

USC Institute for Justice and Journalism Story Behind the Story

Re-entry series

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My initial project proposal was a piece on so-called "technical" probation and parole violators who are reimprisoned for breaking probation or parole rules rather than breaking new laws. After attending the first half of the IJJ program and interviewing more Virginia officials, I learned the problem was not nearly as pressing as I had been led to believe.

Nevertheless, it was still a story. I had to rush it a bit since a new law was taking effect in Virginia and I anticipated other media to be doing stories. The new law set up voluntary guidelines for judges to use in sentencing technical violators.

I then decided to do a larger effort concerning prisoner re-entry in general. I talked to probation and parole officials and prisoner support groups in order to get the names of some parolees who would be interested in being interviewed about the difficulties of making it on the outside – and what their views were on what else could be done to ease the transition. I came up with a great candidate from the Virginia chapter of Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants. I spent a day with the parolee, at his home and on the job.

Transition facilities were visited and officials with the Department of Corrections and non-government agencies were interviewed along with probation and parole officers. This project also moved faster than I had hoped since it became clear another Virginia newspaper was working on a similar one.

I received a great deal of support and encouragement from the management here and was able to make frequent use of the photo staff leading to some compelling, pre-dawn photos of a parolee headed to an employment agency where he hoped to pick up a days' work.

Once the stories were written I sat down with an editor and page designer to work out how the stories and photos would be displayed over the two days the package ran.