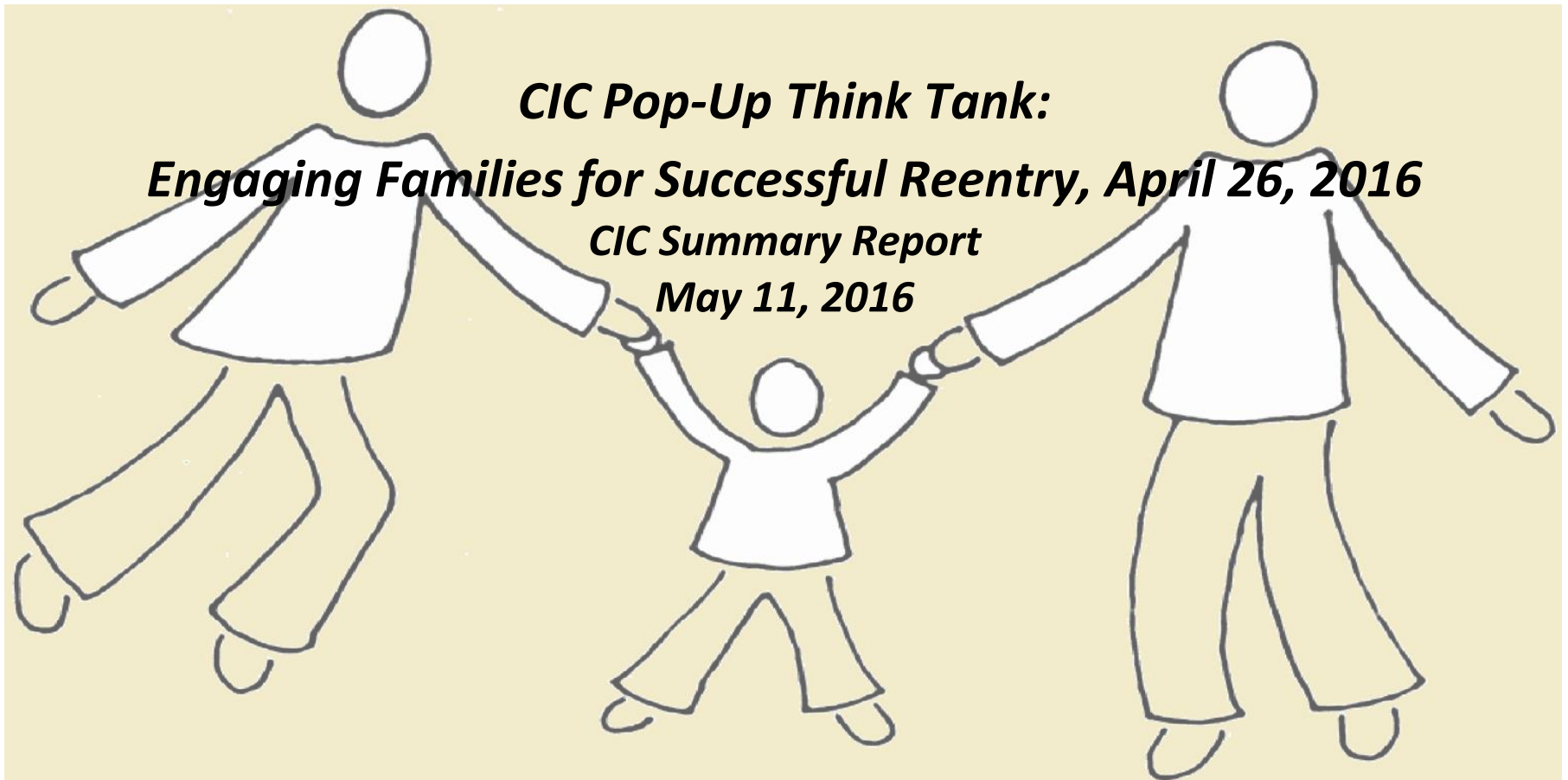


CIC | DC Corrections Information Council



## Introduction

In observance of National Reentry Week, the DC Corrections Information Council (CIC) conducted its first “Pop-Up Think Tank” on April 26, 2016 entitled “Engaging Families for Successful Reentry.” This event convened approximately 30 family members, formerly incarcerated DC residents, municipal partners, and community leaders to work towards the goal of improving family engagement. The objective of this interactive think tank was to create strategies that build upon existing practices and leverage available resources. In contrast with most round table discussions, the think tank encouraged active participation from all attendees to develop a concrete product: a community-driven report that details specific recommendations towards strengthening family engagement.

*What better way to ensure the future success of this city than to reunite families displaced by incarceration? ...Help keep DC safe and thriving by committing to its residents and their children.*

*-Participant*

## Background

The CIC is an independent monitoring body mandated by the US Congress and the DC Council to inspect, monitor, and report on the conditions of confinement at facilities where DC residents are incarcerated. As a part of its strategic planning process, the CIC determined that one of its strategies to engage the community would

be to facilitate “Pop-Up Think Tanks” that provide members of the DC community with a forum to discuss specific issues regarding incarcerated DC residents.

With approximately 5,000 DC residents incarcerated in federal prison facilities and 2800 residents returning to the community annually<sup>1</sup>, the need for strong community and family ties for incarcerated residents is both great and urgent. For its first “Pop-Up Think Tank,” the CIC built upon the theme of National Reentry Week (April 24-30, 2016) by focusing on family engagement and its role in the reentry process. The conceptualization of this event included two key tenets: 1) that “family” extends beyond biological relations and encompasses various support networks, and 2) that these networks play a crucial role in securing the successful reentry of incarcerated individuals.



Facilitation and report by  
CIC Program Analysts  
Lashonia-Thompson-El,  
Tiffany Culley,  
and Laura de las Casas.

<sup>1</sup> George Washington University, *Data Assessment of Mayor’s Office of Returning Citizen Affairs (MORCA)*, Dec. 2015, p. 21.

## Key Findings

Analysis of think tank discussion items revealed several key findings:

1. **Visitation:** The majority of participants identified the difficulty of visitation as a key barrier to family engagement. Even though 74% of DC residents are located in facilities within 500 miles of DC, many of these facilities are not accessible by public transportation and require additional resources for visitation. Strategies identified to overcome this barrier include providing transportation to families for visitation and utilizing technology to improve communication when in-person visitation is not possible.
2. **Technology:** When asked to provide examples of promising practices in existence that facilitate family engagement, participants discussed the effectiveness of the CSOSA Community Resource Day, which provides reentry information to DC inmates via videoconferencing. Additionally, there is currently video conferencing available to women at SFF Hazelton through a program facilitated by Hope House and CSOSA. SFF Hazelton is also implementing a pilot program to expand video conferencing options to include Skype. Other technological services that facilitate communication include Fotopigeon and Phone Donkey.



3. **Information Sharing:** In addition to strategies that promote visitation, participants also focused on developing resources for incarcerated individuals and their families. One suggested resource was a toolkit that explains how to access services from various DC agencies, such as Hope House services and the Mayor's Office of Returning Citizens Affairs (MORCA) transportation services. Participants also suggested providing education to family members on the unique procedures DC residents experience when they are incarcerated.
4. **Post-Release Opportunities:** Successful family reunification oftentimes hinges on the individual's ability to become a productive citizen and contribute to the welfare of his or her family. Many resources that participants identified as crucial to advancing family engagement strategies involved employment opportunities and housing. While these resources may not guarantee family reunification, the think tank's prioritization of employment and housing demonstrates a holistic and long-term vision of successful reentry.
5. **Oversight:** Participants expressed the need for an oversight entity that has enforcement power to ensure strategies that promote family engagement can be successfully implemented. This strategy also encompassed the recommendation of creating a DC liaison to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) to address DC specific issues and concerns regarding conditions of confinement in federal facilities.

## Methodology

The CIC “Pop-Up Think Tank” consisted of five steps that included identifying barriers to family engagement, existing promising practices, strategies to improve family engagement, resources needed, and communication tactics.

At the beginning of the session, attendees received color-coded notecards that corresponded with each of the five steps. Participants were asked to write their ideas down on the notecards which were then posted on the walls throughout the room. Once each set of notecards was posted, the CIC summarized the responses and facilitated a group discussion on select topics. The group then moved through each subsequent step by completing additional notecards and participating in the facilitated discussion.

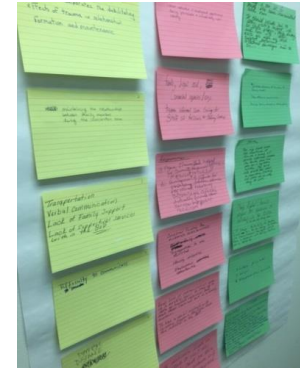
The CIC decided to use a combination of written and verbal feedback to ensure that each attendee had an opportunity to provide input. After the think tank activities were completed, the CIC compiled, coded, and analyzed the data provided by the participants and then drafted the key findings and recommendations found in this report.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the think tank findings, the CIC recommends the following:

- Transfer DC inmates who are within 12-18 months of release to the Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF) to allow for family reunification, connection to community resources, and development of a comprehensive reentry plan.

- Develop a toolkit with information about existing resources to assist incarcerated residents and their families. Information may include how to use technology for communication and accessing resources provided by DC agencies.
- Expand access to video visitation options (such as Skype) for incarcerated DC residents to connect with family and community resource providers.
- Develop additional resources and services for the entire family unit that include family and individual counseling, academic support, job training, and employment opportunities.



The CIC would like to thank all of the family members of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals who shared their experiences, challenges, and recommendations with us. We thank our board members and our partners who are united in our desire to help create a humane justice system by improving family engagement strategies for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Please visit our website at [cic.dc.gov](http://cic.dc.gov) for announcements about future “Pop-Up Think Tanks” that will develop innovative and effective strategies towards improving the conditions of confinement for incarcerated DC residents.