

Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion examines the Inside Out Network, an innovative web-based platform for connecting Returning Citizens (i.e., pre-release inmates) to support programs and resources to assist in the transition back into the community.

Media Contact: [Terry Goodrich](#), Baylor University Media and Public Relations, 254-644-4155

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WACO, Texas (February 6, 2024) – Returning Citizens face a myriad of challenges in transitioning back to the community after release from prison. Traditionally, they have had to rely on pre-release case managers to identify the types of supports, training and other resources they need to achieve housing, economic independence and general well-being. The Inside Out Network (ION), originally established as a church-based ministry called “Under the Door” in Chicago in 2006, is a unique, web-based platform for connecting Returning Citizens (RCs) directly with a variety of community-based programs and services available to assist them in their transition back into the community upon release.

This case study is published through [Baylor’s Institute for the Studies of Religion case studies](#).

This case study and preliminary evaluation describes how ION works in collaboration with the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry (ADCRR) both enroll inmates 7 to 13 months before release to work with the ADCRR case managers to identify the kinds of help they’re looking for. ION also works outside of the prison to recruit service providers on anything from shelter and housing, faith-based support ministries, to help with legal matters.

As Fred Nelson, Executive Director for ION, explains: “ION’s platform is the missing connecting piece in reentry. Better yet, think of us as ‘eHarmony for reentry.’ We make it easy for returning citizens and service providers to search, find relevant matches, connect with, and even reach out proactively and message each other on our platform. We’ve built a tool that empowers and enables returning citizens to engage in their own reentry more actively, often starting prior to release. ION also allows and incentivizes service providers to be proactive and respond promptly, while giving new service providers an easy way into the reentry marketplace.”

In this Q&A, co-authors Johnson and ISR non-resident fellow William Wubbenhorst explain the distinctive elements of the Street Sweep Employment Program they discovered through the case study development.

Q: What makes the Inside Out Network?

Wubbenhorst: ION brings the power and reach of web-based platforms to facilitate Returning Citizens (RCs) in their transition out of prison and into the community. The platform is especially helpful for smaller community-based programs, who often have difficulty reaching RCs prior to their release.

Q. What kind of preliminary impacts did you observe from ION for Returning citizens?

Wubbenhorst: One of the most important impacts we observed is the degree to which ION provides RCs with more agency in terms of directly identifying the resources they feel they need, rather than rely on referrals from ADCRR case managers. The ION platform is also in concert with the trend towards more collaborative approaches for case managers working alongside the RCs in developing their transition plan.

Q: Will you do future research on Street Sweep Employment Program and other similar efforts?

Johnson: Yes, we hope we have the opportunity to continue to monitor the ION program, with a particular emphasis on whether and how the platform demonstrates a reduction in recidivism. More specifically, we want to conduct additional data collection on whether and how RCs' direct involvement in their transition planning through ION results in more and/or different types of resources and supports, as compared to previous reentry opportunities. We are also interested in understanding the degree to which ION facilitates more participation and engagement of faith-based organizations (FBOs), especially smaller ministries.

ABOUT THE BAYLOR INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES OF RELIGION

Launched in August 2004, the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) initiates, supports and conducts research on religion, involving scholars and projects spanning the intellectual spectrum: history, psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, political science, epidemiology, theology and religious studies. The institute's mandate extends to all religions, everywhere, and throughout history, and embraces the study of religious effects on prosocial behavior, family life, population health, economic development and social conflict.

ABOUT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Baylor University is a private Christian University and a nationally ranked research institution. The University provides a vibrant campus community for more than 18,000 students by blending interdisciplinary research with an international reputation for educational excellence and a faculty commitment to teaching and scholarship. Chartered in 1845 by the Republic of Texas through efforts of Baptist pioneers, Baylor is the oldest continually operating University in Texas. Located in Waco, Baylor welcomes students from all 50 states and more than 90 countries to study a broad range of degrees among its 12 nationally recognized academic divisions.

ION BEYOND ARIZONA

Besides its work in Arizona, ION is also active in both Illinois and Oregon, has reached agreement to launch in Mississippi, is in conversation with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, and has a vision and key milestones for ongoing expansion nationwide.