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PROJECT SEEKS TO CUT RECIDIVISM AMONG FORMER PRISONERS

Chicago, August 27, 2008 – Two-thirds of former prisoners in Illinois are convicted of another crime within three years of their release from prison. The state’s first comprehensive program to reduce recidivism among returning prisoners will seek to cut that number dramatically.

A new \$5 million grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation will support Safer Return, a project by the Safer Foundation to target recidivism in Chicago’s Garfield Park neighborhood, which has one of the highest concentrations of former prisoners in Illinois. The initiative is among the nation’s first efforts to engage the entire community in addressing the needs of returning prisoners. The goal is to cut the recidivism rate by half while improving the ability of neighborhood groups to help returning prisoners and to improve public safety for residents.

“Reducing recidivism holds great promise to improve lives and communities,” said MacArthur President Jonathan Fanton. “This is one of the most comprehensive efforts to provide coordinated, community-based services to returning prisoners to determine what works in preventing recidivism.”

The Urban Institute will receive a second grant of \$1.5 million to evaluate the prisoner re-entry project and determine its costs and benefits. Safer Return will offer a coordinated approach to community-based services, such as mentoring, health care, treatment for drug and alcohol dependency, transitional housing, and job preparedness, placement, and transitional employment. Program staff will partner with parole agents to help the prisoners complete parole and successfully reintegrate in the community. Historically, such services have been neither readily available nor well-coordinated. Returning prisoners who volunteer to participate in this demonstration project will undergo individual assessments that guide development of a customized and coordinated reintegration road map.

Safer Return will address shortcomings in the re-entry process through partnerships among organizations and approaches that build community capacity, including:

- Illinois Department of Corrections parole officers will be based in Garfield Park and work closely with community-based groups and service agencies that help prisoners.
- The Safer Foundation will develop a case management plan for returning prisoners while they are still incarcerated. It will act as an intermediary between the returning prisoners, service providers, and community groups to make sure they are receiving

appropriate counseling, gaining job skills, and meeting other benchmarks for progress over three years.

- Employment training and placement opportunities are available immediately upon release. One of Safer Return's components is an innovative Civic Community Works model aimed at improving community infrastructure and teaching hard skills to participants engaged in public works projects.
- Welcome Home Panels, including representatives of local law enforcement, the families of returning prisoners, and community and religious leaders, will meet with the prisoners prior to their release to help ease their reintegration into the community.
- Former prisoners and local neighbors will mentor returning prisoners. Mentoring has been shown to significantly decrease recidivism and increase social support networks.
- The Urban Institute will conduct a cost-benefit analysis and closely track the project, interviewing prisoners, collecting data, and suggesting improvements.

The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates among Western nations, with 2.2 million people behind bars. Nationally, 650,000 prisoners are released each year – an average of 1,780 people a day. In Illinois, 39,031 prisoners were released from state facilities in 2005.

Research shows that current policies are not adequately addressing the recidivism problem. A 2005 city commission and a 2006 gubernatorial commission both called for a community-based demonstration project to explore solutions to the problems of prisoner re-entry. Safer Return is a product of those calls for more research and action. The demonstration project was planned and developed in conjunction with the state Department of Corrections. Evidence from the Garfield Park project could be used by state officials to help shape specific policy and budget recommendations.

So far, about 96 percent of the former prisoners who are expected to return to Garfield Park in the next two years have volunteered to participate in Safer Return. The West Side neighborhood is also part of the MacArthur-funded New Communities Program, the nation's largest community and economic development effort, which seeks to revitalize 16 high-poverty Chicago communities.

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Press contact: Susan Richardson, (312) 726-8000, ssrichar@macfound.org