

**Mind the Gap
Program Documentation
Interviews with Participants**

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INTRODUCTION

This report was prepared to document the program experience of Mind the Gap participants. This report is based on interviews done with fifteen program participants.

Mind the Gap was a pilot project that provided services from 2010 to 2012. It involved a unique combination of programs and activities in two counties in Minnesota, Ramsey and Hennepin counties. Its overall purpose was to close the social and economic gaps experienced by fathers who leave prison. The program was based on the premise that finding employment and becoming voluntary and reliable payers of child support are among the most formidable gaps ex-offenders face. A belief behind the program was that when realistic child support orders are set and regular financial support is provided, father-child relationships are strengthened and children's lives improve.

The program's elements included:

Collaboration. State and local agencies as well as community partners involved in both corrections and child support enforcement are committed to working more efficiently toward common project goals. Partners in the project share the belief that most fathers want to support their children both financially and emotionally, but ex-offenders, especially, need help in finding jobs or overcoming barriers to successful reintegration into families and communities.

Information sharing. By sharing information among corrections and child support agencies and by increasing the quality and timeliness of that information, frustrating delays in processing cases pre- and post-release can be averted.

Training and education. Professionals who serve fathers benefit from learning new ways to improve services and increase engagement of fathers with child support obligations.

Specialized case management. A critical component of this project is linking ex-offenders pre- and post-release to a fatherhood coordinator who will help access wrap-around services that are crucial to success. Well-coordinated multidisciplinary case management helps ex-offenders reintegrate into communities and support their families. Children of ex-offenders will benefit from regular financial support and stronger father-child relationships.

Mind the Gap was funded in part by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement through a Section 1115 Demonstration Grant—Projects in Support of the Prisoner Reentry Initiative.

The following agencies were partners for Mind the Gap:

- African American Family Services
- Goodwill/Easter Seals Minnesota
- Hennepin County Child Support
- Minnesota Department of Human Services' Child Support Enforcement Division
- Minnesota Department of Corrections
- Ramsey County Child Support
- The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Involving previously incarcerated case managers, advocates, staff, and volunteers was the single most-cited program success by participants.

Having direct, in-person contact with a case manager prior to leaving prison was essential to their decision to participate.

Offering assistance for child support was a strong draw for participants, including those who had never participated in programming outside of prison before.

Though the holistic nature of the program was helpful to participants, immediate daily assistance was key in helping them through daily challenges.

Though meeting with mentors was difficult for participants, many still found their relationship with their mentor to be of high value.

Gaining employment was extremely significant for participants, particularly for those who worked closely with Job Club and ERT staff.

For those participants who have been incarcerated more than once, the program proved to be an important intervention that required constant dedication, as those participants could compare both experiences.

Participants affirmed that their contact with Child Support Officers increased and their opinion of CSO's changed; and most significantly, their knowledge of how the child support system operates increased dramatically.

The "group" style of the parenting education was praised by participants for offering a more experiential learning process.

Parole Officers and Child Support Officer's approval of Mind the Gap participation was also helpful to participants, though it was recommended this relationship be strengthened even further, by documentation or more in-person events, where officers could witness participant's program successes.

Participants had some recommendations:

- continued and expanded intensive case management
- expanded/varying hours for programming
- expanded employment services
- the addition of housing services
- increased outreach to recruit more fathers

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

Fifteen Mind the Gap participants were interviewed in person or via phone for this project. Interviews ranged from 25 minutes to over one hour and included questions on program experiences, challenges and successes during the transition home, child support experiences, family relationships, employment history, and recommendations for future reentry programs.

Participants ranged in age from 27-45 years old, with program entry dates ranging from May 2010 to April 2012, reflecting participants who began receiving services both before and after the implementation of an additional program component, being matched with volunteer mentors as a part of a Second Chance Act grant that Goodwill/Easter Seals of Minnesota received.

Participants also ranged in their levels of involvement with the program. While several of the participants were active across the entire program, other participants were selective in their involvement – for instance, only attending parenting group or job club regularly, while not participating in other components. A full chart of participant demographics is available in Appendix A.

PROGRAM ACCESS

All but two participants were recruited into the program while still incarcerated at Minnesota Correctional Facility-Faribault via one-on-one meetings with David Mirambeaux, the Mind the Gap Case Manager. The remaining two participants were recently released and living in transitional housing when they began participating in Mind the Gap. Overwhelmingly, participant reported it was simple to begin receiving services from Mind the Gap once they approached the Goodwill/Easter Seals offices after their release. As one participant noted, “I think I started the week I got out. I came right to Goodwill” (2), and another said, “They made it simple for me. All I had to do was just show up and be willing to participate you know, be a willing participator” (3), while another described the usefulness of having MTG services waiting for them: “It was better that I met him [David] in the institution because when I got out I already had part of my plan already set to go” (1).

When asked why they began to engage with Mind the Gap, answers ranged widely, though several participants specifically said that **assistance with child support was the main draw** - for instance, one participant said, “I had \$23k in arrears. I have no driver’s license. David said he could help me with that. I really wanted to be part of MTG for that” (7) and another said that, “I’m all about my children. A lot of women take that away from us, they go on their own programs or on welfare and stuff and they just sort of kick the guys out. So, I liked it because it was for US. It was for guys. What it’s like to be a father, how crazy our baby’s mothers can be sometimes, how we are not ALL bad. I just wanted a chance to voice my opinion and then it turns out there were 30 other guys in the same boat as me” (8).

Of the fifteen men interviewed, thirteen said Mind the Gap was **first time they fully engaged with a program** designed for previously incarcerated fathers. For example, one participant reported, “At

first I was kinda like...I don't want nothing to do with programs....no county stuff, no nothing. But then once [David] kinda got to explaining stuff - and you know - David is like a real cool guy. He just kinda got talking to me about other things, and I was like....alright. This I was the first program like this I ever did. It was just him, and I was like, this is the kind of guy I need" (2). Another participant noted that, "It's crazy that there's all this help out here. People are sincerely trying to help. I feel blessed I did actually meet them, because I didn't look for it. I was just gonna deal with everything myself, and thought I'll get by doing that. I've been doing it my whole life, but obviously what I was doing - it got me to where I'm at. So, I thought, maybe I'll try something different" (4).

It was very clear from all participants that **having direct, in-person contact with a case manager prior to leaving prison was essential to their decision to participate**. As one person described it, "If you interviewed every guy who went through Mind the Gap, how they heard about Mind the Gap, it would be the day they [MTG staff] came into the prison. You're not going to hear about it when you get out on the streets, once you get out there, because we have a million and one other things you think you gotta do first. If someone's going to come in and tell you why they're in there, and give you somewhere to come, telling you this is what it's about, this is what you need help with, and we can help you with this, you know, that's beautiful. Ain't no way around it. That's the best way, I believe" (6). Finally, two participants simply stated: "Basically David. He's a real caring person. That's basically what made me put my guard down and give it a chance" (13) and "I liked Dave. And the program had everything I needed I could find in one place" (10).

THE "SMALL" THINGS

When asked which parts of the program they used most frequently, many participants noted that **immediate assistance was key in helping them through daily challenges**. As one participant said, "It's those little things - the bus cards, the clothing vouchers for job interviews, the Holiday gas cards - they helped out on them rough days. Them are those days when you feel like - how can it get any worse? I can't believe this. What am I going to do now? And then that \$20 gift card can just fix the whole day. I look at it like, this program is one that just makes things happen. If you continue, that's up to you. If you fall off, it's up to you. You're not obligated to anything, it's up to you" (8).

Another noted how this type of assistance enabled him to pursue other components of the program: "They helped me get funding, job leads, bus passes, clothes....Well I mean each step is important because the clothes, the bus passes and things like that are important to help you get to the classes...it kinda works hand in hand, you know" (1). For some participants, just having planned activities was helpful: "When I first came home, it was just about staying busy. I did this construction training, all of that stuff. The workshops. All that. So, it was just about staying busy and they had a lot of stuff to - you had no excuse (laughs), I mean, cause they had a lot of stuff you could do!" (6)

CASE MANAGEMENT

Every participant who was interviewed repeatedly praised the **intensive case management** they received from David Mirambeaux. For example, one participant said his favorite part of the program was: "The communication with David. He helped me fill out paperwork and turn it in - it

was more like having a big brother, or an advocate. I felt real comfortable, being in my situation. He wasn't looking down on me. The only things he said were things to uplift and help me grow and prosper and become a more productive member of society" (7).

Another participant shared: "Oh man, just, it was just like everything falling at one time, but, I was trying to reach out to the walls and grab something, just grab hold of something, because when you going down that whirlpool of being homeless and you're really not sure who has your back, you turn back to the streets. Doing crime....basically, you do what you know. What kept me sane was David and a lot of these guys here, you know, man, it helped me a lot. There was just that connection to be able to pick up the phone and say, "man I'm tired of this," and I'm going to call crying and hollering and all them at the same time and be like, "man, I'm sick of this." [And] he's like, "calm down bro, this is what you need to do, meet me at the office." And he'll come to you. So that's a beautiful thing. It's not just someone telling you they've got your back, he's showing you and that, that's a big difference" (6)

MENTORING

Though some of the participants who were interviewed began the program *before* the addition of mentoring, even those participants were offered the mentoring component, resulting in fourteen of the fifteen interviewees having been offered participation in mentoring. This makes it difficult to fully disentangle any differences in the program after mentoring was implemented. Of those fourteen who at least made preliminary contact with a mentor, eleven reported they met with their mentor at least several times. The other three reported that they struggled to keep in contact with their mentor, or chose to end their mentoring relationship after several meetings. One participant who did not continue mentoring said: "I did get involved in the mentoring. It "went." I just have a lot going on right now, so it's hard to - as much as I wanted to give back and things like that, I'm still trying to get myself together" (2).

Several other participants also reported that **they and their mentors' busy schedules at times conflicted with their ability to meet** often - but, **it didn't seem to fully detract from the value** they saw in the relationship. For instance, one participant said, "It's going good - it's what I expected. I get what I want out of it as far as whenever I have a problem, I make a phone call. He's pretty busy and I'm pretty busy, but it's just helps me sort things out. Simplify life. That's huge, especially coming out of a situation that I did" (4). Another also noted that though the mentoring met his expectations, he did at times want more: "I did have a mentor, and unfortunately it was kind of my fault because of my work schedule, but again - my mentor was really good. I just think I needed more than what I expected out of a mentor. I needed a little more personal guidance - it was good, I don't want to put it down... but at the time, it wasn't what I felt like I needed. So to me, I used for a little bit, then I figured it was taking up a lot of my time that I could be using for other things" (3).

Yet, it's important to note that the majority of the participants had positive reviews of their experience with mentoring. Some examples of this sentiment are: "It worked out great! Like I said, the calling when you're down when you're gonna go the other way and somebody just in your ear

like "No, man. You know better. Stay positive, it's gonna get better." You know? "Stay focused" (6); and: "It's awesome. I mean it really shows the impact of just networking and meeting people. I don't normally say stuff like this, but just being able to be yourself...open up about things and open up about stuff. So I mean it was real deep, but at the same time it was a genuinely felt process, in all the experience. From where I'm at now I wouldn't mind doing it again" (5).

Finally, a theme this report will return to frequently is the benefit of pairing Mind the Gap/Second Chance mentoring participants with previously incarcerated mentors and case managers. Specifically in the realm of mentoring, **those participants who worked with a previously incarcerated mentor were more enthusiastic about their programmatic experience:** "If I'm having a bad day, I just give him a call and stuff. It's kinda like...he's a good friend. I can actually confide in him without him judging me or anything. He was in prison for awhile and so I can relate with him, talk about that stuff. I think that's just - personally - how it should be. To have people who have similar backgrounds so that they're able to discuss things with you and relate with you instead of just empathize with you" (13). Another participant said: "Yeah, It was a great relationship... 'cause he was incarcerated once, once upon a time, too. Even though we went in for different things, we still had the same goals, a lot of the same thoughts, you know, been through a lot of the same garbage. It worked out good" (6).

EMPLOYMENT

Ten participants reported using Job Club regularly, while the remaining five secured employment on their own, or could not work due to medical reasons, and thus did not regularly attend. At the time of the interviews, nine participants were working, two were out on medical, and the rest were currently unemployed and seeking employment.

Gaining employment was monumental for several of the participants, and these experiences were often directly linked to dedicated work by GWES staff. One participant said, "They got me a job too. And I remember Jackie and Faith took me out there for the interview, then they took me out there my first day of work. That was real. I like this program" (2). Several men also noted that attending job club itself became a sort of proxy for employment, functioning as a daily routine that easily translated into a work schedule; for instance, "I attended job club, worked to be on time, pretty much treated it like I was serious about it. I guess I was rewarded, [because] Andy gave me the job lead, I went down there, and I got the job" (4).

Two participants specifically mentioned the Employment Readiness Training. One participant said, "I did the ERT program - employment readiness. It was grueling. But it gave me all the tools I needed to look and find a job. I found a job - it wasn't in my field - but I took it. But I still come here every week, just for the connection and to talk with the people. And me being fresh out of prison, I needed that" (7), and another said, "I attended ERT - and I really liked it. The mock interviews really showed me what I do - and it really helped me" (13).

COMPARING TO PRIOR RELEASES FROM PRISON

Six of the fifteen participants were incarcerated more than one time, while nine were transitioning

from their first and only period of incarceration. For the six who experienced **a previous reentry period to their current one, there were stark differences between the two.** Three participants had quite specific descriptions of this:

“Last time sucked. This whole program made a big difference this time. Because without them it would have gone bad real quick too. The first time I THOUGHT I had a plan, I thought I had a good one - but unfortunately it didn't go the way I pictured it in my head. So this time when I got out - especially when David was coming up there and telling me some stuff - it was just way different this time. I knew I was going to get into the FATHER project, but once I got into the Goodwill and the employment readiness training and then all these other doors started opening up. I can't even begin to tell you how much these people have helped me out there. I didn't at all expect it to be as helpful as it was....that first time was horrible” (2).

“It was really different. Last time I had my own plan. This time when I came out, Dave, Jay, and Jackie had a plan to go along with my plan. I had support and help from the people at GWES. And that help that really helped a lot or then I would have to go back to my old way of thinking, you know, plus I was realizing that I was getting too old to continue to live in the fast life and things like that, and I had to really grow up and be a parent to my kids because they were beginning to look at me, and I didn't want to see them come up in the same situations. Doing my own thing, yeah, no it didn't work” (1).

“Last time I was out it was a real struggle. I didn't know this program existed - I was illiterate to that. I had no kind of guidance. Last time I came out, got my check for \$200, they said see ya later, check in with your PO in 24 hours, have a nice life. I said, oh, I have \$200 and nowhere to live and I don't know what to do. This time, I had David and a place to stay for 90 days, so everything kinda...this time was better for me. The last time I was actually getting out just preparing myself to go back in. Because let's keep it real. The struggle was so hard. Here I am, I have aggravated assault and kidnapping - “I'm not hiring you!” So I was like, wow, what will I do? The streets are what's left. But they showed me an alternative to the streets” (7).

CHILD SUPPORT

Five of the fifteen interviewees reported they had their cases reassessed since their release and were currently making child support payments they felt appropriate for their employment and income status. For the ten not currently making payments, one was making payments on several cases (but not yet on others), two were in the midst of having their cases reworked, one was married and not required to make payments, and six were still awaiting the process of reestablishing their case.

Many participants said they **made contact with their CSO's and learned more** about the child support system through the encouragement of Mind the Gap staff to meet with and talk to their CSO's. For instance, one participant said: “ [The program] they had you stay in touch with your CSO. At first I tried to avoid her, but once I did start talking to her, she just kinda eased my mind all about it. So, if it hadn't been for them kinda making it a point to keep in contact with her. I never would

have found out the things I found out" (2).

Another participant said: "The first time [I came out of prison], no. I didn't even deal with them. Never went to see them, never called. The paperwork kept coming while I was in prison, but I didn't know who to talk to ...So, I didn't really talk to nobody live until this time when I decided to come to Mind The Gap. And David, he was like, one-on-one, we're going to these people's offices and all that. So I met Linda and Mary - I met a whole bunch of child support officers, like, live in person. It was different. And they actually weren't after me, like I was thinking all those years. They want that money. But when I'm like running, it was like I'm running from the police! But it was cool this time, this time with Mind The Gap, you know, I was able to handle a lot of child support issues" (6).

When asked specifically what they learned, participants said they were often surprised at the level of payment required of them, that the mother's income was now accounted for, and that they were eligible to receive their driver's licenses again. For example, one participant said: "No one likes to get their checks garnished. I don't care what it's for. But the lady was explaining to me that, all these men like to say that they just take all your money and don't leave with you nothing. But they factor in a whole bunch of stuff - you know, the income you make, the income the mother makes...the things [my CSO] she told me, made me think, ok - she made it make sense. I was able to wrap my head around it" (2). Another stated, "They send you the letters and they got that one payment sticking out and you're like, "I don't have this!" But, they don't tell you that you can make slow payments and so you run away from it. Well, I did. You know, I'm looking at the big number and I'm like, "I ain't no way I can get this!" Yeah, so [this time] here they helped, they explained how it goes and who I need to talk to and what could be done and all that" (6).

Another stated: "I learned that the CSOs just want to know you are trying. I think they deal with a lot of people who don't show that they are trying, or are avoiding it. I think that's what I learned the most - that if you deal with this problem head on, then these people will help you. They're not people who want to see you fail. I think that's the one thing I really learned" (3).

One participant had many perspectives on what he learned about child support through the program: "They're actually here to help if you are involved - it keeps your mind focused more on just a woman trying to take your money from you. It puts your mind at ease, knowing this is for my kids - we weigh out the expenses and the pros and cons, what we used to spend, what we spend now. So it helps out a lot. I'm learning a lot more about how it works. Most men don't think anything besides they're out to take my money. But then, how do we get a job to make that money if, 'I don't have a license and I'm on probation, and then child support kicks in - why even work? I'm gonna go back to hustling' - that's where our mindset is until we sit down in these groups and realize it's really not that bad. Fifty, one hundred bucks a month isn't really all that much....We don't really want to contact someone we have to give money to, but then the program staff is always asking us, did you call your CSO? And then they put the phone numbers up on the board each time, so it's just sort of like a constant reminder" (8).

When asked if their **perception of child support officers changed** as a result of the program, all

but two participants said this was at least partially the case: “Yeah it did - I still kinda wish I was in a better position- or never put in the position of having to pay child support, but you know, it is what it is. I understand it more and I don’t feel like I used to about the whole thing” (2). When asked if his opinion of CSO’s had changed, another respondent said, “Oh, a lot, a lot, a lot! They’re actually real cool, man. They’re real people!” (6). Two other participants said: “The program helped me get back on my feet with child support. The program definitely helped me reach out to the CSO. My opinion of them has changed - it’s gotten a lot better with them. I have a person I can actually talk to you now” (10) and “Well, prior to this I never really wanted to talk to them. And then, David gave me the confidence to be able to talk to the people and stuff. Yeah, my opinion has changed quite a bit. I don’t look at them like they’re just out to take my money anymore” (13).

A couple participants were also enthusiastic about **having child support officers present at Mind the Gap events**, where they could have face-to-face interactions with them in a positive environment. For instance, one participant said, “Them inviting us and the other people [the CSOs] to events, through those events they’re able to see people as human beings - and I think that’s the biggest problem when it comes to these things. I even got to see my worker, and we were kinda talking a little bit” (3).

Being part of a Mind the Gap caseload was also important to some participants. As one person described it: “I haven’t been able to get into the process yet of paying my child support, but I know the CSOs speak highly of the FATHER Project and MTG. I did go downtown and meet with them, and they were really cool. They spoke really highly of David and the program, they’re actually glad about that” (8).

Finally, one participant stated his **experience when going back to court** was even more positive than he expected: “When I went to court to reestablish support - they gave me a good leeway, even when I worked, and when they did establish it, they did it at such a good amount. So, they were very fair on that, which in the long run helps me out, because I am able to establish myself a little better” (3). Another participant who experienced a positive child support outcome said, “I talk to my CSO every month. I started talking to them the last 10 months before I came out, let her know I was coming home and joined MTG. And I still keep in touch once a month. They knocked off \$17k from my arrears. I did not expect that to happen. That wouldn’t have happened without the program. That happened through the program’s connections to child support” (7).

PARENTING SUPPORT

The **parenting group - and particularly, the way the group was facilitated - was held in high regard** by those participants who attended regularly. Of the fifteen interviewed, thirteen reported they attended the group. Several participants noted the way in which the group kept things “real” for them or kept them “grounded” to their parenting responsibilities. For instance, one participant noted: “It keeps me grounded. Sometimes throughout this endeavor here, you kinda want to stray away from what’s in front of you, but coming to the class it keeps me actually grounded. It lets me know what’s important to me. I go there and verbalize...just saying my kids’ names and ages and going through the whole process of our check in and having a conversation with everybody. It lets

me know again what's important. You know, 3, 4 days from now, I might just want to buy some new shoes and a big screen TV. And I'll probably end up doing it anyway, but once I get back there, I start thinking about it. It brings me back to like...I can't believe I just did that. It keeps me focused. Just constant. I even just sometimes call the advocates and have a conversation with them. It just keeps me grounded, gives me a reminder of what I need to be doing versus what I want to do. It's great for me" (2).

Another participant said, "Being a part of a group has helped me a lot. It made me stay, too. Because you feel a part of something, you know what I mean? It's not just, 'Ok, I gotta go listen to this. All this, oh he's gonna say the same story.' No, it's always something going on, like what happened this week? You know what I mean? What's good about the week and what's not so good are the questions we start off [with]. You know I mean, you know part of check-ins, you gotta name your name and ages of your kids, what's good about the week, what's not so good about the week? So that just gives you something to think about it and talk about it every week. And that's a new topic every week. So that's a beautiful thing" (6).

Another important **component to the success of the parenting group was the "group" style setting** itself. As one participant described, "The [group part] helps a lot. Because everybody has their own different experience. Everybody has different personalities, their kids gonna be different, all of that. So when you get to tell your story without somebody judging you or butting in or cutting you off, you get to say what you wanna say is, it's beautiful, because you're getting a lot off your chest and plus you getting feedback on it. You're getting different outlooks of it - you're getting like 15 people telling you different ways where they went and did some of their similar stuff and this is how they handled it. You know, just listening to some of the stories helps. For the quieter guys, they still learn, you know, 'cause you're listening" (6).

Another participant said, "They also don't come in and just teach you, they give you the information and then you talk about it, and then you're learning stuff kind of in the group, and people give feedback off each other. I've realized it's a very effective learning tool, when you are peers, and you're a more discussion group - as opposed to one-on style" (3). Another said that, "It's good to bounce ideas off the other guys - because everybody's got stories, from where they came from and where they're trying to go" (11). Other participants reported, "I think it was a nice structured group, they had good topics every week. They give you a lot of information to help you - they pass out resources and stuff - any kind of information you need to get help for your kids. And you check in first - you sit around the table, you check in, where are you struggling, do you need input or feedback. We kinda give our story for the week, then receive the information that comes back in" (7).

The educational component was also recognized by several participants. For example, one stated that, "There's a lot of good stuff in that book. Lot of good messages. You look at a lot of things that you were doing and things you could be doing and how to step it up. Because it ain't all about hollering. Because see, I grew up- I grew up with the beatings and the yelling. And I just thought it was just....you know, they got this one specific group, Discipline vs. Punishment. For a long time, I didn't know the difference. You know, it was all the same. But now I see there's a real thick line

between that. You know, it's a big difference, you know what I'm saying? So yeah, I learned a lot" (6). Another noted that, "I thought it was really good - the group format is really good. To be honest, I didn't really see some of the educational benefit until after I was done and I learned more about the logic behind how its run. But I think it gives people a lot of perspective - like for instance, I saw a lot of people learn things like "how to think like a kid." It gives you new perspective and it helps you understand where kids are coming from a little bit better" (3).

THE NEED FOR PREVIOUSLY INCARCERATED LEADERS

The single most cited theme that emerged outside of the original interview questions was the **need to have other previously incarcerated fathers in leadership and advocacy roles**, particularly in case management and mentoring. Even prior to being directly asked, nearly every single interviewee mentioned this as either a benefit to the way the program operated, or as a suggestion for how to improve programs like this in the future.

Many participants said this made them more open to participating in the program at all, particularly through meeting David, for example: "When he talks, you can tell he's been through some of this stuff that we've been through. So that automatically puts you in a comfort zone, like ok, I can open up" (6), and that "The fact that he can relate. There's a few people in the program like that. Just all those people that you know can relate to your situation. Or even maybe they weren't in it directly, but they know somebody that was. All of that matters, all that stuff matters. Because then you don't need to worry about going into a place and having people looking at you like, oh well.....just being in the situation where you know people aren't judging you and all that stuff. It just makes it a whole lot easier. You don't feel so uptight" (7), and another said, "I have seen what Dave has come from, and seen how much he has accomplished. You know, that is just off of experience, you know, it doesn't take any type of special class or anything. It is a life experience. People can relate to you more if they see that you have been through what they have been through" (4). One more participant noted that, "It's like you can look up to people like David who have been in your situation. All of that matters in the 1:1 time to have someone who has been through what you have been through" (10).

Trust was a large part in the benefit of having program advocates and volunteers who had firsthand experience with the criminal justice system. For example, one participated observed that "the thing about people in prison is, they don't trust in or believe a lot of things that they hear from people in the outside. Its kinda hard too because when you are in prison you don't really trust too many people especially people of authority, or that are considered policing you, probation officers, parole officer and things like that. But, when I was on parole, Dave and Jackie said they were going to be there for me on the outside and when I called them, they did" (1).

Many participants **urged the program to cultivate more program staff and volunteers from this perspective**. For instance, "If I were to add anything at the last minute, I'd just say that they need more people like Dave, that's really caring, you know, people that have been through the system. You know, I'm not saying that people that haven't been to prison can't understand, there're people like the families that have been through it, but they have understand. I think that's the best

way, you know, to have guys who've actually been inside, guys who've actually been through some of the struggles and pain, because, I've seen with my own two eyes people who haven't been through that incarceration part, the people who have been through that incarceration part, either way" (6). Another said that, "David has been to prison. And from what I hear from the other guys too - the people who come from that mentality - if you don't have any credibility with them, they're not going to listen to you. They think you're just another person who's going to come shoot smoke up their ass. So that's the biggest thing you can do, is have someone like David. It is key. That's the one thing - the program NEEDS to recruit people who have some sort of background so they can bring in and say - they can relate to the people in the program" (3).

One respondent told the (female) interviewer: "I don't mind talking to you, and the other guys won't mind talking to you, but you are not the reason we would come into a program. Its gotta be from someone like me, like, 'they helped me, here's what they did.' That's how other people like me will get in. It's the chain of command. It's the same in the streets. You're not going to listen to a teacher who has no idea what I'm going through. When I was a kid, I didn't like the teacher, but I did like that teacher's aide who grew up in the same neighborhood as me" (8).

STAYING OUT OF PRISON

Many of the most engaged participants described how **the program played in integral role in their dedication to avoid returning to prison, particularly through their relationships with Mind the Gap staff**. One person expressed his gratitude to the program staff as, "I think the staff here deserve...something from their higher ups. They are going above and beyond their means to help you out. For one not to take that and really reflect on that to see how hard these people are working to help you - well, that just blows my mind. Every time I come in, they've been searching on the internet all day so that when we get to Job Club there's jobs for us to look at, there's topics on the board to discuss - they sat and thought about it. I just love it. It saved my life. It helped me. I haven't gotten one violation. I walked down 18 months of parole. No interaction with the police. Nothing. And I'm still striving. I'm in a better place today because of this program" (7).

Parole Officer's approval of Mind the Gap participation was also helpful to participants. One participant said his PO: "is really gung-ho about it. He'd rather have me be down there with them all day every day if I can" (13), and another said "I was going through a lot with my PO at first, you know, and then [when I told him], 'The Goodwill, I'm going to the Goodwill,' he OK'd it. You know I mean, if I'm going to the Goodwill, he like, "Ok." Because they know what's going on here. Because there's like a thousand things to do: 'He doing something.' So, it worked out. It was obviously, like, they know who the Goodwill was and what they do" (6). Another participant said, "[My PO] had a plan for me, but when he found out I was in MTG as soon as I got out. He said ok, since you already have a plan going on, just go with them" (1).

One participant noted how he is now using Mind the Gap as a replacement to his former friends and former lifestyle: "This is way different. Because I cut off all my friends. Well, so called friends. I cut them out and I stopped drinking. I don't drink any more. Because the first time I went to prison was in '97. It was get out, throw a party, and go drinking go back to the same old ways. This time it was

like, I got older and the time started to get longer and you know, I don't want to be in that. I'd rather be broke and have my freedom than try to have money and be running" (9).

Another noted that, "Programs like this get you on a different mindset - when you're in prison, you just can't wait to get out, you want to do it all right, and then reality strikes. It's hard out here. There's no money, everybody's broke, there's no jobs - and then you're ultimately thinking, well I have to go back to what I used to do. But then there's programs like this that just keep you on that same tread - come here every day. We'll help you find work, you need clothes, we'll help you find clothes, you need food, we will be eating at 12:00. Its programs like these that give you more hope. Without this, for us thugs, it's a one way street, you want to go back to what you know" (8).

WHAT TO KEEP

When asked what parts of the program participant recommend stay exactly the same for future iterations of reentry programs, many of them mentioned the **overall structure of the program**. As one participant described, "All of it is essential. If you got a good job but things aren't right at home, that'll affect your job. If anything, maybe add more things on - I don't know what - it seems like they're touching their bases, so I don't necessarily know what. I'd say it's all equally important (6). The flexibility and breadth of the program was also a draw for participants. As one noted, "When I miss classes, it's not like you miss three and then you are out. They understood that things sometimes things happen at your job where your hours might not work with your job work around the clock. Being flexible" (1). Another reported, "I like that it's never really over - once you "finish" the program there are always other options - you can keep doing this, or do this other thing" (8).

The parenting and child support components were especially important to many participants. As one participant described it, "I'd go with the parenting. Like with the child support, because we don't get help. Like females do get a lot of help. It seems like they say they don't, but they do. We don't get no kind of help. Whatsoever. That's like our main one for I think every guy that I've talked to, is pretty much the child support. You know. How to fill out the paperwork. Where to go. What to do. You know. Stuff like that. Because like a lot of people don't know. And they're just stuck and they're like not really....they go back to hustling drugs" (9). Another participant in particular liked "The ERT - I like the way they ran it. It was grueling, but you took in so much information. I had four folders by the end of the week, just full of papers and places I could go for anything - anything. Every avenue was covered. I felt like I was safe and I could really just work on me" (7). Similarly, another participant said, "The classes - parenting, Mr. Simmon's class is a very good class, Jackie and Faith's classes - they're great people with a lot of care in their heart. That's what I would keep exactly the same. The way they run the classes - they run it very well" (13).

Finally, one participant recognized strength in the program when **participants were able to interact with staff from other agencies**: "When they bring people from the DOC and other agencies into these ceremonies, where people in the program get certificates and stuff, I think that is very, very super important. And when I go in a suit and tie, those people sometimes come up to me and assume that I work in the program. And then when I go up and do my speech, they say, wow good for you, you're really making something of yourself. And I think that's important for them to

see" (3).

Finally, as iterated many times, participants **praised the program for employing previously incarcerated men as advocates, volunteers and staff**: "The crucial point is having someone like David actually in the prison, getting their hands dirty. Maintaining the little things like bus cards - and the food. That's a big draw for people. It's another worry people don't have to have, if they are coming from work or something and they haven't had dinner yet. That was a draw for me" (3).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

It was difficult for some participants to pinpoint areas for change; for instance, one participant said, "if anyone tell you different it's because they're not applying themselves and giving it their all. The program seriously is perfect. I give credit to the people here for my success - or it's not success yet - but for the steps I've taken thus far, I give them all props" (6). Yet, there were some suggestions for improvement, and the most common responses were for increased case management, expanded services (particularly housing and employment), and for increased outreach, marketing, and recruiting.

All of the participants were **confident in their relationship with their case manager, and many recommended this role be expanded in future programs**. As one participant described, "Yeah, keep Dave where exactly he is at, maybe give him a raise or something, he is a good guy -- he really is.....I really think they need more. I really think they do need more people like Dave to go out to the prisons and talk to the people, so when they come out, the big thing is: prison is really not the hard part. It's the easy part. But getting out and getting back to society, if you don't have a job, if you don't have a place to stay, finding a place to stay - if you don't have resources, then you are going to go back to your old ways, it is so easy to do what you are used to doing, compared to doing what you don't do. So they have more people because there are always more inmates than there is programs. So yeah, I think they need more people in Dave's position to help out" (1).

Similarly, another participant said: "David needs an assistant. It's a ton of stuff he does. People at the top need to understand that people like him are CRUCIAL to the program. They need people to do the clerical stuff, so that people like David can help with immediate stuff for the people in the program. He's got a passion for it. It drives the program. If you don't have people working for it who are excited about it, it's nothing. He's a salesperson. He can get people here" (3). A third simply said, "Make some more Davids" (2), while another participant said: "I think they need to add more people like David. Because even though he is my case manager there, he'll call me over the week - he is open to help anybody - and that's what people like myself need. Someone like him. Personally, I haven't had too many people care throughout my life - and Dave - I basically consider him like my big brother. He's always there when I need him. No matter if it's small or large, he is there" (13).

In terms of **expanding employment services and adding housing services**, some participants had some recommendations, such as: "I wish I had better assistance with housing. You know, housing. The employment, you know, is pretty much you work in the field and, you know, it's like a toss of the coin with employment, you know. But housing, I wish it was more hands-on there. (So

what do they usually do for housing assistance?) Pretty much nothing....refer you somebody. You know, it's pretty much nothing they can do. There's no money for it" (6). Another participant said, "I would add more educational components, sort of more practical and skills based stuff. Maybe for those who have finished the classes in the program. If the program is trying to produce better citizens, you want to make them feel better about themselves, and equip them with things that can make them feel better about themselves. So that would be nice to have" (3). Another interviewee recommended that, "The most important thing is helping people just get out and find jobs. If it would be possible that they could pick up a contract with a company, as far as helping employ people who just get out of prison, you know, monthly or whatever, according to how many people that you need. If we could set up something like helping set up something like the temporary agencies, you know something similar to that" (1).

The **schedule of program components was a bit of a struggle** for a few participants. Of those, one participant said: "Have it more than one day a week. I think this group, this group was very well planned, and the main curriculum that they go out of, all of that, that's a big book, and that's a lot of information in it, so if we had more classes, like more than once a week, that's what I'd change, let people come in when they want. I'd just have an open office, 'cause people need people every day! You go through things every day especially when you're just getting out, it's a big struggle" (6), and another said, "The hours. Not change them, but have different hours for different people that, you know, because in the job schedule some people work all night and then they got to stay up all day. And so probably add more hours like one group in morning and then afternoon and one the late afternoon. Just kind of stagger them" (9). Another participant noted, "It's hard for me to attend, because I work 9-5, Monday through Friday - so my biggest roadblock in the program was the hours. They did have one at night I was able to go through and finish the program up" (3).

One participant also expressed that he wished the program was longer: "I think it should be longer - 16 or 20 weeks, to keep the person in a routine. That's why I come back every Wednesday - I don't need to come back, I finished my program. But every time I come I take something away that is positive and good. It keeps me focused and grounded. You have to be ready to accept the program and be real with the program and yourself" (7).

Another respondent also expressed a need for **more documentation to assist him with his relationship with his parole officer**: "I wish there was more the program could do to tell your PO that you are doing well in the program. I know that it's confidential here between us and my PO and the program, the program doesn't have to tell my PO where I am, but it would help me out. So, like I said today I would be here and it could be just bullshit to him. But let's say for today, if you could like, call him and confirm I was here, it would help. It wouldn't help dramatically, but it would show him that I am doing extra. Like the more certificates I could bring him, paperwork, any documentation that shows I'm not just running the streets. I work and do side jobs, but I can't always get documentation for that either. So the more documentation I can show that I'm doing positive things, the better" (8).

Some participants wanted **more outreach** - for example, one recommended. "They should do more

advertising. Because it really does help” (9), and another said, “Instead of just having it at Faribault, go to more of the prisons just so people know it’s out there. Prior to meeting Dave, I didn’t even know it existed” (13).

RECRUITING NEW PARTICIPANTS

Those experienced in the Mind the Gap program had solid recommendations for what they believed to be the most effective way to recruit and retain new participants. Overwhelmingly, the recommendation was to **continue in-person, one-on-one initial contact prior to release from prison**: “I think in prison is the best way. When you're free and you haven't been locked up, you don't appreciate programs like this .you don't have any idea of the help that's available. But when you're in there and then you know you need help, and there's a program like this - it just does all kind of stuff to help you be successful. But out here, free people, I don't think they get it” (6).

Another recommended the same strategy, but emphasized again that **recruitment must come from a relatable person**: “Just go in 1:1. Just go in there and keep it real with the person in there. That’s what drew me to it. Now if someone would have come in and said they got my name off the county thing and they were someone talking NOT like I talk, I woulda just tuned them out, like, I don't want nothing to do with that, I don't care what you talking about. Cause you know, it makes you feel like [MTG] they have your best interests at heart and it’s not like fake, like oh, we’re doing this so we can fund our program and all that stuff” (7). Another said, “I’d say the same way that David reached out to me. Just one on one. I mean he came down there, he visited me, he talked to me. Told me about program, the things that they offer” (5).

When directly asked about materials to promote the program, participants were a bit dismissive of anything beyond in-person recruitment. As one participant said, “It's very hard to recruit people because its someone’s mindset - either they’re going to ask for help or they’re not going to ask for help. And I really don’t think you are going to change that mindset by a video or something” (3), and another said, “Movies or flyers or presentations won’t work. Maybe you could get more people to come in....That probably seems like the best - you’re getting a one on one prison presentation of it.” (6).

One participant thought that hearing testimony - in whatever form - from other participants would help: “If you put an interview like this one on a screen with more people in the program, they would be able to visualize - me as a person - as a work in progress - where I’ve been, where I’m at today, and where I’m going” (7). In the same vein, another participant emphasized the use of having incarcerated and previously incarcerated fathers tell one another about the program: “Word of mouth in the prison is good. Word of mouth is BIG in prison. The people inside know which people are which, and who they are going to tell. Let’s say you get across to one person that is a little hardcore, and he tells his friends - but they’ve heard it from him - so now THEY think it’s cool. I think that’s the most effective way. A video or something is a waste of money. You need to give people hope when they are still inside. They are going to be facing a lot when they get out. Somebody who’s been on the street a long time, they don’t have a lot of hope. So how can you blame them for going back?” (3).

CONCLUSION

In a review of “what works” in prisoner reentry programming, Joan Petersilia (2004) establishes that successful programs should be community-based (but begin in prison), intensive and at least months-long, and be shaped to the individual cognitive and behavioral needs of individuals in these programs. In addition, she recommends that this intensive-individualized approach eventually be supplemented with educational and vocational opportunities as individuals changed their thinking patterns.¹

Similarly, the information collected from Mind the Gap participants points to the value of intensive programming that is able to adjust to the individual needs of each person returning home from prison. As the participants noted, the holistic and flexible nature of the program was important and helpful to those in the program, as was intensive case management and the addition of vocational assistance once more immediate needs were met.

These interviews also yielded some new information, however. In particular, it was extremely important to participants to note the value of having previously incarcerated leaders, mentors, and volunteers involved in Mind the Gap. For participants, this added legitimacy to the goals and practices of the program, increased their likelihood of involvement, and helped to create a more accepting and comfortable space.

The addition of Child Support advocacy was also important to the participants, particularly in dispelling myths around child support practices, as well as improving the overall perception of Child Support Officers in the eyes of participants. The information from the interviews points to the connection between these two trends – that the more a previously incarcerated father learned about how the system operates, the more likely they were to change their perception of Child Support Officers into a more positive one.

Finally, participants who received Mind the Gap services simply wanted *more* of everything: more contact with other men who had been through similar experiences, more time in the program overall, and more opportunities to participate in Mind the Gap activities, meetings, and ceremonies. For many of the men interviewed here, being part of Mind the Gap was a badge of honor and a positive identity marker, signaling to themselves and others that they were committed to making positive change.

¹ Petersilia, Joan. 2004. “What Works in Prisoner Reentry? Reviewing and Questioning the Evidence.” *Federal Probation*, 62(2), p. 4-8. <http://www.seweb.uci.edu/users/joan/Images/WhatWorks.pdf>

#	Program Enter	Program Exit	Age	Race	Inc more than once	Did Mentoring	Did Job Club	Has a Job	Did Parenting Group	First time in a program	Paying Child Support
1	6/2011	1/2012	43	AFA	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
2	1//2011	1/2012	35	AFA	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
3	5/2010	1/2012	34	W	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	2/2012	N/A	31	AFA	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
5	3/2012	N/A	30	MR	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
6	7/2010	1/2012	36	AFA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
7	11/2010	9/2011	45	AFA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	12/2011	4/2012	31	H	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
9	10/2010	4/2012	34	H	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Some
10	5/2011	N/A	34	AFA	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	1/2012	4/2012	33	AFA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
12	1/2012	N/A	37	AFA	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	7/2012	N/A	30	W	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
14	4/2012	N/A	27	AFA	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
15	2/2012	N/A	35	W	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No