

logo not found or type unknown

Governor Bryan Advocates for Comprehensive Reentry Programs as Part of Second Chance Month

Panelists discuss the significant impact of rehabilitation programs on reducing recidivism in the territory

Community Center / **Published On April 27, 2024 06:43 AM /**

Janeke Simon **April 27, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



Governor Bryan leads discussions on breaking the cycle of reincarceration

For the final event in observance of Second Chance Month this April, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. hosted a panel discussion focusing on the territory's efforts towards reconciliation, rehabilitation, and re-integration for the formerly incarcerated.

Representatives from the Office of Gun Violence Prevention, VI Justice Initiative, the Law Enforcement Planning Commission and Align Community Incorporated spent just under an hour discussing ways to ensure that a prison term does not become a life sentence of ostracism for

Virgin Islanders who run afoul of the law.

“The Virgin Islands has probably the fourth highest incarceration rate in the world,” Governor Bryan guessed. “You could Google it.” In fact, the governor is correct, based on 2015 data. In a [more recent edition](#) of the World Prison Population list, the territory is 12th in terms of prisoners per capita – behind neighboring BVI. Despite the nominal improvement in ranking, being among the 15 jurisdictions which lock up the largest proportion of their resident populations – 394 per 100,000 – is no enviable position for the territory.

Governor Bryan made the point that such a high relative rate of incarceration means that there are many people who need to return to society after their time in prison has ended. Adryann Glenn of Align Community Incorporated, spoke about the work his organization is doing to help ease the transition through a program called R.E.S.E.T. “There is a community of formerly impacted people working here...to make a difference to support people as they come home.” He noted that many people leave prison with little to their name. “You have nothing. You’re like a 13-year old but you’re an adult.”

Notwithstanding their lack of resources, those returning from serving a sentence must still “find some kind of way to make an impact in your community,” Mr. Glenn said. The R.E.S.E.T program helps with that. However, he spoke of barriers to re-integration that need to be urgently addressed, including the practice of paying less in wages to formerly incarcerated people once they return to the working world. “When a job pays \$17 an hour, you may get \$12.50 because you just came home,” Mr. Glenn disclosed. “You know, as a community, we got some biases we got to get past.” Referring to his own past in conflict with the law, Mr. Glenn insisted that community support was the only way he was able to escape that negative cycle. “One thing I can say about this community, they do support second chances. We just need to do it on a bigger scale,” he opined.

Discussion turned to the impact of media reporting on crime, as Mr. Glenn suggested that the press discontinue the practice of publishing arrests as they happen. In a small community, the tension between information in the public interest and the negative impact on families and loved ones of the accused is always keen in a publication’s editorial suite. Ms. Peyton, head of the VI Justice initiative, acknowledged that legally, press outlets have the right to report factually on arrests, charges and allegations. However, she spoke to the best practice of removing reports of cases that have resulted in expungements, or updating reports of cases that have resulted in dismissal, when presented with the evidence.

She noted recent legislation that requires the expungement of [records of marijuana-related offenses](#) that involve quantities of 2 ounces or less, as well as another, more recent measure which requires expungement of arrest records after a court finds [insufficient probable cause](#) to justify the charges. “Why is that arrest on the record, preventing them from obtaining a job?” she asked, explaining that the VI Justice Initiative, which worked on drafting the second auto expungement bill, was pleased to see it achieve such easy passage through the legislature. “The senators understood,” she noted.

Governor Bryan said that he wants to take things further and include pardons as being eligible for immediate automatic expungement. “We’re researching the law,” he disclosed.

The conversation then turned to some of the anxieties faced by those in the community at the prospect of a formerly incarcerated person coming back home, particularly those whose convictions had been for violent offenses. “When you know that other people in the neighborhood

have the threat of violence, it's natural and human to want to protect yourself," Mr. Glenn acknowledged, before asking the listening audience to consider the root causes of violent behavior. Repeating the adage "hurt people hurt people," he argued that robust community support in a way that addresses the traumas that may be carried by those who became violent due to circumstance is the best way to break cycles of violence.

Head of the Law Enforcement Planning Commission Moleto Smith acknowledged, however, that reintegration and reconciliation is much more difficult for a community that was impacted by a homicide, rape, or similar violent offense. "We're a very entrenched community, the relationships are intertwined," he explained, noting that many community members would be connected to both the victim and the perpetrator due to family ties. State support for reintegration is not necessarily only for the returning individual, he suggested – whole communities would need to be healed from the fracture.

Governor Bryan shared his own experience with his 60-year-old brother, who he said has been in conflict with the law since the age of 12. "How do you do it?" he asked rhetorically, musing about his brother's challenges in rebuilding a life when grappling with the lack of educational attainment, struggles with addiction, and a long history of incarceration. "The same services and programs that you provide to a victim, you have to provide to a victimizer as well," Mr. Glenn responded, repeating the sentence to a stunned panel audience. "Or else, nothing ever changes," he declared. He spoke passionately about the disruption and trauma caused by an arrest, conviction, and period of incarceration, saying again that it is only an outpouring of love and support from the community, as hard as it may be, that will offer a returning person the chance to embark on a productive life post-incarceration. "The mere fact of having handcuffs placed on you changes the way you look at society....you feel less than human, and it's very hard to bounce back from that."

Even Office of Gun Violence Prevention Director, Antonio Emmanuel, who has seen the issue from the other side following his long tenure as a law enforcement officer, succeeded by work in related fields, said that he "understands the trauma that people do have when they are arrested and put in jail." He acknowledged that society does have a responsibility to help remediate that trauma once people have served their debt to society, and recounted a personal anecdote where he put his job on the line to hire former offenders to work as security for a particular company. "They were model employees," he reported proudly, with one eventually joining a police department after some time. "Trust is a hard word, and we get it," Mr. Emmanuel acknowledged. "But I think it's our obligation...to give them that opportunity."

Reconciliation can begin even while an individual is serving their sentence, Governor Bryan argued next. "Don't you think we should have a system where even if you're sentenced, there's a path to reconciliation for real?" he asked, citing positive actions like obtaining a high school diploma or participating in community service as potential "carrots" via which someone can reduce their sentence.

"It's important for community partners to come together and to discuss what are things that would make the most sense in the Virgin Islands," Ms. Peyton noted. Drawing on her experience as a former public defender, she sketched out to the audience the intertwined hopes and fears experienced by not just someone accused of a crime, but their entire family. She expressed her understanding of the impact on families, acknowledging that the children would not have their parent coming home, which adds financial and emotional instability to their households. Ms. Peyton further argued that those who may struggle to feel empathy for an offender might have an easier time supporting restorative justice efforts if the effects on family members of defendants are considered.

Another aspect of beginning the reconciliation and restoration process while individuals are still within the correctional system is the provision of resources and support for those with cognitive impairments. Governor Bryan disclosed that reports reaching him are that a significant percentage of those coming before the courts “have some kind of behavioral, mental health, or learning disability,” which must be addressed if they are to function well in society following their release.

Ms. Peyton suggested learning from stateside examples of “day centers”, which she described as outpatient facilities where pharmacy, and counseling services are available, and clients are managed by case workers. “We should not make it so difficult for somebody who is trying to do their best in the community to be able to do that,” she declared, urging that an official delegation be sent to observe such a facility. Mr. Glenn touted the efforts of the Bureau of Corrections, with which his organization works to provide access to education and training for those in BOC custody. Nevertheless, he acknowledged the enormous need for targeted mental health services in correctional facilities, as “most people with mental health problems are being placed in prisons and jails, and that’s not where they should be.”

While agreeing that more services were needed, “the big problem is...even if we have the money for mental health facilities, we don’t have the personnel,” Governor Bryan said. But Mr. Smith said that a monumental collaborative cross-agency effort could provide the needed expertise to mount programs to support mental health and behavior modification treatment. “Look at where the gaps are, and begin to have that collaborative discussion about how we can use the limited resources that we have to support a strategy moving out.”

A joint effort between government and affiliated agencies could produce a robust strategy that could attract sufficient funding to make a measurable impact, Mr. Smith argued. These efforts would not only serve the cohort of people who return to the community from prison or jail, but also support at-risk or marginalized people who may need some additional assistance in meeting basic needs. When considering these groups, the strategies and programs being considered become preventative to some extent, keeping people from the kind of desperation that may drive some to criminal activity.

The panel served as a stark reminder that, far from tossing people in prison and forgetting about them, Virgin Islanders must recognize that those returning home are, according to Governor Bryan, “all our brother, cousin, sister, mother, friends.” As such, we should “want to see them eat, thrive and do well too” after serving their duly allotted time.