

## PRISM Project Summary

### Planning the PRISM Study:

#### *Are PRISON libraries Motivators of pro-social behavior and successful re-entry?*

October 6, 2020

Frustrated with the lack of research to implement evidence-based library services, Diane Walden, then-Coordinator of Institutional Library Development (ILD) at Colorado State Library (CSL), developed a plan to do a prison library impact study in 2017, with three hypotheses:

1. Prison libraries have a positive impact on prisoners' prosocial behavior during incarceration.
2. Prisoners who use the prison library have a lower rate of recidivism.
3. Prison libraries can break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration.

Support was obtained from Gene Hainer, Colorado Department of Education (CDE) Assistant Commissioner of the State Library, and Rick Raemisch, Executive Director of Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC). Diane was prepared to serve as the project coordinator. She sought the advice and research expertise of Keith Lance of RSL Research Group, who was in the process of creating a survey to measure stakeholder satisfaction with the Institutional Library Development team at the time. They decided to submit a grant proposal for a planning grant rather than a research grant after confirming there was limited research in the niche of correctional libraries and realizing there would be a steep learning curve to prepare a survey instrument and research design. Jim Duncan and Sara Wright from Colorado Library Consortium (CLiC) joined the planning team after it was discovered that CDE had a policy of not supporting planning grants. CLiC served as the fiscal agent, Sara and Diane became project co-directors, and Keith represented RSL Research Group as the principal investigator.

The team submitted a preliminary proposal to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in January 2018 with a laser focus on determining library impact on prosocial behavior and successful re-entry. They were invited to submit a full proposal, which included the [PRISM grant proposal narrative](#). The one-year planning project was funded by IMLS's Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian grant program and began in September 2018.

One of the first actions, in the Fall of 2018, was to form an advisory committee. Announcements about the project were read at CDOC roll calls, shared on library listservs, and posted in parole offices and re-entry service provider locations. Individuals were chosen to represent public libraries, academic libraries, correctional libraries, other correctional programs, re-entry organizations, and social service agencies. Most importantly, men and women who had transitioned from prison to their community were included to ensure a first-hand review of activities and resulting work product. The dedication and contributions of the Advisory Committee cannot be overstated.

Originally, the project design relied heavily on the CDOC as the primary partner. As first conceived, the planned study assumed having access to individual-level CDOC data on people

currently incarcerated and having permission to conduct a survey and focus group interviews of those incarcerated individuals. When the preliminary proposal was submitted, the authors had a firm commitment of support from CDOC. With interim administrators in place after the retirements of State Librarian Gene Hainer and CDOC Director Raemisch, that support evaporated. In further negotiations with CDOC between December 2018 and February 2019, it became clear that CDOC would not be participating in the project or providing access to its individual-level data or those incarcerated in CDOC prisons. Ironically, the very agency that promoted evidence-based practices denied the research request that would have provided the evidence.

The PRISM planning project underwent a dramatic shift from its original conception. In March 2019, representatives of the grantee, the Colorado Library Consortium, and the Colorado State Library, negotiated an extension of the grant through December 2020 to allow time to redesign the planning project. In April 2019, project staff representing CLiC, CSL, contractor RSL Research Group, and new planning team member Carol Peebles of Remerg, a clearinghouse website for non-profit organizations and government agencies which address the needs of formerly incarcerated people re-entering the community, negotiated a redesign of the project, described in the [PRISM planning project change request](#).

In the redesigned planning project, the pivotal partner role was assumed by Remerg, the research subjects changed from people currently incarcerated to those recently released, and the ultimate data focus changed from anticipated outcomes of prison library use to outcomes of prison library use that those recently released actually experienced. While the loss of access to CDOC data on individuals during their incarceration precluded a real-world, “hard data” analysis of documented consequences of library use during incarceration—an approach analogous to that followed in decades of school library impact studies—the shift to collecting first-person outcome data and personal stories directly from individuals after release—and, pointedly, after actually experiencing outcomes—brought this project’s design into closer agreement with the Project Outcome paradigm well-established with public libraries and being adopted by academic libraries.

One of the early postings on the prison-l listserv garnered the attention of Robin O’Hanlon, who volunteered to produce a literature review from a nascent list of annotated references created by CSL staff. Advisory committee members shared additional research they found as part of project or personal activities. RSL Research Group’s Marcia J. Rodney advised Robin, and the [PRISM prison libraries literature review](#) is the result.

During its final stages in Spring and Summer 2020, the project experienced minor delays associated with the global coronavirus pandemic, though they were overcome readily by the project team’s and advisory committee’s longstanding reliance on online meetings. For example, review sessions to vet survey and focus group questions with individuals who have experienced incarceration might have been conducted face-to-face; but were conducted online instead. The [PRISM survey](#) and the [PRISM research design](#) were completed. Listservs and networks were used to locate potential library and re-entry partner organizations. Each one

that indicated interest was asked to estimate the number of previously incarcerated clients they might reach.

The survey and the research design were provided to IntegReview, an independent review board, to ensure the protection of human research subjects in compliance with 45 CFR 46. The board determined that the study was exempted research and the informed consent was adequate as noted on the [PRISM IRB exempt determination](#).

Rochelle Logan, of Rochelle Logan Consulting, was contracted to do an independent evaluation of the planning project. The [PRISM independent evaluation](#) describes the results of the surveys administered to potential partner organizations and the PRISM advisory committee members. She concluded the research is needed and the proposed PRISM study is viable, although it is unclear whether current partners can be kept engaged until the research proposal receives funding.

Find all documents submitted to the [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#) under award number LG-97-18-0127-18.

It is the hope of the planning team that the Colorado State Library Institutional Library Development unit will be able to apply for a research grant to measure the impact of prison libraries on people who are incarcerated, and that other researchers will seek to replicate their results. It is the hope of the catalyst of this planning grant that research will eventually be designed to test the last of those original hypotheses and determine whether prison libraries can reduce intergenerational incarceration.

For additional information, contact [institutional\\_libraries@cde.state.co.us](mailto:institutional_libraries@cde.state.co.us).