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Is it a New Day for Reentry in Philadelphia? We Hope So.

According to Mayor Jim Kenney, who began his second term as mayor on Jan. 6, his stated goals this term include reducing gun violence and continuing the city’s efforts to cut the jail population in half.

By Joanna Visser Adjoian and Cameron Holmes | January 10, 2020 at 11:27 AM

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Cameron Holmes and Joanna Visser Adjoian of Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project in Philadelphia.

According to Mayor Jim Kenney, who began his second term as mayor on Jan. 6, his stated goals this term include (<https://www.inquirer.com/politics/philadelphia/philadelphia-mayor-jim-kenney-inauguration-20200106.html>) reducing gun violence and continuing the city’s efforts to cut the jail population in half. As attorneys and advocates providing reentry supports to youth and former “Juvenile Lifers” in Philadelphia, city leaders can hold true to these commitments by investing in formerly incarcerated people as they return to our community from jail and prison.

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City leaders have lamented the lack of action on reentry. Judge Benjamin Lerner, former deputy managing director for criminal justice reform who retired from the bench at the end of 2019, reflected on this [during a recent KYW Newsradio interview \(https://kywnewsradio.radio.com/articles/news/judge-ben-lerners-impact-on-philly-criminal-justice-system\)](https://kywnewsradio.radio.com/articles/news/judge-ben-lerners-impact-on-philly-criminal-justice-system), “Reentry ... is really important in reducing recidivism and restoring people to being productive members of the community. And while we had internally a fantastic person doing reentry work, we were paying a lot more lip service to it as an administration than we were actually moving forward on it. I was kind of banging my head against a wall in that area also.”

The August 2019 announcement of the creation of the Office of Reentry Partnerships is one signal of this administration’s recognition that reentry requires additional resources and attention. To realize this office’s potential, it must be appropriately positioned, resourced and held accountable.

At the Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project (YSRP), we work every day to ensure that young people and former Juvenile Lifers returning from incarceration are treated with dignity throughout their transition, and are connected with meaningful opportunities that respond to their needs as they return to our communities. Our model prioritizes depth over breadth, and therefore means that our work touches only a small slice of Philadelphia’s overall returning citizen population ([an estimated 25,000 per year as of 2015 \(https://www.phila.gov/documents/a-data-snapshot-of-reentry-and-recidivism-in-philadelphia/\)](https://www.phila.gov/documents/a-data-snapshot-of-reentry-and-recidivism-in-philadelphia/)). We call on the city, in this moment of renewed energy and focus, to make a similar investment in all Philadelphians returning home. This means publicly identifying city funding dedicated to creating and improving reentry services, with transparent oversight and accountability mechanisms in place. It also means taking a second look at what is expected from the Philadelphia Department of Prisons, which released over 23,000 people in 2018.

Our collective failure as a city to adequately support people when they come home from jail and prison often does not make the news. But we must begin to treat it like the crisis it is, especially if we want to make progress with other aspirations for our city, such as less gun violence, fewer people in our jails and lower rates of poverty.

Bianca van Heydoorn, who was appointed to lead the new Office of Reentry Partnerships, takes on that task with decades of relevant experience in New York City. Philadelphia’s challenges with reentry are not unusual, as [a new national report \(https://www.convergencepolicy.org/latest-projects/successful-reintegration/\)](https://www.convergencepolicy.org/latest-projects/successful-reintegration/) concludes that “few jurisdictions in the United States offer cross-system collaboration that consistently and effectively supports the process of reentry and reintegration. Instead, most currently and formerly incarcerated individuals experience fragmented, underfunded, and overtaxed systems that further punish their failures instead of facilitating their successes.” We believe van Heydoorn understands that improving reentry in Philadelphia will require, as the report’s authors suggest, “major shifts in all the systems involved.”

Philadelphia is leading on criminal justice reform in many ways: We elected arguably the country’s most progressive district attorney, we are drastically reducing our jail population, and a powerful cross-sector coalition is pushing for much-needed probation reform, among other advancements. But it’s time to address the roots rather than focusing on the fruits. The scientific and anecdotal evidence is clear. The

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map of violent crime in Philadelphia overlays almost entirely with the map of poverty. Our system is set up in such a way that people go into jail and prison poor and come out even poorer. A lot of money is being spent, but very little ends up in the hands of those who need it. And, the voices of those impacted are being largely ignored.

It is time to add meaningful and comprehensive reentry opportunities that lead to positive outcomes to the list of reforms we can be proud of. If the Kenney administration is truly ready to take a different approach to reentry in the mayor's second term, it must start with inclusion, transparency and accountability in the Office of Reentry Partnerships. At a minimum, the office should, in coalition with those impacted, identify needs, clear goals, priorities and metrics for the dollars the city spends on reentry, and report to and receive feedback from the public regularly (at least twice a year). And if we really want to lead and make reentry reform more than lip service, these changes will be determined by and implemented in true partnership with people who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system. At e Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project (YSRP), we know Philadelphia, and all Philadelphians, will be better off because of it.

For more information about the support YSRP provides to youth facing charges in adult court, visit www.ysrp.org.

Joanna Visser Adjoian, *is co-founder and co-director of the Youth Sentencing & Reentry Project (YSRP). YSRP uses direct service and policy advocacy to transform the experiences of children prosecuted in the adult criminal justice system, and to ensure fair and thoughtful resentencing and reentry for individuals who were sentenced to life without parole as children.*

Cameron Holmes *is the organization's youth reentry coordinator, and a 30-year veteran of the struggles within and against the prison industrial complex. His experiences have informed his activities as an activist, author, musician, actor, facilitator and reentry specialist.*

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