
Prison Inmates are Using Peer-to-Peer Activities Created by From Here To The Streets Founder Joseph Chiappetta Jr. to Reduce Recidivism

For Immediate Release

BUCKEYE, Ariz./EWorldWire/July 9, 2011 --- With shrinking budgets and staff shortages, the Arizona Department of Corrections has always struggled to provide programs to the inmate population. In this struggle they have an unlikely ally - inmate peer-to-peer activities, including one developed by Joseph Chiappetta Jr.

"Peer-to-peer or one-on-one inmate-to-inmate self-help is having a measurable impact in an environment with very limited resources," stated Chiappetta.

In 2005, the Maricopa County Health Department used a grant from the Center for Disease Control to start a peer-to-peer program called "HEPS." This program allowed a group of carefully selected inmate volunteers to receive 40 hours of training to become peer educators, who would then facilitate classes and mentor other inmates to help reduce and combat the spread of HEP-C, HIV, and other STD infections. These diseases occur in epidemic percentages within the prison populations nationwide. This program was a huge success, and it continued for several years until it was re-written as a health education program after the grant funding ran out. About 20 of these original peer educators continued to mentor their fellow inmates, and they began to train in additional areas including employability, small business development, credit repair, and many other re-entry related topics. Most inmates prefer to receive this critical information from a peer, rather than a staff member; this is not because the staff does a poor job but rather that the trust and comradeship between inmates creates a unique and more positive learning dynamic. Some of these peer mentors now assist staff as volunteer facilitators in many unit-based pre-release classes, as well as in the grant-funded re-entry program currently being implemented statewide in Arizona.

Another example of peer-to-peer success is the Prison Experience Workshop Program which has an evidence-based report that shows a low 13 percent recidivism rate for its graduates who were released during a three-year period. That particular program is based upon active and continual peer mentorship. Peer mentors continue to work within the inmate population, and many of them are only one-man operations. The key to peer-to-peer activity success is the combination of sincere, motivated, and qualified volunteers, and the use of current and accurate information.

One of the original HEPS Peer Educators who followed this evolution of development is Chiappetta. He participated in all of these programs and, with the help of his family and several 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations, he wrote and published eight books and ten articles related to re-entry. He also developed several classes and launched a Web site at FromHereToTheStreets.com (<http://www.fromheretothestreets.com>) which offers all of his publications and materials free of charge for prisons and inmates across America.

Chiappetta was also one of the peer educators responsible for his unit receiving the President's Volunteer Service Award at ASPC Eyman-Meadows in 2009.

Several state and federal prisons use Chiappetta's Web site and materials, along with thousands of visitors to the Web site. This was due to peer-to-peer activities being part of Chiappetta's prison experience.

There are many other examples of inmates participating in peer mentorship and their success stories, as well as the success stories of the inmates these peers reach out to; peer-to-peer activities clearly get results but perhaps the best and most important example of this dynamic is that these are all volunteer activities.

What about an inmate volunteer who will choose to spend most of his personal time assisting other inmates who are soon-to-be- released , while he is serving a life sentence? One such person is Jake Wideman. For many years of his 25-to-life sentence, Wideman has spent most of his time assisting staff and his fellow inmates as an inmate clerk, a teachers' aide, and a peer mentor. He has helped hundreds of inmates earn a GED, while helping them to stay employed while in prison, and he has gone out of his way to give soon-to-be released offenders the tools and information they need to get out and stay out of prison. This is noteworthy also because he has grown from a 16-year-old boy who committed a terrible high profile crime into a man who is greatly respected and appreciated by his peers and staff alike. Wideman has stated that despite the crushing guilt he lives with and the prospect of a life in prison, the privilege of being able to help others is a driving force in his life. It speaks volumes of a person's character when one acquits one's self while under the pressures of a hostile and dangerous environment.

According to Chiappetta, "Giving back truly is the first real step on the path towards redemption, and these peer-to-peer participants are doing their part to further build these paths and the bridge to reach them."

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