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HONORING NATIONS: 2008 HONOREE

Muscogee Creek Nation Reintegration Program Muscogee Creek Nation

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Although the state of Oklahoma has one of the largest prison systems in the U.S., it provides released prisoners with little post-incarceration support. Many struggle to find their way on the “outside” and are eventually re-incarcerated. In the early 2000s, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation set out to tackle this problem. The Nation’s Reintegration Program works with tribal citizens before and after they leave prison, paying attention to everything from jobs and housing to counseling and spiritual needs.

A Revolving Door of Prison Terms

The general public has a negative view of ex-convicts: employers do not want to hire them, landlords resist renting rooms to them, and families often disown them. Many inmates leave prison with financial obligations, including child support, fines, and fees for parole and probation supervision. Many suffer from underlying substance abuse problems or mental illness.

Yet the state of Oklahoma, which puts a larger fraction of its citizens behind bars than most other states in the U.S., provides few post-incarceration services. Ex-prisoners are given a bus ticket, a set of second-hand clothes, and a check for \$50—and with that they are expected to make it on their own. One official who works with ex-prisoners has observed, “We have created a society that has established so many barriers for this population, recidivism seems like the best option. Hopelessness and despair play a huge role.”

Over time, community leaders from the Muscogee (Creek) Nation—a Native nation with 60,000 enrolled citizens in east-central Oklahoma—grew concerned about the state’s lack of support for ex-convicts. They worried that Muscogee ex-prisoners found it almost impossible to get back on their feet, and all too often re-offended and returned to prison. They also felt that the state’s policy ran counter to traditional Muscogee attitudes towards those who commit crimes. Muscogee custom sees justice as restorative, with the goal of changing behavior and bringing an offender back into the community.

Making Plans for Life on the Outside

In 2004, The Muscogee (Creek) Nation passed legislation establishing its Reintegration Program. Today, the program is staffed by four case managers who work under the leadership of a program director and with the support of an administrative assistant. Funding comes from the Nation’s annual budget. The staff works closely with Oklahoma corrections officials, a broad range of service providers, and the Muscogee community to rehabilitate Muscogee Nation citizens who have gotten into trouble with the law.

The Reintegration Program begins its work inside the prisons. Staff members regularly visit, offering group substance abuse therapy and seminars on topics such as character building, planning for re-entry, and job skills. The program also makes religious items available for sweat lodge ceremonies and coordinates with outside sponsors to give blessings. These services help inmates prepare for life beyond prison walls and start rebuilding their lives.

Once a Muscogee citizen is released from prison, a Reintegration Program staffer serves as his case manager. Together, they think through what it will take for the client to succeed and match the Program's impressive list of services to these needs. Helping an ex-prisoner get settled might mean finding an apartment, paying the deposit, assisting with rent, and buying groceries. The road to getting a job might mean signing the client up for vocational training, finding an employer open to hiring ex-convicts, or identifying bus routes. If necessary, the case manager also buys clothing, arranges medical and dental appointments, provides referrals for mental health and substance abuse counseling, and negotiates payment schedules for money owed.

All of this work takes creative thinking. On the employment front, for example, several clients were able to get oil field jobs—but transportation was an issue. Public transit stopped running before the night shift ended in the early morning hours. Rather than have their clients turn down good work, the Muscogee Creek Reintegration Program contracted with a taxi service to pick them up and take them home. Noting the many ways in which the program has helped him, one participant asked, "How do you go out and just get a job as a felon without this support?"

In addition to client-specific work, the program embraces the broader mission of making its clients feel valued in the community and tackling negative attitudes towards ex-convicts. As part of its "Service Pay Back" initiative, clients donate their labor to help Muscogee elders with home maintenance projects like lawn-mowing, painting, and tree trimming. These activities help clients build personal connections, make a contribution to the community, and show society that they have changed. Case managers also work with local employers and landlords, encouraging them to consider hiring or renting to individuals with a criminal record. In 2006, in response to Reintegration Program advocacy, the Muscogee Nation changed its own hiring policies. Under the new rules, felons are no longer banned from tribal employment.

Critically, the program is not a free ride for Muscogee ex-prisoners. Using a mix of friendliness and authority, case managers insist that clients live up to their responsibilities as Nation citizens. In return for the Program's help, clients must attend probation and parole hearings, meet financial obligations, and stay substance free. Those who are not disabled are expected to work or be in training. Random drug tests and surprise visits help hold them to these expectations. Program participants know the Nation's message: you will not be left by the wayside as long as you want to better yourself.

Reclaiming Citizens One at a Time

Muscogee citizens are no longer lost to the Nation once they are incarcerated. In fact, going to prison is sometimes the first step toward rebuilding cultural ties. In the words of one staff member, the Reintegration Program gives citizens "the opportunity to be proud of who they are, where they come from, and above all, what is to come." Ex-offenders come home to the Muscogee Nation and, once settled, begin to make their own contributions to strengthening the Nation.

Significantly, the Nation is reclaiming these citizens from within another government's penal system. The Reintegration Program works closely with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections so that it can offer services within the state's facilities. Case managers speak on behalf of Muscogee citizens at state parole board hearings, presenting rehabilitation progress and plans, which has helped shorten some prisoners' time in the system. District judges have begun to sentence Muscogee citizens directly into the care of the Reintegration Program. These actions demonstrate how much trust Oklahoma State officials have in the Reintegration Program and in the Muscogee Nation's ability to take responsibility for its own.

How to deal with inmates who have served their time is an important issue for communities nationwide. The need for support services is substantial, as more than 650,000 individuals leave U.S. federal and state prisons every year, and still more exit county and municipal facilities. Yet there is often public resistance to spending money on felons. In this environment, the Muscogee Nation Reintegration Program stands out as a valuable model. After experiencing how Muscogee prisoners benefit from the Reintegration Program, one Oklahoma Department of Corrections official publicly stated, "We need to do what the Creeks are doing."

Bringing the Lessons Home

The Muscogee (Creek) Nation recognizes that every citizen—even an ex-prisoner—is important, and that investments in its people are investments in the Nation's strength and sovereignty. In a setting where the state, surrounding counties, municipalities, and other Native nations are not offering services to ex-prisoners, the Muscogee Nation has built a cutting-edge reintegration program. Citizens who have served their time are now welcomed into what has been described as a "powerful culture of caring." By reaching out to former criminals, the Muscogee Nation Reintegration Program helps them stay out of jail, make a home within the Nation, and lead productive, healthy lives.

Lessons in Nation Building:

- Successful reintegration involves comprehensive service provision, ranging from employment and housing to counseling and spiritual needs.
- Effective tribal programs inspire trust across jurisdictions.
- Investments in citizens are investments in a Native nation's strength and sovereignty.

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