

February 28, 2020

Senator Cynthia S. Creem
Senate Co-Chair, The Task Force on Emerging Adults in the Criminal Justice System
State House
24 Beacon Street
Room 473-G
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Paul F. Tucker
House Co-Chair, The Task Force on Emerging Adults in the Criminal Justice System
State House
24 Beacon Street
Room 312-A
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Senator Creem and Representative Tucker,

It has been a profound honor to serve on the *Emerging Adults in the Criminal Justice System Task Force*. I am grateful to the Massachusetts Legislature for its bold leadership and commitment to reform in this critical area. Through establishing the Task Force, a cornerstone was set from which a series of ideas and thoughtful recommendations have emerged. I am particularly thankful to Senator Cynthia Creem and Representative Paul Tucker for their stewardship over the last year, as well as to the members of their respective staffs for helping to coordinate the work of the Task Force. I also appreciate the collegiality, commitment, and expertise brought by the Task Force members with whom I had the pleasure of working. And I would be remiss were I not to acknowledge the many contributions made by the subject matter experts whose diverse experience and insight added significant value to our planning meetings.

In conjunction with the release of this report, there are several considerations and takeaways that should inform our individual and collective efforts to effect change through public policy. Scientific research elucidates that brain development, specifically the prefrontal cortex, is more protracted than the rapidity of a person's physical development; more specifically, the neuroscience literature illuminates a deficit in executive functioning in one's formative years, resulting in poor impulse control, problems with self-regulation, disinclination toward risk avoidance, heightened sensation-seeking, and susceptibility to peer pressure.

With this as a base, efforts designed to improve outcomes for emerging adults should, at their core, be grounded in a triumvirate approach, whereby scientific theory, data, and evidence-based practices are universally applied. To that end, the Task Force report highlights a number of

existing programs congruous with this philosophy, presenting several models worthy of replication.

Furthermore, many of these initiatives point to the virtues of measured policymaking -- that is, where systemic change can be achieved without having to embark on large-scale, structural overhauls. Our work at the Middlesex Sheriff's Office (MSO) is an example of what can be achieved in this regard -- an approach that is producing positive results. We have drawn from the scientific research to modify and improve our focus on emerging adults, working within the contours of the existing system. Through a unique partnership with the Vera Institute of Justice -- the first of its kind in a jail setting -- we collected and analyzed data on our emerging adult population. Doing so lent additional credibility to the brain science research, and was further buttressed by our own professional experience working with this population.

After the completion of an internal needs assessment -- which involved a baseline study -- we worked with Vera to implement a program model, couched in evidence, and carefully geared toward young adults. Launched in 2018, *People Achieving Change Together* (PACT) is a specialized housing unit for 18-24-year-olds; it offers an individualized treatment approach through integrative care. To date, the impact has paid dividends:

- Since the program's inception, 91% of young adults released for a year or longer have not recidivated.
- Last year alone, 97% were not involved in a fight, and 81% did not receive a disciplinary report.

These findings are significant in that young adults disproportionately represent the age group most likely to be involved in a fight or to commit a disciplinary infraction while incarcerated; moreover, they pose a high risk for arrest upon release and reincarceration. In reimagining how corrections and the larger criminal justice system can respond to the unique needs of young adults, as seen through our PACT experience, I offer the following considerations for further reform at the statewide level:

- **Create capacity among staff**
CJ system agencies should invest in specialized training on best practices for serving emerging adults. In addition, agencies should consider offering training on diversity and culturally competency to ensure that staff better understand the communities from which emerging adults hail. At the MSO, we have trained over 40 correctional officers and several civilian staff on promising approaches for working with emerging adults.
- **Prioritize reentry planning**
Because young adults are more prone to recidivism than any other age group, identifying short-term and long-term needs should start at the earliest point possible to better position young adults for success. At the MSO, reentry planning begins on Day 1 and is achieved throughout one's stay, continuing post-release.

- **Forge partnerships with community stakeholders**
The programs and services made available through our partnerships with Roca Inc. and UTEC, as well as with other young adult advocacy groups, *begin* on this inside and extend to the community. This ensures a seamless transition at the time of release and that the necessary community supports are in place for assistance and mentorship beyond the walls of the facility.
- **Provide family-focused interventions**
When individuals succeed, families succeed. Family support can promote healing, establish bonds, and disrupt the cyclical effects of exposure to the criminal justice system. At the MSO, we have rolled out a comprehensive Family Services Program as a resource and support service for families, including hiring dedicated staff, coordinating contact visits, and facilitating family mediation.
- **Change the treatment model**
Establish age-specific interventions and corresponding treatment modalities through a tiered system of care. The overarching focus should be on developing age-appropriate responses *across systems*.
- **Expand pre and post-arrest diversion programs**
Alternatives to incarceration provide emerging adults with an opportunity to change behavior while remaining in the community with their family. Diversion programs help to prevent family separation and to avoid the collateral consequences associated with arrest.

What we know about the emerging adult population affirms that traditional approaches are not only inadequate, but also inequitable. We need not look solely to scientific theory to tell us this. My personal experience as a “recovering” young adult and now parent of three, offer two different prisms through which to advocate for a new way forward. I am eager to remain part of this effort in the days and months ahead along with other key stakeholders, many of whom participated in this Task Force. I thank you again for the opportunity to be part of this important endeavor, and I look forward to what the future holds.

Sincerely,



PETER J. KOUTOUJIAN

