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## Ex-con re-entry study coming

AUSTIN — Backed by the White House and boosted by \$4 million from the Charles Koch Foundation, a new way to introduce former inmates back into society will soon be tested in Dallas.

"Safe Streets and Second Chances," a randomized prison re-entry pilot program, will measure how to reduce recidivism and lower costs by providing former offenders with individually tailored services to help keep them from falling back into a life of crime.

The study will roll out April 16 and last 15 months. About 1,100 former inmates exiting 40 prisons across four states, including Florida, Louisiana and Texas, will be enrolled. In Texas, the program will be tested in Hood and Hunt counties in addition to Dallas.

Some of the nation's top conservative policymakers — including President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner — as well as Kansas-based billionaire industrialist brothers Charles and David Koch, have backed the project, which builds on a decade of growing bipartisan support for improving America's criminal justice system.



"Over 95 percent of incarcerated people are going to come out and re-enter society. They're going to come out and be our neighbors," says Dallas investor and GOP megadonor Doug Deason. The goal, he said, is to help them succeed "so they don't

Doug Deason, a Dallas investor and GOP megadonor, hopes the study will yield a re-entry model that will one day be scalable in red and blue states, urban and rural areas across America.

Improving the lives of formerly incarcerated people, he said, should be a goal on which everyone can agree.

"Over 95 percent of incarcerated people are going to come out and re-enter society. They're going to come out and be our neighbors," Deason told *The Dallas Morning News*. "The whole point in this huge cycle of recidivism is to prepare people who have made a mistake to re-enter society so they don't prey on us."

### Five key ingredients'

Carrie Pettus-Davis, a criminal justice researcher and an assistant professor at Washington University in St. Louis, will lead the program. Her methodology for the study is based on elevating the "five key ingredients to successful re-entry" for every ex-offender — healthy thinking patterns, meaningful work trajectories, effective coping strategies, positive social engagement and positive interpersonal relationships.

Using this model, Pettus-Davis and her research teams will provide one group of participants with personalized services that will be tweaked based on individual need. The other group will be given services that are already available locally. The researchers will then measure whether and by how much specialized services result in a marked improvement in quality of life and reduce recidivism.

Re-entry specialists said people released from prison often either lack services or have access to the wrong ones. Maybe someone has a great employment history but severe substance abuse problems, or he is stable mentally but has no work experience, Pettus-Davis said.

In Texas, the prison system supports the project. Although local officials aren't directly involved, a spokesman for Dallas said the city backs "programs that reduce recidivism and help the formerly incarcerated to reintegrate into the community and lead healthy, productive lives."

### **'We're nationally unique'**

Dallas was a natural test site, Pettus-Davis said, because while it's well ahead of the curve on providing re-entry services, it deals with the same challenge most big cities face — a large population of former offenders.



Christina Melton Crain, former chairwoman of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and founder of Unlocking DOORS. (Rose Baca/Staff Photographer)

"Dallas already has some great work going on, and then also it is an urban community that has challenges," she said. "The Dallas community also seems very receptive to innovation."

Every year, up to 14,000 ex-inmates return home to the area. But 1 in 5 people released from Texas prisons end up back there within three years, the most recent state recidivism data shows.

Those numbers are better than a decade ago, when the rate was more than 1 in 4. But Christina Crain, a former Texas prison official who operates Unlocking DOORS, a re-entry services network based in Dallas, said the state can do better and hopes Safe Streets and Second Chances can help.

"Dallas should be very grateful and pleased that we're being selected as one of the sites," Crain said this week. "There's always room for improvement."

When it comes to re-entry, Texas has a leg up on many other states thanks in part to Crain's nonprofit, which she called "nationally unique."

Unlocking DOORS doesn't provide services but acts as a network or "broker" for ex-prisoners seeking help. Founded seven years ago, the organization will help anyone 18 and older who has a criminal history to connect with job providers, mental health specialists, drug abuse counselors and more. For a \$5 fee (which is waived if the participant can't afford it), Unlocking DOORS connects these men and women with one or more of the 218 service providers in its network.

Crain said she hopes the work she's done in Texas to expand re-entry services will provide Pettus-Davis with a good foundation for her study. The women have been working to identify Texas providers who will fit the "five ingredients" model.

"We don't want to live in a community that is not safe. We don't want people to come out and not be given the ability to do better, because we know what will happen if they don't," Crain, a conservative, said. "It's probably one of the few issues that both sides of the political

aisle can agree on — and there aren't very many."

### 'Gold standard'

The idea behind Safe Streets and Second Chances was first pitched at a bipartisan policymakers meeting at the White House last fall by Kushner, who has focused on criminal justice issues since his father was convicted of making illegal campaign contributions.

A small group of interested parties — including Kushner, Koch Industries general counsel Mark Holden and Brooke Rollins, who was leading the right-leaning think tank the Texas Public Policy Foundation — then began to hold weekly calls and exchange emails on the subject. Soon after, the Koch Foundation agreed to provide a \$4 million grant for the re-entry pilot program that would become Pettus-Davis' project.

Holden said he hoped the re-entry pilot would result in a "gold standard" that could be scaled up nationwide, especially in red states, where the Kochs have advocated for policy changes such as lowering penalties for nonviolent and drug crimes, banning rules that exclude certain felons from jobs and changing civil asset forfeiture laws.

"We're going to need to change the laws and policies in

some states, especially conservative ones," Holden told *The News* in an interview. "And with the White House championing it, it's going to be very helpful from a policy perspective."

The Koch Foundation has funded dozens of criminal justice initiatives in recent years, but its involvement hasn't come without criticism.

Groups such as UnKoch My Campus have accused the Kochs of profiting off of private prisons and supporting programs that inaccurately promise to lower crime rates based on faulty academic data. Next week, the group plans to release a study that calls Safe Streets and Second Chances an attempt to "leverage Koch's research into policy change."

Crain, of Unlocking DOORS, and Pettus-Davis have both received funding from the Koch Foundation, UnKoch My Campus pointed out, and

organizations such as the Texas Public Policy Foundation, Right on Crime and re-entry service providers in Texas also have ties to the Kochs.

But Holden denied that the Kochs were profiting off the re-entry pilot program and others like it, saying everyone benefits when the nation isn't wasting its "human potential." And criminal justice advocates shrugged off the criticisms, lauding Pettus-Davis' methodology and noting that such programs also enjoyed bipartisan support under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

"Count me in as a supporter of this idea. It's exciting," said Stefan LoBulgio, director of corrections and re-entry at the Council of State Governments Justice Center. "The Koch brothers have a good track record.

"They are a leader in the field."



Charles Koch speaks in his office at Koch Industries in Wichita, Kan. The Koch Foundation is providing a \$4 million grant for the re-entry pilot program. (File Photo/The Associated Press)