

Baylor hunger program to evaluate criminal justice initiatives

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WACO—The Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty is expanding its work to include initiatives that deal with the criminal justice system where it intersects with high rates of hunger and poverty.

New partnerships will allow the organization to evaluate programs designed to reduce recidivism rates and help formerly incarcerated individuals reenter society.

The collaborative's evaluations will provide research-based recommendations for improving and growing the programs beyond their current parameters.



Jeremy Everett is executive director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. (Baylor University Photo)

“Our core commitment is alleviating hunger in the world,” said Jeremy

Everett, executive director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. “But research tells us that hunger is not a stand-alone issue. It is intricately woven in with many other experiences that people face, and one of those experiences is incarceration.

“What we have done best since 2009 is to test innovative strategies for addressing some of humanity’s greatest challenges and to scale them up to a level that can create maximum impact. Our new criminal justice initiatives are a natural next step for applying our methodology to an issue that is closely tied to hunger and poverty.”

As its first project, the collaborative will evaluate programs offered by the One Heart Project and Prison Entrepreneurship Program, two nonprofit organizations devoted to working with both recently released and currently incarcerated people to reduce rates of recidivism and to promote post-incarceration flourishing.

The Baylor collaborative’s connection with the two organizations was sparked by Baylor alum Robert Barkley, who has served on the board of directors for both organizations and also is on the new board of advocates for the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty.

Barkley believes the collaboration of the three organizations will enhance the ability of each to come alongside people on the receiving end of difficult situations. Barkley anticipates the Baylor collaborative “will provide the research expertise to enable PEP and One Heart to understand, develop, and fine tune programs and initiatives that will help returning citizens be successful in society and achieve economic success for themselves and their families.”

One Heart Project

While the One Heart Project launched in 2015, its origins can be traced to 2008, when family and fans of the Grapevine Faith School football team banded together to support and cheer for their opponents, the team from the Gainesville State School, a maximum-security juvenile facility. The inspiring event and what transpired after is the subject of an upcoming feature film.

The football game also gave Steve Riach a vision for enhanced efforts to address the situation facing incarcerated youth. Riach, a filmmaker and the CEO of One Heart, is excited to work with the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty to further develop One Heart's multi-dimensional approach—involving education, mentoring and employment—to reducing juvenile recidivism and breaking the cradle-to-prison pipeline.

Riach believes One Heart's partnership with the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty "will allow us to further scale the work we have done over the past six years and help with expansion into new states, all of which will allow us to see hope spread and the lives of more youth transformed."

Prison Entrepreneurship Program

Since 2004, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program has worked at the intersection of social justice reform and economic mobility. The program provides a holistic approach to prison rehabilitation that begins inside prison and continues when incarcerated people are released.

In the pre-release phase, its "inside-out" program design combines character and leadership development, family reconciliation, business education and the power of a positive peer group. In the post-release phase, the program provides transitional housing, employment services,

access to support services, continuing education and business support.

Brian Kelly, CEO of the Prison Entrepreneurship Program, noted with more than 600,000 people released from prisons in the U.S. each year, “it’s in our best interest to ensure that they become productive, stable citizens.”

He added, “The ability to earn a livable wage/income is imperative to ensure our returning citizens don’t resort to crime to get what they need to survive.”

Economic benefits of reducing recidivism

In the same way addressing hunger and poverty has positive effects on both individuals and communities, the positive consequences of reducing rates of prison re-entry are societal, Everett insisted.

“Mass incarceration is an issue of justice, and it is an economic issue,” he said. “Reducing our prison population lifts the burden on taxpayers and creates conditions for stronger communities, neighborhoods and families.

“BCHP has found that programs designed to elevate wages and provide resources for those facing food insecurity have the added benefit of strengthening the economy. We believe the same principle can work with these new initiatives.”

Sara Dye will lead the Baylor collaborative’s criminal justice initiatives. Dye and her team will employ a strategic combination of programs, policy and research to evaluate One Heart and PEP’s programs and to assist the organizations as they seek to expand their work beyond its current scope.

Dye is enthusiastic about the expansion of the collaborative’s work into criminal justice.

“Federal and state carceral systems intersect with nearly all other issues of justice, including hunger and poverty, and our team is excited to contribute to the ongoing research and policy conversations about the intersections of these social issues that affect us all,” she said.