

DESISTANCE: LEAVING THE MINEFIELD

A growing number of criminologists and practitioners who are working with the idea of “desistance” are asking themselves different fundamental questions from those we’ve been asking for years. It’s not: *How do people get themselves into a criminal lifestyle? What are the criminogenic needs that give birth to crime?* Instead, they’re asking: *Why and how do people stop (desist from) offending? What processes and pathways do people use to get out of a criminal lifestyle?*

There’s a great image about desistance that’s circulating. The question is posed: “How do you get out when you find yourself in the middle of a minefield?” People on the outside may be yelling, “Do this! Don’t do that!” But the best answer is: Follow the footsteps of the guy who got out successfully.

What does that mean? Well, first, when it comes to the minefield of a criminal lifestyle, the *pathways into* crime and the *pathways out* aren’t necessarily the same. A second implication is that the real experts aren’t necessarily the ones standing on the sidelines with their screening assessment instruments. Often, the most helpful experts are the peers with the lived experience, the ones who’ve been there and done that.

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LOOKING AHEAD/NEXT UP...

As we turned the end of last year and started a new one, we’ve been sorting through a lot of opportunities and possibilities. Here are a few highlights...

- Fred Nelson, our executive director, went to the American Correctional Association’s winter conference in Orlando and was able to attend some helpful workshops and do some very effective networking. Along with meeting with representatives from inmate tablet distributors, tech companies, and grant makers, he was able to make really positive connections with

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REENTRY CONGREGATIONS SURVEY WORK CONTINUES

ION has undertaken a special project, using a survey to gather information about what's happening in reentry in local churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques. The aim is to discover what models and approaches are working well (and why) and what's not working so well (and why not). When we have sufficient input, we'll gather what we're learning into an *Effective Reentry Ministry for Ordinary Congregations* guidebook. Our hope is that this guide will help those faith communities that want to engage intentionally in ministry with and to returning citizens but need some ideas about how to get started.

As of this writing, we've gotten 44 survey responses, though not all are sufficiently complete to be helpful. Our goal is a minimum of 75 surveys. In what we've seen so far there's some commonality of models but also some interesting innovation. We'll be following up with some survey respondents to hear more about their ministries. And, of course, we're letting them know about the ION platform, too!

If you know of faith communities that welcome people leaving incarceration, please share the survey link: surveymonkey.com/r/SLFWMLS.

DESISTANCE: LEAVING THE MINEFIELD *(continued from Pg 1)*

A desistance approach is about looking less at those who *didn't* make it and more at those who've actually desisted and managed to build new, healthy lives. It's about attention to the success stories and exploration of how those who made it out of the minefield managed to do that. Think of desistance as someone's *pathway toward* slowing down, de-escalating, and eventually terminating their criminal career.

Some theorists have boiled desistance down to these four elements:

- 1 Openness to change. Often, there's some sort of breakdown that allows for a breakthrough.
- 2 Finding good hooks or turning points. It isn't enough to be open to change—that open door can slam shut if there's nowhere to go next. There need to be some tangible people, places, and things to hook into and explore. Some common hooks or turning points are marriage, work, the military, and church or another faith community.
- 3 Envisioning a positive future new self. This is referred to as "identity work," and many people who write about desistance consider this central to the process. Terms often used are: redemption scripts, rituals of acceptance, overcoming shame, and forging a new self.
- 4 Recognizing the old, false self and leaving it behind. This involves being able to look at our past self and say, "That wasn't the true me, the real me. That was the old me, the false me, the me that's being overcome by the new self God is creating in me." This isn't a one-time change in a person's life but a process.

To summarize, some of the fascinating (and hopeful) key takeaways from desistance studies and theories are that...

- People are, in fact, making it out of the criminal minefield.
- This is an intensely personal process.
- In this process, people are constructing new selves with new hope.
- In this process, people need practical how-to hooks or turning points.
- In this process, people need to have a sense of personal agency and choice.
- In this process, people need acceptance and encouragement from others.

We find this incredibly exciting and believe that ION is uniquely positioned to enable, accelerate, and enhance the efforts of men and women leaving the minefield to desist from crime and pursue a meaningful, productive, and abundant life. We're helping transform reentry through three key aspects of our work that have a positive impact on the process of desistance: (a) identity work through our book, *Spiritual Survival Guide for Prison and Beyond*; (b) new relational connections, through our *Reentry Congregations Initiative*; and (c) good hooks, through our online ION platform.

Watch this space for more information about the important area of desistance!

LOOKING AHEAD/NEXT UP...

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- key reentry officials in Texas (this would be big), Washington state, and South Carolina. He also had the opportunity to cultivate deeper connections with Crossroads Prison Ministry. Crossroads connects prisoners with outside mentors to exchange letters and do Bible study together. We're actively exploring potential collaboration with Crossroads.
- We decided to shelve (for now) the possibility of leading a "Community Reentry Coaching Initiative" in collaboration with two county reentry coalitions in Southern Arizona. We felt we had too many irons in the fire right now to give this project the attention it requires and deserves.
 - We continue to make progress with our tech team to implement security changes to our website to make it more "whitelist-friendly" for use at computer terminals inside Arizona and Oregon prison facilities. The idea is to remove any potential security vulnerabilities so that inmates can directly access our site without the direct involvement of a correctional officer.
 - We've made initial forays in the state of Florida with a prison and jail ministry, the head chaplain for the state, and folks at the Trinity Broadcasting Network, who run the TBN 2nd Chance project. We'll keep you posted on any updates.
 - We're going to be the subject of a preliminary case study by Baylor University's Institute for the Study of Religion. Their research staff will conduct interviews of staff and users of our platform, examine data, lead our staff through rigorous "logic models" to help us refine our thinking and processes, and help us evaluate how we're doing and how we might improve. This process is being led by Professor Byron Johnson, author of *More God, Less Crime* (2011) and *The Restorative Prison* (2021). Obviously, we're super excited about this opportunity!

RETURNING CITIZEN SPOTLIGHT: MATTHEW

Matt Shafer is a father, son, and previously justice-involved individual who is positively contributing to the recovery and reentry space in Arizona. From his work as a Peer Support Instructor while in prison to his current position as a Community Development Manager for Connections Health Solutions, Matt continues to give back to others in need. We are blessed to work alongside people like Matt, and we're excited to share his story here. He answered our questions for this profile.

Q: What were some of your biggest surprises upon release?

A: Other than my kids having grown up and changed so much, I was surprised by how many mental health and substance abuse organizations hire Peer Supports with felony records. Individuals with lived experience with substance abuse and/or mental health issues have a huge impact when it comes to helping others who struggle with those things. I was also surprised by how alone I felt even though I was with my family and loved ones.



Q: What have your biggest challenges been?

A: I think a good number of justice-involved people have incurred some kind of restitution or fines. It's really challenging to be faced with fines and the fact I had to start over at age 42. It is hard to navigate the legal system to try and get my rights back. I am lucky I had my parents to help me but some people being released are not so lucky. The other challenge I am working on still is being in large crowds of people. I have some anxiety being around lots of people, like at a concert.

Q: What's gone well—even better than you might have expected?

A: My kids were teenagers when I was released and my relationship with them could not be better. I thought they would be mad at me for the choices I made while in my addiction and for being away from them for so long.

The biggest thing that has gone well is my career in the mental health and substance abuse community. Connections Health Solutions hired me one month after my release, and my life has changed forever. I started as a Recovery Support Specialist, which gave me the opportunity

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ARIZONA UPDATE

We have three significant developments to report from our work in Arizona.

First, we've begun hitting the road for in-person visits to prison units across the state. In the past two months, we've been able to meet with front-line correctional officers and specially trained inmate workers called Reentry Support Specialists (RPS) to do live demonstrations and field questions about the ION online platform. We've been to Douglas complex (near the border with Mexico), the Yuma complex (at the border of Arizona, California, and Mexico), and the Tucson complex, with many more to come. We've learned a ton, heard from staff about their challenges, and fed off the infectious enthusiasm of the inmates. Big increases in inmate registrations following our visits demonstrate the success of this approach. *It's working.*

Second, based on feedback we were getting from prison staff about the constraints on their available time, our contact people in the Arizona Dept of Corrections suggested setting up special, highly visible, and accessible stand-alone ION computer terminals, under the supervision of RPS workers, where inmates can directly access their profile. Inmates whose release date is within 11 months and who are eligible to use the system will be able to book a 15- or 30-minute time slot to search for services and/or send and receive messages from providers. Once we've ironed out a few technical issues, an initial pilot program is slated to begin by the end of March.

Third, *something really cool from the prison chaplains.* At the direction of the head administrative chaplain, unit chaplains (there are 55 of them across the state) have begun using ION to identify "returning citizen-friendly" congregations that they can refer to inmates who are seeking a faith community upon release. Once they identify a potential fit, they're taking it a step further. They're using their work laptops to set up initial pastoral calls on Zoom between an inmate and a pastor or other key leader of the church. That level of introduction is helping forge a personal relational link to a new community and makes the bumpy path from prison to congregation a much smoother and more positive one.

Arizona Scorecard (as of Dec. 31, 2022): 2968 returning citizens and 167 providers enrolled



ILLINOIS UPDATE

ION and the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) are currently exploring new options for returning citizen registration. During this process, pre-release registrations are on a temporary hold. However, we are now working with federal probation staff from Northern Illinois to register those who are under their care. Also, people leaving Cook County Jail are given our info upon release. Beyond that, we are staying involved with the re-entry community by increasing involvement with the Illinois Reentry Council's Support Service subgroup, Justice 20/20, and other coalitions.

Illinois Scorecard (as of Dec. 31, 2022): 2284 returning citizens and 216 providers enrolled



OREGON UPDATE

It's early days yet—we just started reaching out to service providers in Oregon in mid-January—so there's not much to report in terms of registering service providers. At the direction of Program Director Maddi Briguglio, our Oregon team of former intern and now part-time program assistant Kristina Beretta, Portland State University intern Esme Ringelstetter, and Arizona State University intern Madison Howe are hard at work, assembling working lists of potential reentry service providers and reaching out by email and phone to let them know about ION. It can be tough work to get through to people for the first time and build a movement from scratch, so please keep our team in your prayers.

A little insider information for you: Our "expansion playbook" in Oregon has a defined numerical target for us to reach before we'll go live. We've reached an agreement with the Oregon Department of Corrections that they will start offering ION to adults in custody (AICs) when ION has registered 70 service providers. We want to have enough service providers onboard that when AICs begin to go online to search for help, they're able to find a reasonable number of choices and variety of services. The understanding is that we will have at least 50 providers in the heavily populated I-5 corridor, with at least another 20 providers coming from more rural areas of the state.

Oregon Scorecard (as of Feb. 8): 3 service providers registered, 67 to go



Matt with his kids (from left) Ethan, Jackson, and Grace

RETURNING CITIZEN SPOTLIGHT: MATTHEW *(continued from Pg 3)*

to help others. I was promoted to Community Development Manager a year after I started, and now I get to bring our services to those who need it.

Q: *How would an organization such as ION (a connection tool) have helped you when you were released?*

A: ION would have helped me in many ways. Being released from prison was nerve-racking because I didn't know who would hire me, where I would work, how to access services for

my physical and mental health, my legal help, and where I could find support to help me with my journey. The Inside Out Network is such an important tool to connect justice-involved people to all the resources they need to become successful and regain their lives. People coming out of prison fail sometimes because they do not have stable housing, no employment prospects, no counseling, no job training, no support, and even no consistent food or clothing. ION is there to help people even before they are released. Having access to so many providers and organizations who care about you and want you to succeed is just amazing.

Q: *Is there anything else about your journey that you'd like to share?*

A: I am now nine years clean from drugs and would like to thank my family for their love and support. I also would like to thank Connections Health Solutions for giving me, and others who are in my shoes, the opportunity to be a part of an organization that really cares about people and the community. Thank you, ION, for changing people's lives and connecting us to services and giving us hope so we can be successful. I am living proof that people can change, we do recover!

Thank you,
Matt Shafer

SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL GUIDE: ANOTHER FORM OF SUPPORT

The latest box of copies of the *Spiritual Survival Guide for Prison and Beyond* to go to the post office was headed to JR DeGroot at Crossroads Prison Ministries in Grand Rapids, Michigan. To date, roughly 60,000 copies of the Survival Guide have made it into the hands of incarcerated individuals, returning citizens, ministers and ministries, and family members.

ION's executive director, Fred Nelson, published the *Survival Guide* in 2012 after interviewing inmates at Stateville Prison in Illinois, along with people who'd been incarcerated. Family members shared their experiences as well. Originally, teams from Redeemer Church, Park Ridge, Illinois, would distribute the book along with Bibles to interested inmates at the intake center at Stateville. But it's gone out across the country, too.

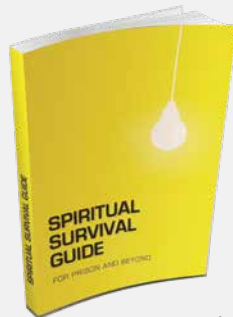
A jail ministry in Sumter County, South Carolina, uses the book. Grace Lutheran Church in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, asked for 250 copies so they could give one to everyone in the Dodgeville City Jail for Christmas last year. And Lee Robbins, a pastor and

life coach active in reentry in Gwinnett County, Georgia, wrote to say: "We used your book with a class we call, 'Tackle the Shackles': The Coach Approach to Corrective Thinking and Spiritual Formation. My friend Buddy Curry, a former NFL player for the Atlanta Falcons, and I lead the class, and they are loving the round-table discussions. We gave your book to the entire class, and they are responsible for reading it and coming back for discussion the next class. They love it!"

Over the years, ION has received stacks of moving letters from inmates, many with stories about someone happening upon the book at just the right moment in their lives.

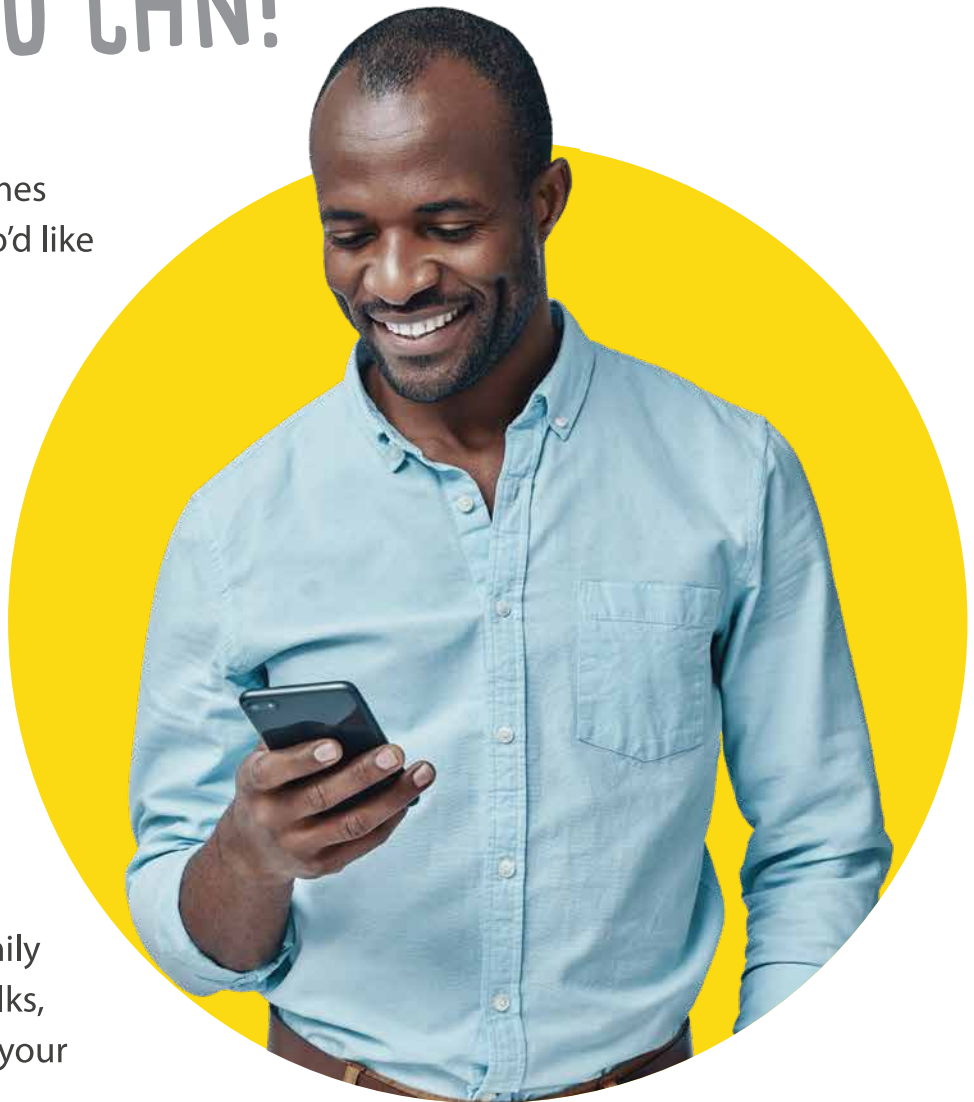
We're grateful to God for working through the *Survival Guide* to make a difference in people's lives.

The Kindle edition of the *Spiritual Survival Guide for Prison and Beyond* (2nd edition) is available on Amazon. Paperback copies can be ordered on the ION website at <https://secure.myvanco.com/YGKR/home>.



CAN YOU HELP? YES, YES YOU CAN!

The Inside Out Network welcomes contributions from anyone who'd like to help empower returning citizens to take control of their own reentry and get the support they need. You can give by clicking on Donate on our Facebook page or in the top menu on our website. Or you can send a check to ION at the address below. You can also contribute by spreading the word about ION on social media, to service providers, ministries, corrections staff, family members of justice-involved folks, news media, grantmakers, and your prayer group. It takes a village!



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The Inside Out Network is always a free service for returning citizens

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