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CARLOS T. CARTER

Incarceration

As we continue our discussion around the Social Determinants of Health, we are centering on incarceration and its impact on health. Carlos T. Carter, President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, shares his ideas:

What are your thoughts on the ways the mass industrial prison complex disproportionality impacts Black and brown communities?

Our country spends \$10.3 billion incarcerating nearly 2 million people. However, we are not willing to fully invest in education, housing, and other resources that could prevent incarceration. The big business of incarceration is making a few people rich, while impoverishing and devastating whole communities of color.

There is a concerted effort to dehumanize and criminalize Black people, leading to their overrepresentation in the prison system when compared to white Americans. Black people receive harsher sentences for similar crimes committed by their White counterparts. They are also more likely to sit in jail due to being unable to afford bail. Overinvestment in incarceration is setting up our children and future generations for failure.

It is difficult to unlock your greatness when you are imprisoned. It is challenging to be a good parent, financially provide, and positively contribute to your child's social and emotional development when you are locked up. Our incarcerated Black fathers cannot participate in Father's Day activities at their child's school, and that is devastating to our children! Imagine how you would feel as a kid on the basketball team or as a cheerleader when you up look in the stands and don't see your parent because they are locked up. This is heart-breaking!

What are some of the ways that the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh supports people who have histories of incarceration and their families?

We help returning citizens in many ways. We help to remove barriers by connecting them to job training and placement, housing, emergency food support, and by providing opportunities to help the whole family at our three Family Support Centers.

More specifically, we help people with first month's rent and security deposit. We have provided food, basic necessities, and other supplies to people when they leave the county jail.

We currently provide free adult job training programs like COMPTIAA and CISCO leading to certifications and living wage jobs in the tech sector. We also offer paid job training for individuals aged 55 and up through our Urban Senior Job Program with special support for those facing high barriers. We are actively recruiting people to join both programs—please see our website ulpg.org for more information.

Further, we provide youth leadership opportunities for our teen girls and boys through our Black Male Leadership Development Institute and Black Female Leadership Development Institute. Each cohort of both programs includes young people who have been impacted by parental incarceration.

As we work together to create a community where everyone feels cherished and supported, what can our readers do to advocate for change?

First, we need to address the stigma around returning citizens and must recognize their humanity and value as people. We must invest in their potential. It is in everyone's best interest that our formerly incarcerated neighbors are reintegrated into society by being presented with opportunities to gain the financial independence needed to break cycles of poverty and recidivism.

We also must find ways to invest less in the prison industrial complex and invest more in housing, education, and greater support systems for our youth and families.

Finally, we must vote for candidates in all offices who support an approach to criminal justice reform that empowers people to learn from their mistakes and positions them to be thriving, contributing members of society. We need leaders who will commit to disrupt this toxic system that continues to eviscerate the dignity and quality of life for Black and brown people who have sacrificed so much for our country!

Incarceration takes heavy toll on health

Compared to other major countries, the U.S. is the leader in how many people we put behind bars with 1.9 million confined nationwide.

In Pennsylvania, there are about 73,000 people behind bars, including 29,000 in local jails who are mostly awaiting trial because they can't afford bail.

Of those people, Black Americans are incarcerated at unequal population rates compared to White people, especially for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as drug possession. They also receive the harshest sentences, including death sentences.

Social determinants of Health (SDoH) are the non-medical forces that shape a person's well-being from birth to death. They play a role in this inequity, especially bias and discrimination in policing practice, drug law enforcement, sentencing, pretrial detention, and cash bail.

The ripple effect

University of Pittsburgh's Dr. Emily Dauria, Assistant Professor, Behavioral and Community Health Sciences, studies incarceration as a significant driver of public health. "Incarceration affects the health and well-being of the person who's incarcerated," she explains. "We know from research that people who are or have been incarcerated are disproportionately in poor health before, during, and after their incarceration.

"Incarceration may also affect the health of the person's family, neighborhood and community. "It alters important emotional and social bonds," she continues.

Dr. Dauria's research asks important questions about incarceration's impact on the health of Black and Brown people and the places they live. For example, How are women and communities affected when Black and Brown men, are removed and incarcerated disproportionately?

What Dr. Dauria and others' research shows is that when we put someone behind bars, it causes disruptions in every aspect of their life. Not only can it worsen their health, but also impact their employment, housing, education, and healthcare, including Medicaid coverage. It also damages relationships within families, social sets, religious groups, and even alters neighborhood dynamics.

"Incarceration has a deep ripple effect on health outcomes," says Dr. Dauria. "Not only on the individual who enters the carceral system, but also on the people in their life, especially the 10 million children who have had one or both parents incarcerated."

Within Allegheny County, 35,000 children and youth have experienced parental incarceration. Since 2003, nonprofit organization Amachi Pittsburgh has supported these families. The organization uses trauma-informed, strengths-based approaches to engage the whole family system. Services include a mentoring program for children, an ambassador program for high school students that reduces stigma and amplifies voices for civic

engagement, and a family strengthening program. "Amachi" is a Nigerian-Igbo word that means, "who knows but what God has brought us through this child."

Black and Brown people who enter the carceral system already face daunting and disparate health issues caused by poverty, substance use, sex work, untreated mental health factors, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, limited or no health insurance, and lack of access to quality healthcare providers. Incarceration often makes those conditions worse.

Healthcare gaps

The U.S. Constitution requires that all people who being detained receive adequate medical care. However, there can be huge disparities and gaps in the quality. This is caused by facility turnover, a shortage of service providers, and overcrowding, which may create health conditions, such as COVID, hepatitis, and TB.

One example that's especially disturbing is pre- and post-natal care for incarcerated birthing people who, depending on the state they live in, may be shackled during delivery and subject to the inspection process after they've given birth — and who often receive little or no lactation support.

Mental health care is also lacking. The distress caused by being locked up can make other mental health conditions worse as can solitary confinement 23 hours a day.

"For some, the healthcare they receive while they're incarcerated may be their first," says Dr. Dauria. "But it can vary from system to system. Plus, it's hard to address comprehensive healthcare needs in a system designed to punish."

What's being done to improve health outcomes?

In Pittsburgh and nationwide, there are programs to help divert people from incarceration, especially for low-level offenses.

There are also programs to boost healthcare outcomes for incarcerated people and reduce recidivism.

Preventing initial incarceration

Dr. Steven M. Albert, Professor of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at Pitt, is especially hopeful about a recent report titled "How Long is Long Enough?" The report focuses on the U.S. tendency to put too many people in prison for too long. In the report, there are 14 recommendations, including reducing racial and ethnic disparities in sentencing and lowering recidivism by providing health services, training, and other opportunities in prison.

Dr. Albert explains, "If we can shorten people's sentences, for example, we can use the money we save to offer more and earlier drug prevention and treatment programs. This improves health outcomes for substance users and helps them move away from the carceral system altogether."

Lowering recidivism

For Allegheny County citizens who've served their sentences and are re-enter-

ing the community, Pittsburgh offers Reimagine ReEntry, one of four programs that make up the Pitt Public Health Violence Prevention Initiative.

Co-lead by Dr. Albert and Richard Garland, Reimagine ReEntry provides opportunities, reduces barriers, and supports returning citizens, their loved ones, and communities.

"We know from research that staying out of the carceral system for about three years greatly improves a person's chances of staying out long term. But people need help to do that."

With that in mind, Reimagine ReEntry works with a formerly incarcerated person for three years after they leave the system. The coaching staff helps the individual build and re-build support networks, find and receive education, training and a good-paying job, take advantage of mental health resources, and reunite with family members.

Turning differences inside-out

David Harris, Professor of Law at Pitt, studies, writes, and teaches about police behavior, law enforcement and race, and search and seizure law.

Among the courses Professor Harris teaches is the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, where traditional Pitt students learn and study alongside people who are incarcerated in the State Correctional Institute (SCI)—Greene.

Pitt and SCI-Greene are two of 150 campuses and correctional facilities that participate in Inside-Out nationwide. The program was founded in 1997. Pitt has been a participating member since 2017.

Inside SCI-Greene, Pitt students and incarcerated people, who may be studying to earn their GED, learn together about law and criminal justice issues.

"It's good for my law students to meet, talk to, and get to know people who are incarcerated in the place they're confined," Professor Harris explains. "It helps to break down stereotypes and creates a learning community between two groups of people whose paths differ greatly."

The breakdown often results in a realization for Pitt students that differences stem from the circumstances of a person's birth — where they were born, their gender, and the color of their skin.

"For incarcerated students, the value of Inside-Out is dignity and worth," says Professor Harris. "In the classroom setting, they're treated as human beings, partners, and peers. Their experience and thinking are valued. It's a model program for boosting human connection and understanding human capabilities."

Professor Harris reminds us, "Every person has value regardless of their circumstances. What we see in the carceral system is a reflection of the disparities taking place in our Black and Brown communities nationwide."

Allegheny County's Dept. of Human Services offers resources for persons involved in the carceral system.

Foundation of HOPE removes re-entry roadblocks

Since 2002, Pittsburgh's Foundation of Hope has been helping individuals impacted by the criminal justice system to rebuild and improve their lives. HOPE offers several programs.

Chaplaincy takes place in the Allegheny County Jail and features inter-faith religious services and instruction classes; one-on-one counseling, including grief counseling if a family member dies; hygiene care packages; and holiday events and celebrations.

Requiring 120 hours of group work per person, as well as a final exam, the pre-release program is a collaboration between soon-to-be released individuals, community service providers, and volunteers. Everyone works together to help transform thinking and behaviors as people returning from jail prepare to make a new start. Key themes include addiction and recovery, anger man-

agement, "stinking thinking," life and parenting skills, release and reintegration, and spiritual formation.

Aftercare is a pre- and post-release integration program that provides release individuals with assistance, resources, referrals and guidance about employment, housing, and other social issues. Aftercare covers everything from toiletries and reading glasses, to employment and housing counseling, to creating a resume and getting an ID.

Aftercare may also include one-on-one mentoring in the jail and after release, as well as Positive Initiative to Reinforce Change (PIRC) support groups that provide a safe and welcoming forum for released individuals and their supporters.

The Foundation of HOPE Adult Diversion Program provides supportive services, free-of-cost, to individuals trapped in a cycle of justice involvement due to substance use

and mental health.

The HOPE program is based on public health and harm reduction principles. Each person in the program is offered safe, judgment-free, intensive case management and referrals to a network of evidence-based services to help address their unique needs.

By addressing key social determinants of health with a trauma-informed approach, Foundation of HOPE and its partners seek to lower the numbers of fatal overdose and mitigate many of the reasons that people who use substances encounter police.

The goal is to support participants toward stability by limiting the harms associated with using substances.

Learn more about Foundation of HOPE by visiting the organization's website at foundationofhope.org.

RiVER Clinic supports formerly incarcerated people

In 2021, the Rethinking Incarceration and Empowering Recovery Clinic or RiVER Clinic began offering immediate, effective, and compassionate primary healthcare to people as soon as they leave the carceral system for substance use disorders, hepatitis C, diabetes, high blood pressure, women's health needs, mental health issues, and more.

The care also includes helping patients find and use support services as they reunite with their families and communities. The program is supported by grants from local and state sources.

Since it opened, RiVER Clinic has helped hundreds of people regardless of their ability to pay.

A community health worker and a social worker go into Allegheny County Jail to meet people ahead of time. Upon release, a patient may meet with the clinic's medical staff, which includes two internal medicine doctors and a nurse navigator, to evaluate health needs and provide care, including telemedicine. A psychiatrist is available to support psychiatric needs, and a social worker is present to aid with transportation, hous-

ing, food security, and more. Additionally, a Patient Care Navigator and a Peer Recovery Specialist support patients in their transition back to the community.

RiVER Clinic's goal is to make formerly incarcerated people's re-entry to normal life healthier by lowering their risk of relapse in substance use and drug overdose — and reducing their chances of returning to the carceral system.

RiVER Clinic is one of the many programs Allegheny Health Network offers via its Center for Inclusion Health