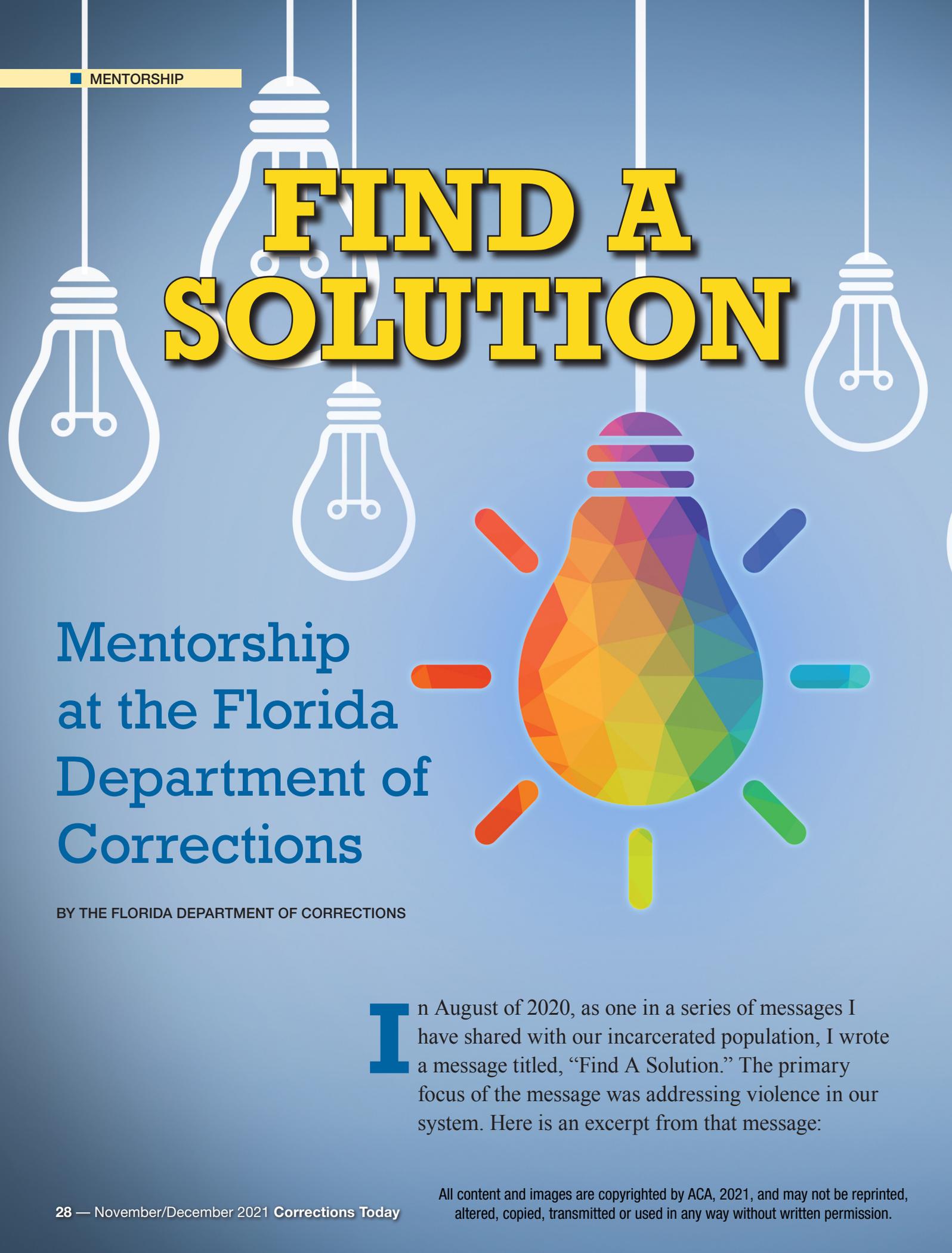


# FIND A SOLUTION



## Mentorship at the Florida Department of Corrections

BY THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

**I**n August of 2020, as one in a series of messages I have shared with our incarcerated population, I wrote a message titled, “Find A Solution.” The primary focus of the message was addressing violence in our system. Here is an excerpt from that message:



*I want to ask for your help first with just one program we are designing to address violence against new short-sentenced inmates. We will start a program this year for most of the 7,000 inmates that annually come into our system for less than a year. You know this group. They came to your dorm five months ago, never really fit in, were probably manipulated by some, perhaps assaulted by others, and have already left the prison with the worst experience of their life. More than half unfortunately will come back after reoffending, for much longer sentences. Maybe this is your story.*

*Instead of sending these novice inmates to your dorm, we are going to take a different approach. We are going to hold them at our reception centers (or other locations) for their entire sentence, separate from longer-term general population. We will design and provide education and mentorship programs specifically focused on this group to get them back home on the right track, hopefully never to return. Here's my question. What should we teach, what should this mentorship program look like, and who should be their mentors?*

*I wouldn't be asking these questions if we had not already concluded that the best solution, the best program, will come with your participation. Many of us believe that there is a core group of long-term or life-sentenced men and women, that have learned some of life's hardest lessons. This group has many that, in their heart, now have a sincere desire to help others.*

*We believe, if given the opportunity, that enough of you will step forward to help build this program and serve as mentors for this challenging group of young inmates cycling through our system.*

*Are you someone that would want to be a part of creating and taking part in this solution? If so, contact your classification officer and let them know your interest. Give them something in writing explaining why you would want to be part of the solution, and what you have to offer. You will also need the endorsement of your warden. We will initially select 8 men and 2 women to be part of our design team, working with FDC staff from our Institutions leadership, and Program and Re-entry Division. As we get a better idea on the required size of the inmate mentorship cadre, and select those candidates, these first ten men and women will help design the training program for the mentors and will be key in training the mentorship cadre and getting this program up and running.*

*TODAY, are there ten of you that will step forward to help design this program for short-sentenced inmates? TODAY, are there perhaps one hundred of you that will raise your hand to serve as mentors and share your life's lessons to these young men and women, showing them a better future? TODAY, are there perhaps one thousand of you that have really thought about our challenges with violence and victimization, and will pull out pen and paper to forward ideas and solutions to me on how to disrupt and marginalize those still committed to criminal activity? Do you have solutions on how we can approach and bring change to those predators, that perhaps do not know how to change the present course in their lives? Can we build a realistic path for redemption and a second chance for all those willing to take the first step away from violence?*

**“**  
Being part of this initiative has encouraged me and has given me a sense of optimism and fulfillment, which has greatly impacted my life. Helping mentees navigate the prison system by encouraging positive living and influencing right choices by sharing my personal experience has been the most uplifting, rewarding work I have ever done. — L. Barthel  
**”**

**“**  
I envision this initiative growing so that it's not only for inmates with short sentences, but for all inmates who have a mindset to change for the better all across the state.  
— D. Williams  
**”**



Fast forward one year later, Deputy Secretary Ricky Dixon and I sat with nine members of the Design Team, along with our remarkable program and security staff, to gather their impressions of our new short-sentenced inmate program. This was our second time meeting together, having first met at the initial design conference in October 2020. My personal charge to the team was to put no constraints on their ideas and planning, to make this program more than any of us could ever imagine. I quickly realized upon meeting again, they had accepted our challenge!

As this incredible group of men and women recounted their initial efforts and impressions, followed by their recommendations for the future, we concluded this story needed to be told in their words, not by me or our program

“ Secretary Inch’s vision for mentor units brings the best of both worlds together; staff and mentors working together for a safer, restorative corrections experience, and ultimately safer communities. — T. Conrad ”

staff. I hope you can hear the authenticity of their story, and their experience. As you look at the picture of the members of the Design Team and assess their posture, the look in their eyes, and then mentally extend that image out to the 179 life and long-sentenced inmates that volunteered and joined the mentor cadre, I hope you can sense something truly amazing is happening in the Florida Department of Corrections in the lives of our short-sentenced inmates and those that answered the call to mentor.

While we have been committed to being a positive influence on those we encounter, we were shocked and a little wary when we were selected to design a model that would meet Secretary Inch’s goal of establishing mentoring communities for individuals incarcerated in a Florida prison for the first time, with sentences of one year or less.

### Design

In designing mentoring communities, we wanted to create a positive, safe and structured environment that would avoid the slippery slope of institutionalization. Staff worked alongside us, helping us to work through

## Inmate Mentorship Program Curriculum Design Team



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## What is emphasized is community concepts standard among all mentoring communities, including personal accountability, responsibility for the health of the community, house responsibilities and positive change.

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concept, validating and helping us to remain objective, and helping equate goals to viable practice. What was designed is rooted in the basic tenets of an FDC modified therapeutic community, without the clinical foundation and focus. Mentoring

communities promote community responsibility as part of daily life, with informal mentoring intertwined as a natural element. Prospective mentors are trained alongside staff in a mentorship academy that immerses them in community concepts, including structure, through an experiential process. Because the communities do not have a clinical foundation or focus, practices such as encounters, confrontations and earning an authoritative role are not elements of mentoring communities. The degree of regimented activity is also less, for the same reason, because it has limited utility for the purpose. This model does not give any inmate, mentor or mentee, any authority. Not only does Florida policy prohibit inmates being placed in authority over other inmates, we recognize this dynamic, or even the appearance of such, will quickly disease a community. What is emphasized is community concepts standard among all mentoring communities, including personal accountability, responsibility for the health of the community, house responsibilities and positive change.

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I've never laughed so much in my life! It's been refreshing to live among individuals that aren't hardened or fully committed to prison culture. I'm thankful that I can give my testimony living alongside first-time offenders that trust me enough to take my story to heart.  
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— J. Ivey

### Implementation (The last 8 months)

As we began working with staff and then participated in the first mentorship academy, we just knew our excitement and resolve would carry us through, and we would make this happen! Then came the reality of obstinate mentees and the ever-present negative inmate culture, all compounded by the current stresses to the Florida system. We don't mean to imply this has weakened our resolve or burdened us. Instead, we understand more fully we cannot do this by ourselves, nor can we make it happen. This process has taught us there is still much we can learn and areas we can grow.

We've learned staff buy-in to the model and *community as method* is crucial. As vital as it was to work with staff while building the model, it's equally as vital, if not more, for staff at mentoring community locations to be fully embedded. When staff helps to reinforce the structure and the concepts, and when they exemplify and emulate the shared norms, expectations and principles integral to the model, there is a unified effort to exercise *community as method* to positively impact mentees.

Staff communication with the mentors, for their awareness as well as to hear their concerns and address as appropriate, and meeting with the upper structure,

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When I greet them as they get off of the bus, and I tell them that I've been here for all of my 20s, all of my 30s, all of my 40s, and almost all of my 50s, they stop for a minute. They are also surprised that I want to be a positive influence.  
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— C. Feimster

for example, all contribute to the health of the community. It also provides various avenues for staff to keep a close eye on the community. We want staff to be invested and embedded in the community. Aside from the obvious reasons, all of us, mentors and mentees alike, need their guidance and assistance. As mentors, we want to be held accountable to our charge, and though we strive to hold each other accountable, we want staff to hold us accountable. This encourages us and gives us a degree of confidence we're not reinforcing something that isn't in the best interest of the community or the mentees. Even though we look at our roles as a mission and a passion, this is our job, and we need feedback so we can do our jobs to the best of our ability.

“  
I am not the same person that I was when I came to prison, but I'm also not the same person I was when I was selected to be part of the design team and core group of mentors. I've grown.  
— A. Treadway  
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### The mentor's influence

Mentors can be part of the solution or part of the problem. Mentors that are truly part of the community strive to promote a safe living environment and to build trust and healthy relationships. They build trust by being transparent, and by making mentees aware of their personal experience. A mentor's lived experience, when shared in a healthy way, also helps the mentee grasp the difference between being a “good *citizen*,” and a “good *inmate*.”

Additionally, a true mentor seeks to normalize what's not popular in prison, fostering a safe place to pursue positive growth so the mentee can make the choice to change unchallenged. The morning meeting starts the day off on a positive, upbeat note, and reminds mentees to make the best of what the day offers. After a day in formal programming or completing job assignments, mentees return to a place where mentors are committed to the structure and tenets of the community and are willing to be transparent and accountable. We've discovered, as a result of this commitment, the mentees

witness changes happening in us. They can relate to the possibility of change.

We've also discovered within the safety of the community we can counteract mentees' hesitation to fully engage in available in-prison programs and services and motivate them to be more receptive to taking a path that will increase their chances of success in society. This includes full engagement in transitional planning and a willingness to utilize services available to them once they are released.

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Finally, we realize selection of those that will be given mentorship responsibilities must be done carefully. On the part of the mentor, their commitment to being transparent and available to a mentee, while also maintaining their own personal growth and energy is necessary. We realize it's difficult to select mentors because their end-goal cannot always be ascertained at the start. We venture to suggest an additional requirement to application, interview and training. Inmates remain prospective mentors until they have completed six weeks of shadowing following the mentorship academy. During this period, trained mentors will be expected to model building productive and healthy relationships. Staff can observe how the mentor-in-training responds, how they engage with mentees, whether they are willing to hold themselves accountable, and if they can maintain appropriate boundaries.

## Personal impressions and looking to the future

We've been incarcerated, collectively, for 200 years and we're tough, but we're especially heartened by the letters we receive

from mentees that have returned to society. Sometimes they need encouragement, but many times they express gratitude and share their personal successes. These letters inspire us because we can hope in a more tangible way we are influencing people for the better, possibly even breaking a negative cycle.

We recognize formal, evidence-based programs are necessary for rehabilitation and to meet the various needs of the incarcerated. Qualified professionals, targeted programming and citizen volunteers certainly provide much needed services. Secretary Inch's mentoring initiative takes nothing away from that; rather, it recognizes the influence that lived experience can have when channeled toward effecting positive change. Outside of the program

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When I have a particularly hard day, I go back and read the letters I've gotten. It does something deep down inside of me to influence a positive change in someone.

— R. Pérez

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area and away from the skilled professional, and for those that may not be involved in formal programming, is the compound and the dorm, places where real prison life happens. It's in these settings that established mentoring communities can have a unique effect, and where purposeful growth and change can be fostered.

It is our belief if the Secretary's initiative continues its forward trajectory, it will benefit multiple stakeholders, including staff, inmates and their loved ones and the communities to which the mentees return. It is our hope mentoring communities for individuals with short sentences will become standard

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Mentoring is a lifestyle. When you know and live the right way, you can show the right way

— J. Massie

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Inmates that will be returning to society need to do more than engage in abstract thinking about what they are going to do upon their release. They need to be engaging in ways that will make these thoughts materialize, and connections from the outside need to be made.  
— R. Falcon  
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in FDC, and that a similar framework, founded on community concepts and utilizing *community as method*, will be employed throughout FDC institutions.

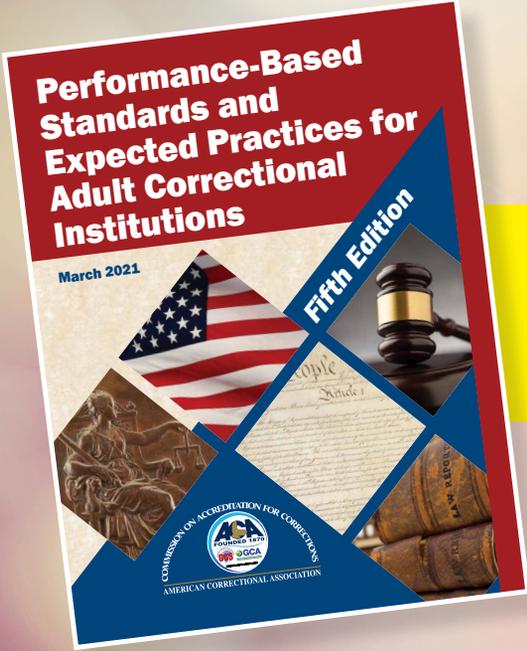
We also hope as this process continues, some normalization and brightening of the living areas can occur

to match the spirit of the community. Finally, it is our collective vision individuals that have achieved successful restoration to society, and are actively sustaining a changed lifestyle, will be inspired to volunteer their time as citizen mentors for pre-release in-reach and mentoring throughout the process of restoration. Their lived experience in accomplishing successful reintegration could be invaluable to those seeking to transition from “inmate” to contributing, law-abiding members of society.

We remain inspired by the Secretary, and we’re grateful for central office staff that closely monitor the mentoring communities and take the time to check on us. We are grateful staff have allowed us to be candid throughout this process. We are appreciative of, and inspired by, dedicated staff that work alongside us in the communities, and we’re grateful for our fellow mentors.

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*This article was produced by the Florida Department of Corrections, Mark Inch Secretary.*



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