The New Southern Strategy Coalition:  
A Campaign to End Collateral Consequences

Introduction, January 2012

On November 16, 2011, forty-four participants, representing 11 Southern states and several national groups, met to discuss how we can improve access to employment, housing and benefits for Southerners who have a criminal history. Organizations participating in this inaugural meeting of the New Southern Strategy Coalition included direct service providers, community organizers and policy advocates working to remove the many barriers that people with a criminal history face when attempting to reintegrate into society and become productive citizens. The newly formed Coalition seeks to address the unique need for networking and information-sharing that exists for reentry service providers and advocates in the South.

“Collateral Consequences”

Throughout the United States people with a criminal history, which can include people who have been arrested but never convicted, are frequently denied employment, housing, and access to essential benefits and services. Legal barriers to reentry jeopardize public safety by making it difficult for people to support themself and their family, and increasing the chance of recidivism. Sometimes these barriers are called the “collateral consequences” of a criminal record, but in reality the long-term impact of these barriers may be more damaging than the original charge or case. The societal cost of maintaining these barriers – both monetary and increased crime and violence - is high and unsustainable.

Why a Southern Coalition?

Two reasons make the existence of this Coalition particularly compelling. First, the South has been ground zero in the build-up of the United States prison population. Second, Southern states have, on average, more legal barriers to successful reentry than other states. Add to that, the disproportionate effect of these barriers on communities of color, and the need for a regional effort becomes clear; organizations working on these issues in the South must confront a legacy of racism and an unrelenting “tough on crime” ideology. Our experience teaches us that reform strategies that work in California or New York are not effective in Alabama or Mississippi.

Overall, the U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, and it is the South that leads the U.S. prison population growth trend. Louisiana and Mississippi have the highest incarceration rates in the country, with many other Southern states ranking in the top ten. For example, nationwide one in 31 adults is behind bars, on probation or on parole, but in Georgia, one in 13 adults is under correctional control. Over 96,000 people are in jail or prison in Georgia and the Georgia Department of Corrections’ annual budget is $1.1 billion. Other Southern states have statistics akin to those of Georgia.

The many people who come into contact with the criminal justice system in the South face a complex array of barriers to reentry when they are released. In 2004 the Legal Action Center (LAC) analyzed the barriers that state laws and policies erect to successful reentry in the areas of employment, housing, access to public benefits, voting, adoptive and foster parenting, and driver’s licenses. (See After Prison: Roadblocks to Reentry at www.lac.org, last updated in
LAC found that while reentry is difficult across the nation, the Southern states consistently erect the most restrictive barriers to reentry, perpetuating a cycle of arrest and recidivism. For example, all Southern states allow employers to consider arrest records that did not lead to conviction.

The Goals
The vision for the New Southern Strategy Coalition is to gather Southern groups together to help build not only a body of knowledge and expertise, but also to help build momentum around the issue of collateral consequences. The Southern states, like many regions of the country, have many things in common, and they look to each other to validate trends and momentum. High prison costs and their negative impact on state budgets are forcing many Southern states to seek alternatives to incarceration to deal with the strain. The Coalition will seize the opportunity created by the budget constraints and build momentum for positive policy reform in the South.

Although every state erects barriers to reentry, in recent years there has been a push for state-based reform and many model reentry policies, programs, and successful initiatives have been implemented, but the majority of progress has been in the northeastern and Midwestern states. Advocates in these regions have worked together formally and informally to support reform efforts, but there have been minimal connections like these made in the South. The New Southern Strategy Coalition seeks to facilitate these connections.

Specifically, the Coalition will help members identify and connect with potential allies, including criminal justice and other public officials, employers, groups with overlapping target populations, and national groups that could create more opportunities for people with a criminal history who are committed to changing their lives. The New Southern Strategy Coalition will lay a foundation for a stronger movement for the reform of criminal justice and reentry policies, both in the South and nationally.

Planning Committee
The seeds of a Southern-based group were planted by Roberta Meyers-Peebles, director of the National H.I.R.E. Network (Helping Individuals Re-enter through Employment), and in May 2011 a planning committee came together to begin building the Coalition. The planning committee discussed how Southern-based groups and national partners can support positive reform in the South and decided to kick-off the Coalition with the November 2011 event. The planning committee consists of representatives from: the Georgia Justice Project, the North Carolina Second Chance Alliance, the National H.I.R.E. Network, and the National Employment Law Project.

The committee’s short-term goals for the inaugural meeting:
- Provide participants a contextual review of federal policies and policy trends in the Southern states that perpetuate collateral consequences of convictions, in particular the TANF/SNAP drug felony ban and other bans derived from federal law;
- Highlight successful strategies and models that have been utilized in Southern states to lessen the impact of a criminal arrest or conviction through community organizing, direct legal services, or policy advocacy;
• Identify existing challenges in the respective states and brainstorm possible solutions that can be implemented in those states; and
• Create a collaborative network of Southern groups that can support each other in their efforts to reduce the negative consequences of a criminal record.

Georgia Justice Project hosted the meeting in Atlanta. Individuals and groups working on reentry issues in each of the 14 Southern states were invited: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. Due to a lack of resources there are fewer advocates and providers working on reentry issues in the Southern states, and because an established professional network was not in place, it took some time to identify who was working in each state. Thanks to support from the National H.I.R.E. Network, the Public Welfare Foundation, and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation the Coalition was able to offer travel stipends to individuals coming from outside of Georgia. The law firm Nelson Mullins generously agreed to provide space and food for the meeting and the Georgia Justice Project hosted a reception after the meeting in their office, adjacent to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site in downtown Atlanta.

Participants
Many diverse perspectives were represented at the meeting – faith-based groups, government agencies, grassroots organizations, large and small non-profits, and well-known national policy advocacy groups. The following organizations participated:

• TASC Program-Jefferson County Community Corrections (AL)
• The Ordinary People’s Society (AL)
• Arkansas Voices
• The Homecoming Mothers Coalition (AR)
• Georgia Justice Project
• Macon Reentry Coalition (GA)
• Forever Family (GA)
• Project South (GA)
• Georgia Budget & Policy Institute
• Central Outreach & Advocacy Center (GA)
• Making Connections (KY)
• V.O.T.E. - Voice of the Ex-Offender (LA)
• Job Opportunities Task Force (MD)
• ArchCity Defenders (MO)
• Missouri Association for Social Welfare
• North Carolina Office of Indigent Defense Services
• North Carolina Second Chance Alliance
• Community Success Initiative (NC)
• North Carolina Justice Center
• Southern Coalition for Social Justice
• South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center
• South Carolina Legal Services
• LifeLine to Success (TN)
Many more individuals and organizations throughout the South expressed an interest in participating, but couldn’t attend the November meeting. They will be a part of the Coalition as it moves forward.

**Inaugural Meeting**

The planning committee identified three complimentary models of advocacy that together can effectively reduce barriers to employment for people with criminal records: public policy advocacy, community organizing, and direct legal services. At the meeting Coalition participants learned about each of these strategies through the case studies discussed below. With these case studies at the fore, participants broke into small discussion groups to identify the components of successful advocacy and the challenges advocates encountered in their states. Gleaning lessons from the case studies and other individuals’ experiences, participants were introduced to new strategies and deepened their understanding of how to improve the effectiveness of their work.

- **Public Policy Advocacy**
  *Dennis Gaddy (Community Success Initiative) and William Rowe (North Carolina Justice Center)*

  The North Carolina Second Chance Alliance presented on their legislative reform success highlighting key components of their model. The Alliance’s efforts were rooted in a strong connection to the community and to grassroots organizations. In addition, the Alliance firmly established their credibility with policy makers, their allies, and the media. With a clear vision of their goals and knowledge of the legislative process, the Alliance was able to move their reform agenda forward.

- **Direct Services**
  *Doug Ammar, Marissa McCall Dodson and Ashley Deadwyler (Georgia Justice Project)*

  The Georgia Justice Project’s (GJP) holistic program provides a powerful case study of direct services. In addition to providing legal representation for individuals with pending cases and individuals who have been denied employment or benefits due to their criminal history, GJP also provides education on the relevant laws to the impacted individuals, and reaches out to inform legislators, judges, lawyers, and relevant state agencies. By developing strong relationships GJP can effectively advocate for their clients and for positive changes in the system at the same time. Recognizing that clients also have a wide array of needs, GJP partners with social service organizations and other reentry groups to alleviate barriers for their clients.
Community Organizing

*Linda Evans (All of Us or None)*

All of Us or None (AOUON), in their work organizing the formerly incarcerated and their allies across the country, has identified several common threads for success. AOUON emphasized that communication to the public must be accessible and compelling, and should leverage all media tools. In order for a strong movement to reform the penal system to take root, people who are directly affected must be engaged, invested, and feel that they are contributing to the change. More importantly, they should be leaders in the movement. Campaigns must be built with a foundation of trust between those who are directly affected and their partners. As in any of this work, sufficient resources are needed to support opportunities for the most directly affected people to be able to participate (i.e. transportation, training, etc.).

Summary

After each presentation there was time to discuss the model and the challenges organizations working in that area face. The attendees then divided into three groups to share ideas and brainstorm. At the end of the day the groups came to together to share what they had learned and discuss next steps and the focus of the Coalition.

The Community Organizing breakout session highlighted the need to work in coalition and share best practices. Educating and empowering the base was identified as key to building a movement. The Direct Service session discussed the need for comprehensive assessment of individuals’ needs and holistic services that address the family as well. The group also highlighted the need to meet individuals where they are and provide materials and training that are educationally appropriate and engaging. The Public Policy Advocacy session emphasized the need to understand the values of the policy makers and to build relationships with the key players. In addition, the group mutually agreed that in order to form a coalition of policy advocates, it is essential to have a cohesive, clear vision and to have agreement of what is non-negotiable.

Next Steps

The final part of the meeting was dedicated to discussing the next steps for the Coalition. The planning committee has also met to discuss the meeting and the feedback. The following priorities and ideas were identified as helpful to the advocacy efforts of the participants and to further nationwide reform:

- Building a broader base of stakeholders throughout the region to demonstrate broad support for positive reentry reforms in the South and promoting access to policy-makers through a unified voice from the South;
- Sharing information and best practices (webinar series, idea and question sharing through a listserv, work committees focused on key areas, database on ally policy makers);
- Identifying allies and opposition for specific reform issues (including expungement reform, elimination of the TANF/SNAP drug felony ban, and Ban the Box);
- Providing assistance to participating groups with framing and public messaging: (developing a consistent compelling messaging that advances reform in the South);
• Assisting Coalition members in attracting media attention through meetings with editorial boards, targeting local radio broadcasts, and utilizing media outlets, listservs and other communication tools;
• Increasing visibility of how these issues affect the South by participating in national events (the Democratic and Republican national conventions will both be in the South in 2012);
• Collaborating with other criminal justice reform movements (such as the Formerly Incarcerated Peoples Movement);
• Creating more opportunities for individuals who are directly affected and from the most impacted part of the country to participate in the national dialogue on reentry;
• Increasing access to national sources of funding through a unified approach (possibly establishing an umbrella organization that could issue re-grants); and
• Holding an annual summit to gauge collective progress and strategize.

Conclusion
There is a tremendous need for an established and unified voice of stakeholders in the South who want to reverse the phenomenon of mass incarceration. The severe economic and budgetary climate has prompted state governments in the South, like those around the country, to reevaluate their criminal justice systems because they can no longer afford to maintain a bloated system that encourages recidivism rather than promoting reentry. The members of the steering committee have found, individually and collectively, in the past few years, an increasingly receptive audience for policies that improve employment outcomes for people with a criminal record as part of a comprehensive approach to improve reentry outcomes. The moment to insert the voice of reform is now and the South is the region in the country most impacted by these policies. The New Southern Strategy Coalition can serve as a critical force in maintaining the momentum the nation has been experiencing on the federal level and in other regions of the country to reform counter-productive reentry policies in the South to be more just, fair, and redemptive.