying to provide for their families and contribute to their communities,” Paul says.

The practical effect is that returning citizens have a hard time getting jobs and safe housing. Typically, employment applications ask if a person has been convicted of a felony. In many places, checking that answer box triggers an automatic rejection. There is rarely an opportunity to offer more information, including what positive skills and attributes the applicant would bring to the job and how much time has passed since the last offense.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul reentry initiative brings together formerly incarcerated men and women with Vincentian volunteers to address critical issues of poverty and justice by advocating for systemic change. The national project works with parishes and dioceses in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Ohio, Florida, and Louisiana.

“We want to go beyond recidivism reduction and promote the common good,” Paul says. “Our focus is on building transformative relationships and



Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project joined with WISDOM in Madison, WI, at the launch of a campaign to decrease incarceration rates and improve reentry. WISDOM is a faith-based organization in Wisconsin that seeks to improve the quality of life and create opportunities for returning citizens.

strong communities, advancing restorative justice, and promoting the human development of each person.”

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is an organization of lay Catholics that seeks to help members grow spiritually by offering person-to-person service to the needy and suffering. A cornerstone activity of the group is home visits to help determine the personal needs of those it helps.

“It’s where we connect with families. Everything we do is built around the home visits where we get to know people and understand their needs and challenges. The practice has a lot in common with community organizing; all the fruits of organizing grow from relationships,” Paul says.

“We’re a disconnected and divided country. Our communities are

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## From the Director

### Dear Friends,

When we pay off a car loan or home mortgage, we get a clean title. And if we get into a bad credit situation, we can generally fix it with a few years of careful financial management. But when a felon finishes a prison sentence and completes any required court-ordered programs or supervision, he or she still carries the stigma of being an “ex-con.” Somehow, our society doesn’t consider the debt fully paid and has a hard time accepting the formerly incarcerated back into its fold. As a result, the newly returned citizens face predictable obstacles to employment and safe housing. I was surprised to learn that a man coming out of prison makes about 40 percent less than he did before he went in.

As Pope Francis said in his visit last year to detainees at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, “All of us are invited to encourage, help and enable [their] rehabilitation,” for the benefit of the entire community and society. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has a long-term interest in prison reform and restorative justice. Over the years, we have funded local initiatives to aid current and formerly incarcerated people and their families, and we have supported efforts to change laws and structures that seemed to focus more on retribution than redemption. We have also looked for creative ways to integrate strong local solutions into programs that will have a national impact.

The Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project, described in this issue, is one of the initiatives we are supporting with a CCHD Strategic National Grant. We have developed an unprecedented partnership with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which has a national footprint and a respected presence in parishes. They have a tremendous legacy of home visits and direct service. When they decided to address the timely issue of mass incarceration, we were honored to support them.

CCHD and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul have a common understanding of how dialogue and encounter break down

barriers. We both serve the gospel mandate to act in solidarity with the poor. And we both believe that promoting structural change is an act of justice. As Pope Benedict said in his letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, “Justice is the primary way of charity.”

Working in five states, the Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project provides immediate assistance to returning citizens and leadership training programs to help Vincentian volunteers and the formerly incarcerated advocate together for important changes to federal, state, and local laws governing hiring, sentencing, probation revocation, driver’s license suspension, and solitary confinement.

The CCHD Strategic National Grant Program, now in its third year, identifies timely opportunities to promote human life and dignity, advance justice, and address the root causes of poverty. The grants align with the priorities of the USCCB and help funded organizations act statewide, regionally, or nationally. More information and examples of the ground-breaking work we are accomplishing is available on our website at [www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/grants/strategic-national-grant-program.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/grants/strategic-national-grant-program.cfm).

We are indebted to you for the encouragement, prayers, and support you offer throughout the year. Thank you for supporting our efforts to help others to help themselves.

Sincerely,

Ralph McCloud  
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

VISIT OUR WEBSITE FOR MORE ON THE CATHOLIC FRAMEWORK FOR ECONOMIC LIFE:

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/catholic-framework-for-economic-life.cfm>

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segregated and we don't know one another and don't understand one another's stories. Most of us don't have the experience of being in a relationship with people who've been through the criminal justice system," he explains.

There are two parallel strategies to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul reentry organizing program. One identifies immediate needs of returning citizens and the other addresses local and state-wide public policy issues. Both entail a seemingly unlikely partnership between largely older white Vincentian volunteers and returning citizens with whom they may have few experiences in common. Partners from both demographics have a stake in building a better world for their families.

### National Effort

CCHD established the Strategic National Grant Program as a discretionary response to timely opportunities relevant to the priorities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: to promote human life and dignity, advance justice, and address the root causes of poverty. The grants are intended to catalyze organizations to work on a significantly larger scale than the community-based organizations that commonly receive



Br. Mike Murphy is a Marianist brother who founded the HELP Program and key partner of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Cincinnati, OH, which works with returning citizens to get jobs, stabilize their lives, and create a strong community of support and brotherhood.

CCHD grant support. They are renewable for up to five years and fund programs with time-specific goals.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has a national reach and local organization in parishes and dioceses throughout the country. Paul Graham says CCHD and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul saw the opportunity to work together in five places where the situation of returning citizens was particularly challenging, and the local Catholic groups were well-organized and committed to tackling systemic issues.

"We've been involved in social justice and the structural issues of poverty since our founding in the early nineteenth century. It's as much a part of what we do in service to the poor as providing basic needs assistance," Paul says. "We're active in prison ministry, and a number of our councils and district councils have developed reentry programs."

"Mass incarceration is a crisis. The CCHD grant gave us the capacity to bring an additional component to our leadership development work and enhance the impact we can have in advocacy to promote fair hiring and address other barriers to reentry," Paul says.

### The Five-State Project

The Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project works to refocus the public discussion of criminal justice away from punishment and toward reintegration of individuals and families. "Vincentians listen, support, and engage returning citizens. We invest in leadership skills



Catholics and returning citizens share stories with each other to learn and understand the issues and grow relationships that create strong teams.

and social capital and tap the talent of returning citizens. Together, we advocate for systemic changes to a criminal justice system that yields little to no restoration or healing," Paul says. "We offer leadership development training and also develop the organizing skills of Vincentians and the returning citizens to advocate on urgent public policy issues."

"The gospel message of love and Catholic social teaching requires that we allow people often left out of the public arena to take the lead on campaigns and issues that impact them," he explains. "We start with a person's story, invest in leadership, define what matters, and then see people go beyond their basic needs to be agents in their own lives."

"Ban the Box" is an area where the group has enjoyed success. In Ohio, for example, bipartisan support helped pass legislation to take a question about felony convictions off applications for public employment. "Now it focuses the process to more fully consider an applicant's credentials and skills, so their qualifications can emerge. The background check takes place at the end of the process, after the potential employer gets to know them," Paul says.

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The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is leading by example. It has made a conscious effort to hire people with criminal records, Paul says. “There’s a huge growth in our own organization as they see themselves as leaders in society and the community. It’s really exciting to witness and experience it. By asking returning citizens to step into leadership, I see them take themselves more seriously,” he says.

The organization established a T-shirt shop “social enterprise” staffed by people whose criminal records made it hard for them to get sustainable work. One fellow survived being shot 11 times but couldn’t get work because he was a felon. Another was shot in the stomach during a robbery over \$20 and an old phone. Because of his record, he was ineligible for the assistance available to other victims of violent crimes, Paul says. “We do this for the individuals who want to turn their lives around.”

Mentoring of returning citizens by Vincentian volunteers transforms both parties. The mentors learn about the barriers their mentees face and then go


to bat for them, Paul says. “They see how complicated the criminal justice system is, even when well-intentioned.”

“As a society, we’re not very forgiving. There’s unbelievable pressure on people getting out. They can’t get a break, and it’s hard to make ends meet,” Paul says.

Paul says the CCHD Strategic National Grant has allowed the project to expand training and development of advocacy skills, add capacity within each of the five states, and engage other national Catholic partners involved in restorative justice and prison ministry, including the Catholic Mobilizing Network and the American Catholic Correctional Chaplains Association. “CCHD has been an important collaborator every step of the way. They help us think about, measure, and evaluate what we’re doing, and keep Catholic social teaching at the heart of it,” Paul says.

“The challenge is that the demand is greater than our capacity,” he reflects. “There are so many Society of St. Vincent de Paul groups in other states for whom reentry and criminal justice are a top priority. They want to be part

of this because they know there are ways of improving their service and taking on the structural challenges,” he says.

Although the Returning Citizens project avoids a sole focus on recidivism, it is encouraging that of the formerly incarcerated men and women consistently active with the program in five states, which included 717 people in 2015, not a single one has been convicted of a new crime. That’s solid evidence of transformation through compassionate partnering and persistent advocacy. 



Fr. Kemper of St. John the Baptist parish in Harrison, OH, reflects with Anthony, a returning citizen leader in Cincinnati, OH.

### What Is CCHD?

**T**hrough the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

**S**ince 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income-led,

community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD’s investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



An initiative of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development

**Today, 43.1 million people in America are living below the poverty line.**

That’s more than ever before—and far more than the population of our largest state. Join us and help to break the cycle of poverty.



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