Chairman’s Thoughts

What’s up, everyone?

Fearless engagement! We must fearlessly engage one another in humanity and humility to drive this work home. It’s as simple as that. To have the best shot at successful reentry for citizens returning from incarceration, and to have the best shot at building healthier and safer communities for all, we must return to humanity and humility.

What does it mean to fearlessly engage one another? I’m no historian, but, as best as I can gather, our communities overcame slavery and the other plight(s) of being black, brown, and/or in other ways “different,” by putting our differences aside and working collectively to take care of one another. We were able to do that because we (a) centered each other around a shared experience, (b) developed empathy by listening to one another, and (c) acted collectively and strategically. Laws can change, policies and practices can be modified, and we may even have a foreign-born President one day. But until WE do the work, nothing will change in our lived experiences. And I am telling you today, the work is returning to humanity and humility.

Imagine a triangle. Our communities have long been at the bottom of the pyramid, while the powerful and influential have been at the top. Well, we know in this city who the powerful and influential are, the government, its agencies, and the systems in place. In the middle of that pyramid are advocates, organizations, and other parties who have a passion for changing the narrative surrounding our communities’ issues. But at the end of the day, nothing trickles down to us. When lived experiences don’t change, we know there is a void. We create that void when we don’t treat each other with compassion, love, nor understanding. And that’s the last piece to this puzzle. As you all have heard me say, time and time again, you cannot be IN the community and not be OF the community.

Let’s get to work.

Courtney Stewart
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Advocacy Spotlight

PAULA THOMPSON – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, VOICES FOR A SECOND CHANCE

PAULA THOMPSON brings more than 20 years of experience to her role as Executive Director of Voices for a Second Chance (VSC), an organization with over 50 years of service to the community that bridges the gap for individuals from incarceration to community and serves more than 4,000 persons a year. Ms. Thompson is a passionate, proven leader, champion, and advocate for incarcerated, justice-involved, and Returning Citizens. Her visionary leadership evidences her commitment to this population. She has created a continuum of care approach centered on the reentry needs of the individual during incarceration and post-release to mitigate the trauma and transition resulting from confinement. In addition to her passion for this work, as Executive Director, Ms. Thompson successfully manages the administrative, financial, and programmatic operations and tactical decision-making for the organization. As an expert in reentry, mobilization, and equity for marginalized populations, Ms. Thompson continues to elevate the discussion to influence policymakers and stakeholders to give Returning Citizens real access to a second chance with the tools and resources necessary to integrate effectively into the community. She is a proven strategist and successful mobilizer for the advancement of underserved, dismissed, and voiceless populations. To achieve this end, she serves as the Founder and Co-Chair of the DC Reentry Action Network (RAN), a coalition made up of 30 community-based reentry direct services organizations working together to elevate, educate, and advance the issues and needs of justice-involved and Returning Citizens. DC RAN leads and participates in efforts to advance systemic reforms and funding support through public-private partnerships. Paula’s other activities include Council for Court Excellence Board Director, appointed by Mayor Bowser to serve as a Commissioner on the Returning Citizens Affairs Commission 2015-2019, and other community and civic affiliations. In 2017, Ms. Thompson was the recipient of the DC Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs Excellence in Reentry Leadership Award.

Before embarking on a career in nonprofit senior management, Ms. Thompson was a successful federal lobbyist having secured over $35 million in federal and private funding; created development plans for nonprofits; and designed and implemented public policy and advocacy agendas for not-for and for-profit organizations. With a diverse background and extensive experience in advocacy, reentry, program design, and capacity building. She holds a BS degree in Public Affairs-Political Science from The Lincoln University of Pennsylvania.

NRNRC: How long has Voices for a Second Chance been around, what are the details of your role within the organization, and what it is that your organization does?
Paula Thompson: I am the Executive Director of Voices for a Second Chance. We have been around since 1969 and our original name was Visitors’ Services Center. We changed the name about five years ago, because it fit better with the mission of the organization, which is to provide the means for people to be self-sufficient. We do that through a menu of services that are supportive in nature but are individualized and community and family centered. It’s based on creating a plan – a service plan, reentry plan, life plan - for that person and to help them transition back. Your needs could be anything from a birth certificate, which everyone does need in order to establish identity, your social security card, all of those things to set your identity and then talk about what it is that you want to do post incarceration, if it's education, employment, if you need housing, or if you need to repair family, and community relationships. What it is that you need to stabilize yourself so that you can rebuild your life so that you don't return to incarceration. We are that source. Our tagline is that we bridge the gap from incarceration to community, and everything that I just described fits in that gap, to make sure that Returning Citizens have a seamless transition. We've been doing that for over 50 years, and we've evolved over those years. We serve over 5000 people a year annually, and it's unfortunately growing. We work directly with individuals who are detained in DC jail and provide them with some basic services. We work with individuals who are released from the BOP and then we also work with individuals in the halfway house. Right now, we work on site at VOA Volunteers of America in Baltimore, where some DC residents are housed unfortunately, because we don't have a halfway house here to help them transition. We go there and, in COVID, we found that people were in dire need, and sometimes they didn't know where to go get our resources, and they did not have the funds to get here. We took our services to the community. We gave our COVID kits and also tried to get people connected to other services that they need, which is anything from mental health, to medical, to food, to housing, and also provided transportation for them. We offer a menu of services, but we still want to help them become stable and self-sufficient. That's why we do what we do.

NRNRC: You've been doing this work for a very long time. From what you've just told me, I can see that you've seen the needs of Returning Citizens and how reentry is not just simply coming home from prison and going back to life as it was. That's one of the things the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens is trying to get the public at large to realize. We've been talking to people about humanity, in terms of how we regard Returning Citizens and how important it is for people to look at us as humans rather than just focusing on the offense that we committed. What do you think is the best way of getting general society to stop using the labels that dehumanize us and see us as people who have made a bad decision and are now in need and have been through some sort of victimization as a result of the criminal legal system?

Paula Thompson: We lead with humanity. I always tell my team from day one, it's a no judgment zone for anyone that crosses over the threshold of our door. You’re not in a position to pass judgment, you're in a position to support and direct. I think that there is going to have to be a lot more mobilization with Returning Citizens, and also providers like myself and your organization, to come together around shared interests, and one of those interests is around the humanity piece. All of us are one decision away from having walked in that person's shoes and some people just haven't gotten caught. Everyone has been in a situation where they made a choice and wish they could have taken something back. We also don't talk about the environmental factors that play a part. We are in a world where people come from intergenerational, unresolved challenges and issues that are passed on from generation to generation. Poverty is passed on from generation to generation, as well as a lack of access to basic
needs that are also passed on from generation to generation. It becomes a boiling pot, where there's an innate feeling that I should have something more than what I have, but I'm not afforded that opportunity. There are folks in this cesspool environment, where if you step out a few yards, you see something different, particularly in DC, and every major city across the country, where there was a significant population of black folks that doesn't exist anymore. Gentrification is a factor. Poor educational systems are a factor. There are entire communities that are lower income, they don't get the same amenities, they don't get the same services that translate into education, which translates into jobs, which translates into a lease for housing. Many of the folks who have been incarcerated have lived in those kinds of circumstances. One thing people don't realize is that they just want a better way in which they're living, because they know it should be better. If they made a decision to involve themselves in something such as a criminal activity, the root of that is because they want something more than what there is because they see vibrancy, they see wealth, they see prosperity all around them. It doesn't exist as a reality for themselves, so when they aspire to become those things, they do it by a form of criminal means. They make that decision, because at the root of it is that they just wanted something better than the way the things are where you have all of these failing systems that are supposed to be in place to help people prosper. I would say, interrupt cycles of poverty and intergenerational lack, whether it's mental health, physical health, all of these factors. Those systems were supposed to be put in place to make it better for the next generation but that didn't happen. There have been systemic reasons that have been intentional. There have been policies and decisions and laws that have been put in place to make sure that certain individuals do not have access to those opportunities. It's a cyclical thing, and I think that everyone needs to come together and mobilize to really move within a concerted effort around systemic change. It can't just be talking about it, you've got to thinking, what is the plan? What is the agenda and how do we move forward?

NRNRC: You definitely hit on something when you talk about seeing how the other side lives. Many of us, including myself, came home from prison, and were stunned by a lot of the changes to the city as a result of the gentrification. I see all of these condos and luxury apartments and I didn't realize that this level of living in DC was possible, because growing up in the 80s and 90s, I had never seen anything like that in this city. Now that I'm seeing it is possible and people are doing it, that's what I want to aspire to. I don't want to live in a rundown neighborhood, but in a nice luxury apartment or condo, just like they do. I want to live the same good life and be able to shop and eat and stay in the same places they do. When we talk about humanity, we must address the fact of people not wanting us in certain neighborhoods, because they see we have a criminal background and make a snap decision based off that. How do we effectively bridge the gap across different ethnic and racial backgrounds to better understand one another and treat one another humanely so that we don't have that kind of bias?

Paula Thompson: I think the key is to find a commonality. What is the common thread or that common link that we all care about? Just like they want their right to live in a safe neighborhood, other ethnicities and races also want to live in a safe neighborhood, they want to raise their children in safe neighborhoods, and they want to make sure that the laurels of their hard work is passed on to their children. That way, they can build upon what they have. If you have a family, you always want better for yourself and for your family. If you appeal to someone to the fact that you want to live in a safe neighborhood, you want to be able to afford your rent or your mortgage, you want to have a job with more than a minimum wage, you want to be in a job where you can see growth opportunities, because then that expands your capacity to make more money to invest and to have a family. Why don't you
think that the person living in Benning Terrace wants that? Don’t you think that family member who gets up and goes to work, but is working just to have enough to just and do enough wants the same opportunity and access to what you have? If you appeal to people from a real basic level, it’s kind of hard for them to deny. They’ll say that these individuals should be able to have this. So how do we make that happen? How do they get access to the same opportunities you had access to? If you can appeal to people, then you can begin to uncover some of those systemic issues. When you start talking about the profile of the person, it doesn’t matter what their background is, it doesn’t matter if they’ve served time. They’re here now and they’re being productive. They’re changing their lives. They’re an active member of the community. Appealing to people at a very basic level makes it hard for them to deny how difficult it is for others, because then they have to look themselves in the mirror. They have to think, why is it okay for me to have safe housing? Clean water? Access to healthy foods? Why is it I can walk down the street to Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s when just across the bridge, they don’t have a decent market? What you’re saying is that you value one group over another, and I think that’s when you get to make people confront their own biases and racist feelings and intentions that sometimes they know, and sometimes they don’t.

**NRNRNRC:** In this edition of the Black Table Talk, we’re also talking about community building, because here at the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, we’re interested in building a community comprised of Returning Citizens, advocates, and community-based organizations. What strategies do you believe we can use in bringing together people from different backgrounds so that everyone’s unique perspectives can be put to use towards these goals?

**Paula Thompson:** I think that you use the mission of the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens as sort of the carrot. If you care about this issue, here is a group that has been on the ground, doing the work and is led by someone who has experience in the system, who has been successful in business and is setting an example of elevating these issues in the community. If you really want to be involved in a community shift, I think you can start with your clients, you can start with alumni who have gone through the program and gone on to find jobs. They could talk about their experience with transitioning, and speaking about what the barriers are, how they confronted them, and where they are now. You can have a little panel, where you invite them in along with neighbors from the community, donors, and talk about how you invest in a person starting where they are today and show that you all have several alumni who have come through the program and who have gone on and to do great work that’s still centered around community building and sustained system change. Then I would just do that maybe every other month, and then begin to talk about what some of those challenge areas are. How can we set an agenda to confront those barriers, so that as people are moving through their transition, we avoid them from having to deal with that same thing? Show the people who have benefited from the work, because they’re an example people want to see. Then people say, this is why I need to be involved. I’m a neighbor and I say, I’m in the District and I care about these issues. How can I involve myself in supporting this mission? That’s how you build community, because now you have an example. What can we do to support more of this and what can I do personally, to get involved in that?

**NRNRNRC:** Lastly, with everything that’s been accomplished so far with community-based organizations, where do you believe we go from here? What mistakes do you think have been made along the way that we’ve all had to learn from?
Paula Thompson: You have to keep saying you’re going to build on the work that has been done. Focusing on the mobilization around issues is important, because then you build an agenda for what’s going on. I think that we’ve done well there. I think some of the missteps is that not everyone can be a leader, some people have to be a follower. Sometimes you just have to support the mission at hand, or whatever the agenda is, and support that strategy, but you have to think collectively and not individually, as in, how does this impact me? It has to be more global, as in, how does this impact us? The decisions I'm making over here, may impact you, because you are at a different stage of your transition than I am. I've got to look at it through more of a wider lens to make sure that whatever strategy that I'm trying to advance is something that the collective can benefit from. If we could think more collectively, around how to advance issues, and not just one organization. No one is on their own because we all touched many of the same clients in some capacity. I do what I do, I don't do workforce development, so I need to be able to send you over to the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens, because they do a great job at this. We have to think collectively, because you want to think of it as a whole person, a whole issue, a whole agenda, a whole community. We're going to work together to make sure we address these issues that impact you, because we know that it's not just you, there is always someone else. I think the missteps have been that it's been us against them, if you're not a Returning Citizen, and you don't understand, you can't work with us, and we can't afford to do that because there's too much on the line. We really have to be looking at it from a global perspective and from a community lens. If I'm suffering, you're suffering. If I'm doing well, you're doing well. That's how we have to look at it. I think the mistakes that have been made is that people have just been concerned about what's good for them, and not what's good for the collective.
Greetings:

I trust this issue of our Black Table Talk finds you all well and happy. My name is Russell Rowe, and it is an honor to address you all for the first time as the Housing Coordinator with the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens. I am excited to build upon the NRNRC’s success, and to help the organization continue to find ways to meet the needs of returning citizens and our communities.

In this edition of the Black Table Talk, we are having a two-part discussion circling around the topics of humanity and community building. These two values are at the core of the NRNRC’s capacity to not only meet the needs of returning citizens, but to empower every member of our community to become agents of change in promoting health, safety, and social mobility.

According to the Department of Justice, each year 2,000 – 2,500 individuals released from prisons across the nation return home to DC. Further, the ACLU estimates 60,000 DC residents have been previously incarcerated. In a city of 701,000, Returning Citizens comprise 8.5% of the population here in DC. While this may seem like an insignificant number to some, I assure you the impact on communities is much greater as incarceration affects more than the individuals who are locked up. Families are separated, lose income and financial security, and are at an increased risk to various public health issues and social inequalities. Thus, we engage in and contribute less to society, lose leverage in advocating, organizing, and mobilizing to get what our communities need, and, as we see today, we regress. We all want a better narrative; a narrative that reflects our potential as a people. Where do we begin?

Yes, our country is very much in need of overhauling policies, procedures, and practices in the criminal legal system. Yes, sweeping changes in infrastructure and personnel (or actors) in the criminal legal system are needed to better support successful reentry. Nonetheless, year after year, millions and millions of dollars are circulated amongst government and other entities while bills sit on legislators’ desks. The result: nothing changes in our lived experiences. We get frustrated at the system(s), voice our displeasures in social media posts, and then silo ourselves. All because we expect the same government that contributed to our social status to somehow improve our condition(s). But I want to tell you the answer is closer to home than you might think.

For many community-based organizations and advocates in this town, we understand the onus is on us to improve our situation, and it begins with humanity. Humanity is the foundation of the work community-based organizations, such as the NRNRC, do. We understand best the issues that impact our community, and we are in the best position to produce better outcomes. With each obstacle one of us
overcomes, we build a toolkit to navigate our pathways to success. Further, we develop the *compassion, empathy, tolerance, and understanding* necessary to help and empower others in the similar positions. We must get back to understanding that, although our outcomes may differ, we are all impacted by the same issues.

While incarcerated at DC Jail in 2019, I got into an argument with a correctional officer over something trivial. I said something he didn’t like, he said something I didn’t like, and next thing you know I am being transferred to North 1, the “hole”. What hurt most wasn’t the fact my wouldn’t be able to call my family nor would I be able to order commissary. It wasn’t the fact I would have to deal with the realities of North 1: the extreme cold, the 23-1 lockdown schedule, the leaks, the access to books. What hurt the most was that I had this experience with correctional officer from my own community; somebody I thought should understand my pain enough to treat me with a little more *humanity*. But my mother always told me two things: (1) to take care of self first and, (2) to practice what you preach.

I decided to handle the next difficult encounter differently. When I perceived disrespect by another correctional officer, I chose humanity. From my own experience, I understand people don’t always make the best decisions nor respond to people in the most appropriate manner under stress. Rather than take it personal, I considered this officer may have had a bad day. Maybe she was a single parent and had a child to go home to who wouldn’t understand why his or her mother was so upset after work, disrupting their home life. So, I asked if everything was ok, and it led to a conversation of healing and understanding for both of us. I realized, if we could have this level of awareness for each other when interacting in the community, we would be in much better position to work together to rebuild our communities. If the young lady walking into the Department of Human Services didn’t perceive the tone or mannerisms of the representative as disrespect but as another human having a very human response to the racism, sexism, or whatever -ism impacts so many of us, they’ll remain patient enough to successfully process whatever benefits they need to receive to stabilize their families instead of getting frustrated, walking out of the DHS center, and projecting that energy on their families. This is our goal here at The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens. To use our stories to generate the empathy, understanding, and patience needed for us to heal, rebuild, and safeguard our way of living.

Let’s get back to respect and chivalry, greeting each other with kind words and holding the door open for the next man or woman. Let’s get back to listening to one another, valuing everyone’s experiences, and respecting our individual perspectives. Let’s get back to remembering the great many sacrifices people have made to create opportunities for our upward mobility. Let’s get back to humanity so we can re-build community.

My best regards,

*Russell Rowe*
The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens is in its 20th Cohort for the Ready4Work (R4W) Program.

The schedule has been extended from three (3) days a week to five (5): Monday - Friday from 10am – 2pm. The Cohort meets in person Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at our headquarters at 1200 U Street NW. Tuesday and Thursday in person sessions are held at Skyland Workforce Center at 2509 Good Hope Road SE.

The NRNRC has several vital consultants: Caroline Cragin from Community Mediation D.C. who instructs participants in conflict resolution, a very necessary skill Returning Citizens need to be able to adapt to some of the challenges in today’s workforce; Thandor Miller from JD Ellis & Associates LLC, a dynamic motivational speaker who builds participants up to be the best version of themselves possible; Mia McFarland of New Hope Credit Solutions who offers financial literacy, something that is sorely needed amongst the Returning Citizens community; Erika Berg who specializes in Visual Storytelling workshops in which participants get to tell their personal stories through paintings; and Elder Johnson, from Good Success Christian Church, who is an NA/AA recovery specialist.

The Ready4Work Job Readiness Cohorts offer clients a different perspective of how they view employment. The comprehensive learning environment provides pertinent information to clients from a holistic approach. The training dives into a deeper way of thinking, such as emotional intelligence, appropriate workplace behavior, cognitive behavior modification techniques, time-management, self-awareness, trauma informed care, conflict resolution/mediation, communication styles, hard and soft skills, self-advocacy, thinking traps, self-regulation, work-values, leadership abilities, identification of strengths, and weaknesses, etc. One goal is to look internally to find out why we make certain decisions that lead to termination of employment, or not getting hired for permanent employment.
Feature Interview:
Building Community with Humanity

ALICIA HORTON – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THRIVE DC

ALICIA HORTON is the Executive Director at Thrive DC, a homeless and low-income social service organization in Columbia Heights neighborhood, since 2009. Alicia has lived in the DC metropolitan area all of her life and has been a DC resident for the last 25 years. Alicia has always worked in the nonprofit sector advocating on behalf of communities and individuals throughout her career. Prior to her joining the Thrive DC team Alicia spent 14 years working nationally to reduce gun violence with the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence. Currently, Alicia stays busy with her work on the Howard University Medical Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects; she also sits on the Leadership Council of the DC Reentry Action Network, she is active member of the Victims Action Network and in 2019 she joined the Public Health Integrated Advisory Committee for the District of Columbia Department of Health. In her free time, Alicia loves to quilt, make pottery, and play with her dogs.

NRNRC: What do you believe may be some good strategies for community building, particularly when bringing together the Returning Citizens population and those that advocate for them?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: I think any opportunity that we can offer, where people get to be in a relaxed environment and get to know each other as people, as opposed to your titles, jobs, or whatever other exterior issues that you may have. Breaking bread together, engaging in some spiritual activities or activities that allow you to eliminate some of those excess noises are some good ways to do that. We need a place where we can sit down and talk in a judgment-free zone. These are things I think offer the best opportunities for people to get to know each other's paths and their facades. We are offering a program called A Chance to Thrive; it's an opportunity directed toward the rest of the world to see Returning Citizens for the people they are today, not for the people they were in their past. The program offers the community at large an opportunity to move past their biases and their preconceived notions of individuals and to understand how hurtful the obstacles, biases and preconceived notions are for folks who are trying to rebuild their lives. I think sometimes people don't understand the barriers they create for Returning Citizens when they say, 'I don't want to work with them' or 'I don't want to hire them'. I don't think people understand how dangerous and damaging that can be. Therefore, our Ad Campaign is designed to help people understand that. It's one of the programs we have that isn't directed toward our client community. We see the community at large as our clients and try to teach and uplift them so that they can do better.
NRNRC: Trying to create some awareness, some education, and some self-awareness.

Executive Director Alicia Horton: Yes, absolutely. I don’t think a lot of people are aware of some of the ways Returning Citizens can be affected, and the things that you don’t see on the surface, such as low self-esteem. Those kinds of things lead to hopelessness, and for some people it causes them to re-offend.

NRNRC: Networks and communities operate differently. How do you believe that the differences between communities and networks are most advantageous to those involved?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: I think the difference between communities and networks is that communities feel more organic to me. Communities are a natural coalescence of individuals who come together to live, to pray and to worship. They coalesce because of a natural kind of coming together. A network feels a little more designed. It seems to me that networks are more focused on a particular goal, and that they function more in play to that goal. For instance, the DC Reentry Action Network is a coalition of service providers that have come together to advocate and support each other and the work that we do. They advocate for our client communities and accomplish a specific set of goals around what we want to see happen within the community of Returning Citizens. I think the community of Returning Citizens operates on much more of an emotional level; these folks are connected differently. However, I think both are important. I think folks who come together for a specific purpose, and who are driving toward a goal through a network are critical, but I think you can never underestimate or just negate the power of a community of like-minded people. People who have similar experiences and who come together to support one another at a fundamental level are critical. Depending on what your needs are, you’d find some advantages in both forms.

NRNRC: The “where” of community building is extremely important. Most people believe the best places are either on social media or through an app of some kind. Where do you believe is the best outlet to begin building a community with Returning Citizens who give to and support one another?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: I’m still a bit old school, I think. However, social media is an effective means of promotion, a kind of information gathering. I think there is power in coming together, and to the extent that we can continue to offer forums where people can see each other face to face, particularly when we are talking about disparate audiences. It’s one thing for a group of Returning Citizens to get together on Zoom and bond and have those conversations but I think something is lost when two communities that don’t know each other, come together, and have to bridge that gap electronically. I don’t think it offers the same kind of connection. Therefore, in addition to social media, I love the idea of an old-fashioned block party. Festivals are opportunities where people can come together and connect on a real level. I don't think we can lose that element of promotional activities or networking. I think a good combination of in-person or social media, or electronic connections is the way to go.

NRNRC: How do we create awareness of the community we are trying to build and encourage individuals to build a rapport with people who may come from dissimilar backgrounds?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: Among the programming and support that we provide, we also do a bit of work in the homeless arena. One of our biggest programs is our meal program, and I have never done any kind of formal promotion for that program. My most successful promotion activities are word of mouth. People will bring others to the program, and they’ll tell people about the program; word of
mouth from folks who have experienced the program, folks who've had to come here because they needed that kind of support. They can say to other individuals, “go there, they have good food, and they'll treat you right”. That has got us brimming, busting at the seams every morning for breakfast because people know who we are. They've been endorsed by folks who they trust, and that seems to be the most effective promotional campaign. We can never negate the power of personal touches and personal endorsements. That kind of word-of-mouth spread is invaluable.

NRNRC: In community building, we want people to become an engaged community member, not simply a follower. What are some good ways to add value for prospective members so that this platform is something they check up on regularly and find it difficult to live without?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: Folks have to see what's in it for themselves. While that sounds a little self-centered, I think I understand it. When you're in ‘build mode’, where you're working to reorganize and thrive, you need to be able to take advantage of opportunities that help you do that. Therefore, I think making people very aware of the advantages is a good start. Additionally, there may be some advantages you don't even think about, such as networking for possible employment opportunities, networking for relationship building, and creating a support network around yourself. If there are incentives that we can offer; one of the ways we use to bring folks in and connect them, is by tapping into people's sense of 'I'm getting something for this and there's purpose'. At the end of the day, people are more driven by purpose than they are anything else. Once they feel purposeful in a situation or circumstance, it's extremely motivating.

NRNRC: Although the pandemic is not over, we do seem to be past the worst of it. What kind of incentives can be used to get people who are part of a community building process to connect with one another offline?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: We have to slow-walk that because I am still very aware that a lot of people in our community remain unvaccinated or feel hesitant toward some of those kinds of protections and have to operate more carefully. Again, we operate with the homeless community, and we recognize that there's a high level of infection around that community, because they have chosen not to be vaccinated, which is their choice. However, I can't responsibly bring 300 people together in a room. Understanding that is the situation, I think we must be mindful of the new dynamics and organize accordingly. Therefore, I think we should start with working towards small gatherings, where people can feel comfortable and safe. If it means gatherings where everybody has been vaccinated, if that's your concern, it's all good. If not, then it could be a smaller gathering in a bigger room. We're not done with this. For instance, my background is in microbiology, so I have a deep understanding of what this all is and what's happening.

NRNRC: Merriam-Webster defines humanity as: compassionate, sympathetic, or generous behavior or disposition: the quality or state of being humane. In your own words, how do you define humanity, especially in regard to considering giving individuals a second chance?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: The word that comes to mind is empathy. Compassion flows from empathy, where I have a unique, deep, and abiding understanding of what you're going through. It gives me a sense of connectedness to what you've experienced. I think when people don't feel connected, it's because they just don't get it, they just haven't walked in my shoes. Therefore, the experience feels distant and far off from what they know, understand, or can perceive. I think humanity is about empathizing with fellow human beings and their experiences, and once you know, it's a community. When Returning Citizens come together, they connect and they get it, and that empathy drives it. I
think, to the extent that we can foster a sense of empathy and empathic nature, we can increase our sense of humanity because it's hard to treat somebody in an inhumane way when you see yourself in them.

NRNRC: Most people are ready to either pray for, protest for, or donate supplies and money to those who are suffering unjust and inhumane treatment such as the civilians in the tragic situation happening in Ukraine right now. How do we get more people to have concern about the millions of individuals in the American carceral system who are also suffering inhumane treatment?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: I think there's a difference between how people react to situations where folks are or have hardships as a result of something beyond their control, and the way people react to what they perceive as someone who made a mistake. One of the questions we pose to our audiences is, “you don't have to share, you don't have to be vocal about this, but just think back to a moment where you made a mistake. I don’t think there's anybody in this room who can honestly say they can't find a moment like that in their lives!” It’s about trying to evoke that sense of could have been me, I just didn’t get caught, I didn't get hung up. For instance, to think about the carceral system, and not just the carceral system, but the many systems at play that create circumstances where folks get caught up. I don't want to take personal responsibility out of anything, but I do want people to be clear that it isn’t all level-ground out here. Things happen for reasons beyond our control sometimes. If you put that together with the fact that we all make mistakes, you can come at this from a different perspective. We have to encourage people to begin to do that and then take a forward look at it. The forward approach is what we all want: a functioning, happy, and embracing community that serves us all and to get there, we must do it. We must be embracing, and I don't even want to say forgiving because that is a look back, but helping people be who they are today. That helps us create the kind of community we all want. For instance, you hear parents sometimes say, “what you did was wrong, but you're not a bad person. You're not bad, what you did was bad.” That's the way to help children characterize bad decisions. We have created a system of punishment because when we get hurt, we incline to punish. We must decide as a society, whether we want to punish or rehabilitate, if we want to help people understand the wrongness of that decision and the impact that it has and help them have empathy for whoever they have affected, or if we just want to grind them down and punish them. The two can't happen together. From a policy and process standpoint, that's what we need to work on to move toward a system of building people up, instead of just breaking them down. When people are deemed criminal or have done something that puts them in that category, you fall in the hierarchy and you’re no better than nothing, so you don’t deserve the opportunity. You don’t deserve to be built up, and that's how our whole society operates on this hierarchy: you’re worthy or you’re not. At an even deeper level, that's a whole other thing that must be addressed.

NRNRC: If a person must raise concerns from individualistic confines to a broader concern for all people, what does that sort of life begin to look like, especially in terms of perceiving the situations Returning Citizens are faced with?

Executive Director Alicia Horton: You talk with your heart open, right? If you can begin to see outside of yourself, I think that is evidence of emotional growth and emotional intelligence. When your center is not just you, your whole world opens up. People get that from travel, it's what people get from experiencing other cultures and reading; it opens your mind, it opens your heart, and gives you something more than yourself, something bigger than yourself. It's what spirituality does for people, what religion does for people, it takes them out of their sphere and shows them a bigger picture. I think
it’s transformational. The only way that people can open up to empathy and begin to exercise compassion is, they have to see past their little circle of self. The only clear opportunity for growth that this society has, is to move past our liberal places and embrace the bigger world. This will result in fellowship, camaraderie, and empathy, and allows you to understand and open your heart to other people’s experiences. In that, I believe it is the opportunity to see people and not the labels.

**NRNRC:** The 16th century French poet and novelist, Voltaire, once stated that tolerance is a consequence of humanity and that to pardon one another for our follies is the first law of nature due to us all being formed of frailty and error. What do you believe is the biggest lesson one can learn from this statement?

**Executive Director Alicia Horton:** We've all made mistakes that we deeply regret. We've all had our foibles. The luxury of having that be kept a secret is luck. We all have something we want to take to the grave. When have to be honest about that and understand that others have not had that situation where they will be able to take it to the grave or where their foibles weren’t exposed. Give them the grace to live past that, because otherwise, you’ll draw folks away. I think Mr. Voltaire had it right. We are the same in more ways than we are ever willing to admit, and if the situation were reversed, we would want the same type of grace that we need to give and the grace we deserve. I think it’s a philosophy to live by.

**NRNRC:** Human nature can be difficult to explain which is one of the reasons why so many people judge and condemn those who have committed crimes. How do we effectively bridge the gap across different ethnic and racial backgrounds to better understand one another and treat one another humanely?

**Executive Director Alicia Horton:** Again, I think it’s about widening our communities; furthering our reach into different cultures and understandings. We [Thrive DC] work up in Columbia Heights, so we’re in a Black-Brown community setting, and while we suffer so many of the same kinds of ills, it’s unfortunate because our issues may be a little different. However, ultimately, we’re all suffering because of the hierarchy. The moments where I see togetherness are when we share experiences, organize festivals, break bread together, have conversations, and go to church together. Those are the moments where folks seem to be able to ignore those differences. The extent to which we can foster that kind of bridge-building and cross-connection is the only way to begin to break down some of those walls.

**NRNRC:** What sort of immaterial gifts can Returning Citizens receive from those who choose to show them compassion and forgiveness and what sorts of immaterial gifts can be given by Returning Citizens who have been recipients of such kindnesses?

**Executive Director Alicia Horton:** I've had some difficult conversations with Returning Citizens about their sense of empathy. In some situations, you do some real damage, and there's some restitution or some resolution that must happen around that. The extent that folks who have made a mistake can come with that kind of spirit, and say, “I'm so sorry, I did my time, I paid for it, I did what society says I needed to do to be whole again.” However, the victims do need another kind of apology. While I'm not sure you can ever get them where they need to be, I think the effort has to be made and that's one side. The other side has to understand that these are victims as well and that circumstances, situations, and systems have impacted folks’ decision-making. In a lot of respects, they are suffering the same kind of victimization that victims have faced. Therefore, once we understand that we are all coming from the same spot, we all are experiencing life in these circumstances with different results, then I think we can
have a better sense of each other. There has to be some hard conversations between folks who have been affected and folks who are affected. This creates an opportunity where folks who have been victimized come together with the folks who were in their situations with them. When you see them walk together it's a powerful statement. I did gun violence work for many years, and I've worked with families who have lost loved ones. I've seen a mom grieving in the street over her child. It's gut-wrenching. I get it and I know moving past that is probably almost impossible, but it can be done, I've seen it happen. Additionally, not all of the situations are that intense, so if it can happen at that level, I think it can happen at all the levels between that. If we create a system where that becomes a goal, it will be better than what we're doing now. I don't want to negate the concerns, the fears, and all the emotions that people have, but I know what they want is for this not to happen. In order to do that, we've got to embrace people and figure out what happened, what went wrong, and where we could have stopped this cycle. We can only do that with understanding and compassion, and a clear picture of the system that affects people.
Reentry Spotlight – Marvin Parker

Marvin Parker is a Returning Citizen and former participant of our Ready4Work program. Recently, he agreed to come in to our office to participate in our new podcast discussion we are having involving Returning Citizens who are sharing their experiences with reentry and the road back to normalcy post incarceration. This is an excerpt from that discussion.

Well, first and foremost, it's been an adventure, not a positive adventure, but it's been an adventure. I was fortunate to find this organization. I was in a situation in which there was nothing coming in, no money, no anything. I was also fortunate to have a family member say, you can stay with me. If it wasn't for that, I'd be on the streets, because there was nothing else going on, nothing was happening. Prior to going in, I was in very good standings financially, but in fighting matters, such as what I was going through, I spent a lot of resources. I was paying attorneys to try to get my time reduced make things as best for myself as possible, before I even went in.

So, after I was released, I just so happened to hear about this organization. I didn't give it much thought because I had looked into everything else but I figured I had nothing to lose, so I looked into it, and got involved with the Ready4Work program. That program prepped me for a lot of different situations, not just being ready to work, but ready to get back to life. Even though I was gone for a short period of time, less than two years, things had changed dramatically. When I went in, there was no pandemic, no shortages of gasoline, no shortages of work, people weren't staying in, it was totally different. In just that short period of time, I had to make adjustments because the business that I had established prior to going in was totally wiped out because I wasn't there to run it. It speaks volumes to have an organization like this that could provide hope, first and foremost, and then on top of that hope, give people a chance to reconnect to see what's going on and see what is available. Getting involved with this program showed me that there were ways to get my credit back together, which is good for because I'm still working on ways to get my business back on task. It's not an easy road, but I'm building every day bit by bit.
Peer Navigator: Program Overview

A Peer Navigator with The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens (NRNRC) is responsible for providing hands-on assistance to individuals who are returning from periods of incarceration. The goal of the Peer Navigator is to promote the successful integration of DC residents back into the community, along with being a role model who understands and can convey clearly how to access and utilize key services for Returning Citizens and their families, loved ones and children. As a member of NRNRC, the Peer Navigator will provide peer-to-peer support to Returning Citizens who experienced trauma as they navigate and address barriers and empower participants to obtain resources. Bottom line, an NRNRC Peer Navigator is an individual who possesses character, credibility, integrity, morals, and principles.

Peer Navigators keep in touch with Returning Citizens by contacting them anywhere from 3 to 5 times a week. These contacts take the form of either phone or social calls where the Returning Citizen has a chance to update the Peer Navigator on their progress with obtaining credentials, employment, housing, etc., and informing them of any assistance they may need.

The Peer Navigator also provides a shoulder to lean on when a Returning Citizen needs to vent about any of the frustrations or problems they are facing during their reentry. As someone who has first-hand knowledge of the barriers and stumbling blocks Returning Citizens face, Peer Navigators can be that port in the storm when an individual needs it.
DO YOU NEED A PEER NAVIGATOR?

PEER NAVIGATORS:

• Helps manage time, prioritize work, set goals, develop transition plans, and gain better understanding of your work
  • Provides support
  • Makes no false promises
• Works together to solve problems and learn about issues
  • Asks questions on behalf of peers
  • Life Coach You Can Trust
• Knows how to build rapport
  • Has a desire to help

Contact:
Jharris@thereentrynetwork.org
(202) 584-1000
Employing Us: Interview with Jeffrey Vinson, JVM Consulting & Contracting Services

JEFF VINSON is President and CEO of JVM Consulting & Contracting Services, a Small Disadvantaged Business (SDB) Specializing in Administrative & General Management/Consulting, General Construction, Publics Works, & Highway Maintenance. Doing Business in DC, MD & VA Since 2017, JVM has been providing Top Notch General Contracting & Management on Numerous Highway Maintenance Projects along with Maryland State Department of Education

NRNRC: You come from a similar background as many Returning Citizens. Given some of the hardships that you have had in the past and being involved with the wrong kinds of people, what was your journey like? What were some of the obstacles you faced as you were transitioning from that kind of life to where you are now?

Jeff Vinson: I was blessed because I had no clue that I would be in this situation I’m in now. I was just like the next man, just looking for a job. It was hard, I went to a few employment centers in Largo. * I frequented that place probably two or three times a week. I went to Labor Ready in Greenbelt, * went there daily, and just waited for my name to be called for assignments. Every now and then I would get an assignment that lasted a week, but it was a struggle. I was living with some of my friends, sleeping on their couch and stuff like that. My parents didn’t really believe that I was trying to do something different, they just didn’t know what I had just been through. As an adult, over 40 years old, it’s kind of hard for them to have faith in you again. You have to refill your sphere and reinstate their faith in you. Now, I also had a background in sales, I’ve been doing outside sales ever since cell phones became popular. So, I happen to go to the employment center in Largo and they were having a meeting. A guy from the Laurel* branch came over and he had a friend who was a contractor like I am now. He saw my resume, pulled me aside, and said he had a friend that was looking for an account rep. So, what I’m doing now, I learned from working there. In the beginning however, he didn’t want to hire me when he found out about my situation in the past. Obama has a video out there that talks about second chances, and I sent that video to him, but he happened to be on vacation. About two weeks later, he called me and asked me if I could come in again for the third time. I came in and he told me he was on vacation in Nigeria because that’s where he was from. He said, I thought about it, and I wanted to give you a chance, and so he gave me a chance. It worked out and everything I learned, I learned it from him. I started my own business because he wasn’t doing too well. He relocated me because he knew I didn’t have anywhere else to stay. He was a small company like myself and he was trying to get all the certifications. He wanted this HUBZone certification and in order to get a HUBZone certification, you have a certain percentage of people that work for you, to live in a household. I moved to Baltimore even though I knew nothing about Baltimore, being from the DC metropolitan area. I moved there so he could get the HUBZone certification but then six months later, he wasn’t doing well. He changed my schedule from 40 hours to 20 hours a week, but he was never there and because I learned everything from him,
everybody thought I was running the company. I was now part time and living in a brand-new
apartment, so I had to do something quick. I started a business and one of my buddies said, you know,
you can bid on these contracts. I got on some contracts in 2017 and the rest is history, just learning and
growing. Knowing the situation I've been in, and the struggle, I've had people call me, and explain their
situation and pretty much beg for a chance. Being a contractor, there is only so much I can do, as I do
have to abide by the rules of the contract, but I tell them, if they can pass the background check, I'll give
them a shot. That's what's happening, that's why I was successful. We're successful with the four
gentlemen that we have from your program.

**NRNRC**: What have your experiences been like working with individuals from our program? What are
some of the successes that you've seen?

**Jeff Vinson**: We started this contract on March 1st, so we've only had them for about two months, but
they're doing really well. My best workers, they work 40 hours a week, they're hungry. I don't have any
hands-on experience with them because I am the contractor. I managed the contract for the Metro
stations, and I have them spread it out at different stations, so I'm not at the facilities watching them
but I'm hearing nothing but good news.

**NRNRC**: How did you become familiar with the National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens in order
to be able to pull job candidates from our program?

**Jeff Vinson**: That's a good question. A friend of mine I played basketball with in college, just came home
about a year or so ago, and he sent me the contact information for a staff member. I don't know if he
was actually in your program, but he's a good friend of mine by the name of Ernest Glover.

**NRNRC**: Yes, I'm familiar with him. (Laughs) He's on our board of directors.

**Jeff Vinson**: We grew up playing basketball together. We went to college together one year, and I
transferred and went out to the West Coast. He knew that I was looking for some employees and he
asked me to give her a call, so if anyone deserves all the credit, it's Mr. Ernest Glover. For reaching out
and looking back and trying to pull some of his friends up. A lot of people don't, once they get out of the
bucket or the barrel. They don't want to look back, so he definitely gets all the praise.

**NRNRC**: Going back to your own success, how vital would you say it was for you to have had those
people in your corner who supported and gave you the encouragement you needed to keep striving and
reaching for your goals, so that you didn't slip back into destructive behavior?

**Jeff Vinson**: It was very important. I think the relocation was what did it for me. Baltimore is known for
having a lot of crime, so being in a place like that, where you don't know anybody, it kind of teaches you
to stay to yourself and stay focused. When I was at home, you got people in the same boat and coming
over and now their problems are your problems. You may go out and get into some more problems, and
so, it was good for me to be solo. Sometimes it's good for some people to sit down because when
people get away for a minute and get themselves together and get a second chance, they do better.

**NRNRC**: In this issue of the Black Table Talk, we're talking about community building, particularly
between Returning Citizens, organizations, advocates, everybody. In your own opinion, what do you
think it would take to build a community such as this, given that there are so many different, ethnicities
and backgrounds and values all coming to the table?
**Jeff Vinson:** A lot of people have thoughts of building community situations like that, but it’s always one person that messes it up for everybody else. If everybody can come out and be screened, and prove that they’re ready for this second chance that they don’t want to screw up. There’s got to be a high success rate for people to all want to join in. Once you get started in building a community like that, if one person screws up, that messes up everything. I think you would have to get a nonprofit type of organization to build a community program like that. Also, not all Returning Citizens have the same skills. For example, Mr. Glover has a job where he’s driving, but I know he can do office clerical work, because he’s done that. Everyone has different skills, so in a situation like that, you would have to have different departments in the program, for example, labor over here, clerical over there. If you get people from churches, or retired citizens, people with good hearts that see they can trust these individuals and see that they’re ready to listen and are willing to learn. My mom is retired and always looking for stuff to do and get involved with. They’ll come out and help the program by making the conditions to the contractors and to the employers and create something where we can build some kind of trust to get them. Obviously, they’re going to start them off as temps, but I tell these guys, do good, keep your head down and stay focused.

**NRNRC:** There are many Returning Citizens, including myself, who wish to become entrepreneurs and get their own business started, just like you did. What sort of advice and motivation can you give us to keep that hope alive? Especially when we may be concerned about our criminal backgrounds, and how that could be a potential setback.

**Jeff Vinson:** I’m glad you asked me that, because one of the things that I wanted to talk to someone about is, how to go and talk to Returning Citizens, or people getting ready to come home, who are looking to start their own business. I know they’re going through the same hell I’ve been through, dealing with resumes and no one wants to look at you. I strongly advise people to take up a trade, if they can. People can take a trade while they’re locked up. If you’re talking to someone that’s already locked up, and getting ready to come out, tell them now’s a good time to pick something that you think you’re good at, and you want to learn more. Let’s see if they have that program in there. Then, just coming out, I would suggest starting your own business, and then learning how to bid on these contracts. This is something that I stumbled into. I’m learning something new every day and I love it. Also, there are so many opportunities for hands-on people. If they can find a trade such as bricklaying, carpentry, landscaping labor. There are so many jobs out here. When I say jobs, I mean contracts. I need 50 people for this job, for example, they need to start thinking more like an entrepreneur, as having their own business. The first thing is startup money but it’s not it can take only about three or four hundred dollars to start an LLC. The first thing you want to do is get all your certifications, a lot of people don’t understand that part. What I do right now is I try to show people how to start a company. First thing you want to do is get all your certifications. You’re already Black, so you’re already entitled to a DBE (Disadvantaged Business Enterprise) or MBE, (Minority Business Enterprise). These are the things they don’t tell you when you’re starting a business, is that because the mayor is used to all the white people getting on the same kind of contract every year, they’re making it mandatory that they have to bring in a subcontractor to fulfill a certain percentage of MBEs and DBEs. If someone has a million-dollar contract, 25% or $250,000 has to go towards a company with an MBE, or DBE. It’s very important to get that, because things will fall in your lap, you just have to stay focused. Take it slow, get experience, read the contracts, and just abide by the contracts. It’s a lot of work, but it’s worth it.
Community Podcast: Hosted by the NRNRC

The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens has started a podcast which will be synonymous with our Black Table Talk. In our podcast discussions, we will be speaking with Returning Citizens, advocates, community-based organization members and more.

The main focus of these conversations is to tell the stories of Returning Citizens and bring even more awareness to the plight of this very vulnerable group. These testimonies will help better shape the reentry story and show the general public why organizations like the NRNRC are so necessary.

We will also talk with the individuals who have an impact on policy reform and other means of trying to make the lives of Returning Citizens filled with less barriers and the hardships and triumphs, the pitfalls and the rewards that come with such hard work.
Community Bulletin Board

THE NATIONAL REENTRY NETWORK FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

INSPIRE & EMPOWER

PROFESSIONAL CLOTHING DRIVE

We encourage all that can donate professional clothing to our organization, so that our clients can be prepared for their next steps!

We are accepting clothing donations today!

Drop off Location:
1200 U ST NW, Washington DC 20009
Are you a new Returning Citizen released from incarceration?  
How has the first 72 hours of your release been?  
Do you need assistance?  

CALL  
THE NATIONAL REENTRY NETWORK  
FOR RETURNING CITIZENS  
HELPLINE  
1-844-916-2577  

The National Reentry Network for Returning Citizens HELPLINE,  
1 844-916-2577, is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year,  
information service for returning citizens re-entering the community in need of  
reentry services.  

We can provide assistance for emergency issues that may arise.  

AVAILABLE 24 HOURS A DAY  
www.thenationalreentrynetwork.org
Community Focus Group

MISSION STATEMENT
Our mission is to build a strong, national network comprised of individuals returning from incarceration who support each other’s successful reintegration. We use a client-centered approach to identify basic needs and to create a continuum of care that can address barriers to reentry, promote restorative practices, and reduce recidivism.

VISION STATEMENT
Our vision is to reinvest in safe and healthy communities, create more living wage jobs, permanent housing and economic self-sufficiency for returning citizens.

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”
Martin Luther King Jr.

JOIN OUR MOVEMENT
When: August 31, 2022
Where: 1200 U ST NW
       Washington DC 20009
Time: 6 pm -8 pm

Contact Us:
1200 U ST NW, Washington DC 20009
Office: 202-584-1000
Fax: 202-584-1002
WEBSITE: www.thenationalreentrynetwork.org
EMAIL: info@thenationalreentrynetwork.org