

Aftercare: From Confinement to Freedom
by Phil Oliver

Aftercare is a term used for assisting incarcerated juveniles as they leave their facilities and are released back to their neighborhood and continues as they reintegrate into society.

Think of it as surgical recovery and then convalescence. When incarcerated juveniles are released, they have essentially been through a major surgery of heart, mind, and spirit, and are in desperate need of Surgical Recovery and caring support at home.

This medical picture gives the gravity of importance for AfterCare services when they leave incarceration to help successfully transition these juveniles back into their neighborhoods, family, and even the faith community.

When they are released, the parole or probation systems take over but are not adequately staffed or funded to reach out to these young people as they begin to face critical situations of decision and change. With the juvenile justice systems concentrating their efforts and resources on accountability, watching for mistakes, and then employing reward and punishment motivation, a void is created in relational encouragement, affirmation and ways to strengthen their spirit. This is where the faith community and churches can and must "step up to the plate" to help provide vital intervention ministry to teach and model for the youth intentional friendship, authentic fellowship, and wholesome fun.

While incarcerated, each of these inwardly fragile young people was confronted with their antisocial choices, counseled about changing, and given training in how society expects them to behave and contribute. In some cases, the faith community has already been a part of the facility schedule and given additional opportunities to renew their spirit and seek divine help in overcoming issues in their lives that seem to be controlling their antisocial choices.

Also during their incarceration, many of these young people have had vast amounts of time to think about where they are in life, how they got there, and what they plan to do differently when they get out. They have even developed an official "Success Plan" for re-entry with their caseworker and supervising staff. The problem is that these steps have been somewhat superficial because so much of their incarcerated environment is controlled and continually monitored, but when they get out, they have to make it happen by themselves. This is one of the big reasons that a large percentage of youth (50% or more), after returning to the cycle of dysfunctional communities and families, end up re-committing offenses and returning to incarceration.

The paradox remains that while many of these young people have decided what they want for their new future, they rarely see it played out in their environments "in the free". Therefore, they have no needed reinforcement and positive affirmation of their new choice systems and they quickly question themselves and abandon their resolve.

I believe that this void in the Aftercare experience is where the faith community fulfills its God-given directive to minister to "the least of these" who are returning to our communities after radical surgery and in vital need of spiritual growth and nurture. This time of recovery is critical as these young people are re-evaluating, revising, and re-visiting places, people, and relationships that contributed to their original path toward incarceration.

What can be done?

As churches, God has given us ultimate intervention directives. We alone have the HOPE that change is possible and permanent through Christ, under God's direction. We alone are in it for the long-haul, not just past probation or parole because we are members of a universal family.

We alone have the empathy for sinners who have been lovingly reclaimed for God's Kingdom and his eternal family where nurturing fellowship, peace, and grace are practiced and promoted. This is what we have to offer that will not be part of this vital process unless we get involved.

What can YOU do?

Get involved. Volunteer to mentor, provide Bible Study, or tutoring, with your local juvenile system. They always need individuals to grow and show positive adult relationships with these incarcerated juveniles. The volunteer coordinators are trained and ready to receive your help. Lead your church fellowship to create an outreach ministry to provide Bible Studies or birthday celebrations in facilities.

Take a risk. Build relationships with your parole and probation departments. Talk with your pastor and youth pastor about the need for this life-changing outreach. Invite newly released youth to your church with several members "adopting" the youth and their family.

Open doors. Get your church or business on the community service list provided by your juvenile system for youth who are given community service hours to complete. Work with your pastor, maintenance director, and business office to plan meaningful work experiences that help the young person as well as your fellowship. Then, invite them to get involved with your fellowship and find "hosts" for them as they do. Meet with denominational ministry directors to discuss their commitment to juvenile ministry in facilities as well as "on the street" and what local resources are already in place---or they would like to put in place with your help.

What is the JJMNT doing? JJMNT is committed to continue to provide resources for you, your ministry, and your church to help provide intentional, effective aftercare in your community. We believe that together through Christ we can make a difference to "the least of these".

Please let us know of your successes and concerns and check back with us often as we add more resources to our website, www.jjmnt.org, and our newsletter *Juvenile-Networking*, www.juvenile-networking.org. For further information contact info@jjmnt.org.