

## WHAT IS THE OFFENDER RESETTLEMENT JOURNEY?

The primary mission of the VADOC is the provision of public safety. In the past this essentially meant the secure and safe incarceration of offenders. Now, with higher standards, that would be seen as only a temporary solution for public safety. Lasting public safety also requires treating of-

*Another way of thinking about that is the more successful offender resettlement journeys there are, the more recidivism goes down and the more public safety goes up.*

enders while they are in the care of the Department in a way that enables them to re-enter society after release and then resettle successfully in the community. Another way of thinking about that

is the more successful offender resettlement journeys there are, the more recidivism goes down and the more public safety goes up.

Successful offender resettlement journeys (ORJs), therefore, are of primary concern to the Department. They should also be of personal concern to every employee because, eventually, some of these offenders may settle in our neighborhoods and interact with our families and friends. So how can we support the journeys offenders are making while they are in the care of the Department? This is the purpose of the three Offender Resettlement Journey (ORJ) pilots that began in May 2014 and will continue into 2015. The pilots were strategically chosen to cover security level 5 (Wallens Ridge State Prison), security level 3 (Nottoway Correctional Center) and security level 1 and community supervision (Patrick Henry Correctional Field Unit, Martinsville District 22 and Danville District 14). Each of these units already has a good understanding of the Dialogue Skills that are an essential foundation for the ORJ work.

The prisons and districts involved in the pilots have been interested to discover more about the journeys being made by the offenders in their care. They have been taking the perspective of the offender and considering the routes they take and what might help or hinder them on their journey. This involves drawing on accurate data (not assumed numbers), getting the first-hand views of the offenders and ex-offenders themselves (not assuming we know what they experience and need), tracing the actual journeys that offenders take (which often involve many different units) and engaging staff to help come up with improvements that would make a material difference to the success of the offender journeys. Some of these improvements are related to what happens while offenders are resident within a single prison or district. Others involve the way offenders step down (or step up) from one unit to another - and therefore are affected by the level of

understanding and cooperation between different operational units and central functional units. This requires staff to think systemically about the many factors affecting an offender who is in transition from one unit to another. In the community systemic thinking is essential because the network of support is so much more complex. The key here is the level of collaboration and understanding between the VADOC and the many other agencies with key roles in supporting the offender's journey. In many instances it is feasible to improve success by reducing duplication of services and covering the gaps where ex-offenders lack necessary support. It is also possible to combine with other agencies to access grant funding to improve services.

At the heart of each ORJ is a powerful event where ex-offenders who have spent a significant number of years under the care of the VADOC recount their own personal journey. In the presence of a large group of many different staff and stakeholders, the offenders symbolically 'walk' their journey from arrest and sentencing, through a range of facilities and out into the community, while being interviewed by a sensitive facilitator about their emotional experience and what helped or hindered them on their journey. It might take them an hour to walk the journey that actually took them 10 or 15 years.

This is a powerful way of connecting the staff and other stakeholders with the human experience of the offender resettlement journey. It also reveals what can make a difference to the success or failure of the journey. Often it is significant conversations at key moments that change people's lives, along with being offered an opportunity or understanding. In other cases it is access to drug detox, education, a treatment program, job training or being put in restrictive housing that triggers a change of direction for the offender.

*Often it is significant conversations at key moments that change people's lives, along with being offered an opportunity or understanding.*

The ORJs are designed to go a step further. Based on the new understanding gained from the ORJ perspective and the research undertaken, proposals for specific local changes will be developed and tested prior to implementation. The aim is to make a material and measurable difference to the success of the journeys of offenders as they travel through that particular unit. These changes will, of course look different in each of the three pilots, and reporting will be available in 2015 that tracks the value of these three pilots. The ORJ may then become available to other units in the Department, supported by Dialogue Practitioners.

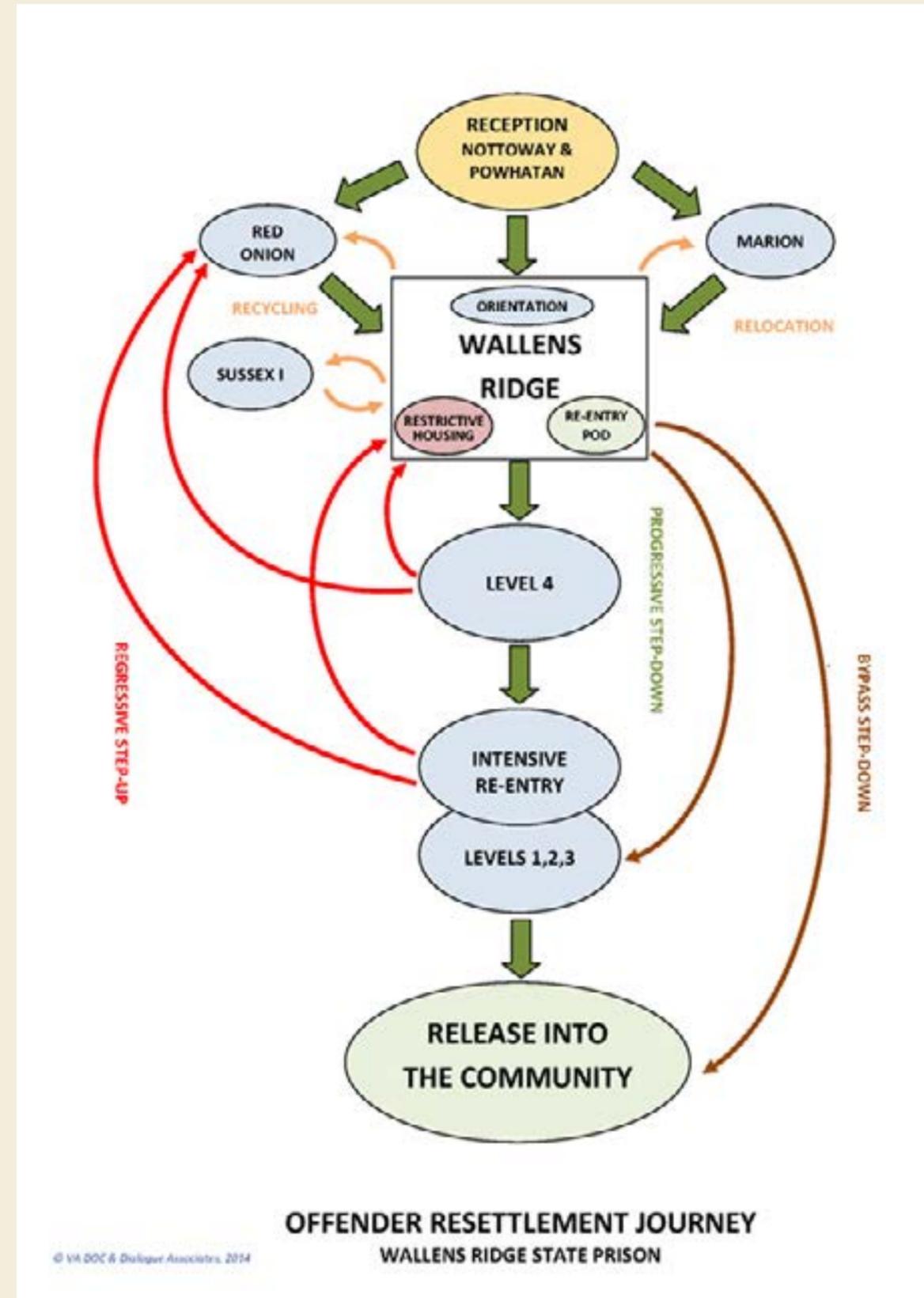
continued next page

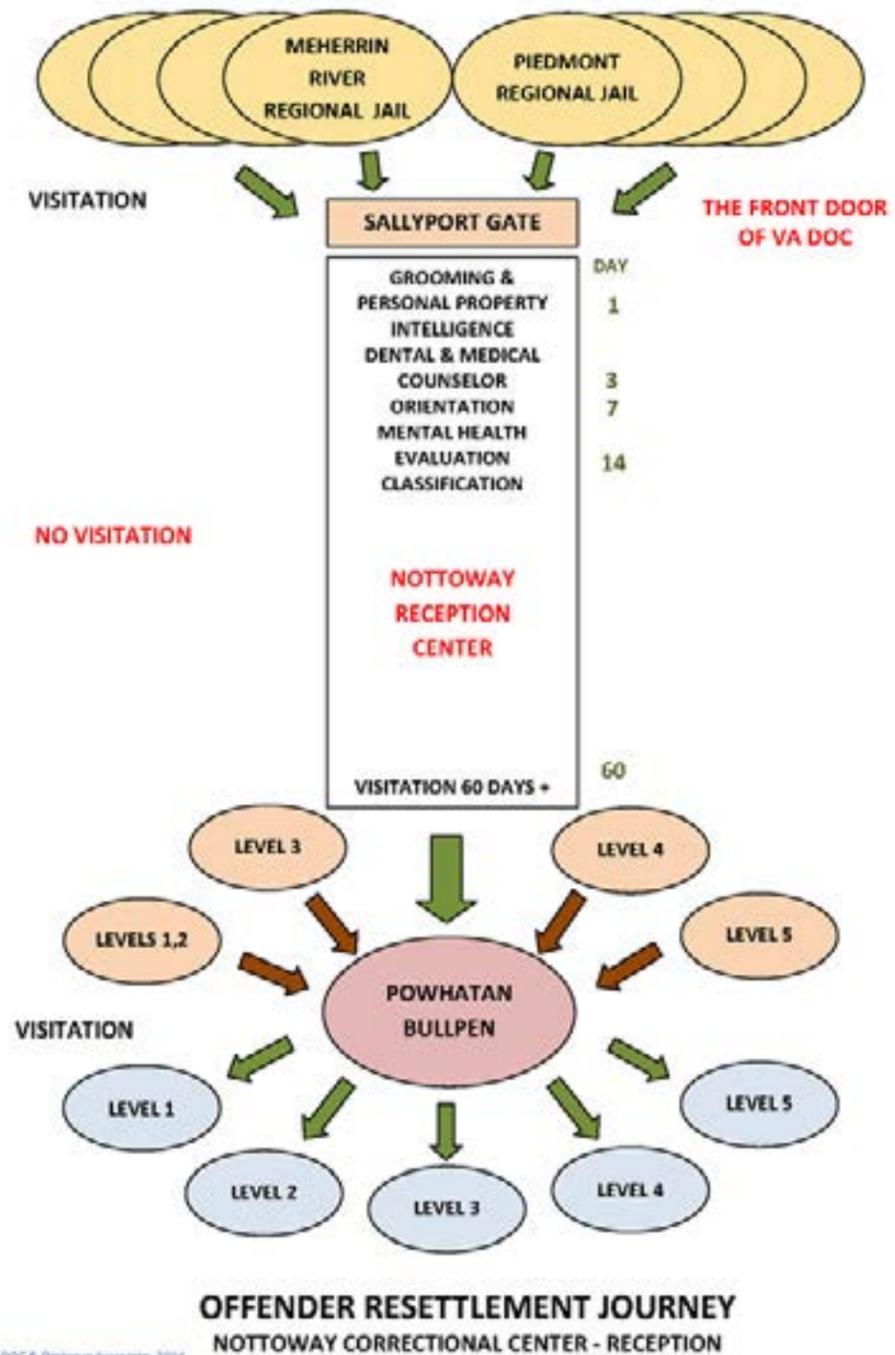


The Wallens Ridge ORJ has taken a lead in defining the generic set of offender journeys and creating a graphic depiction for easy understanding and for use in the offender ‘walk’ event. This original work describes five different journeys, or detours, that have resettlement implications:

- **Progressive Step Down Journey:** The recommended route that steps down one security level at a time and allows access to the treatment and socialization needed to prepare for re-entry.
- **Bypass Step Down Journey:** The less favorable step down journey where offenders miss out a security level by jumping down from say level 5 to a level 3 intensive re-entry unit shortly before release.
- **Recycling Journey:** Where offenders move to and fro between similar security level prisons and are moved either to get access to treatment or because they are proving difficult to manage.
- **Relocation Journey:** Where offenders are moved for mental health treatment, return to the general population when they are stable, but then bounce back having deteriorated.
- **Regressive Step Up Journey:** Where offenders head in the opposite direction, because of a specific misdemeanor or poor score at their annual review, and are transferred to a higher security level facility. This not only means a more onerous and demoralizing journey to more restrictive conditions and more difficult contact with family, but also a longer sentence because of loss of good conduct time.

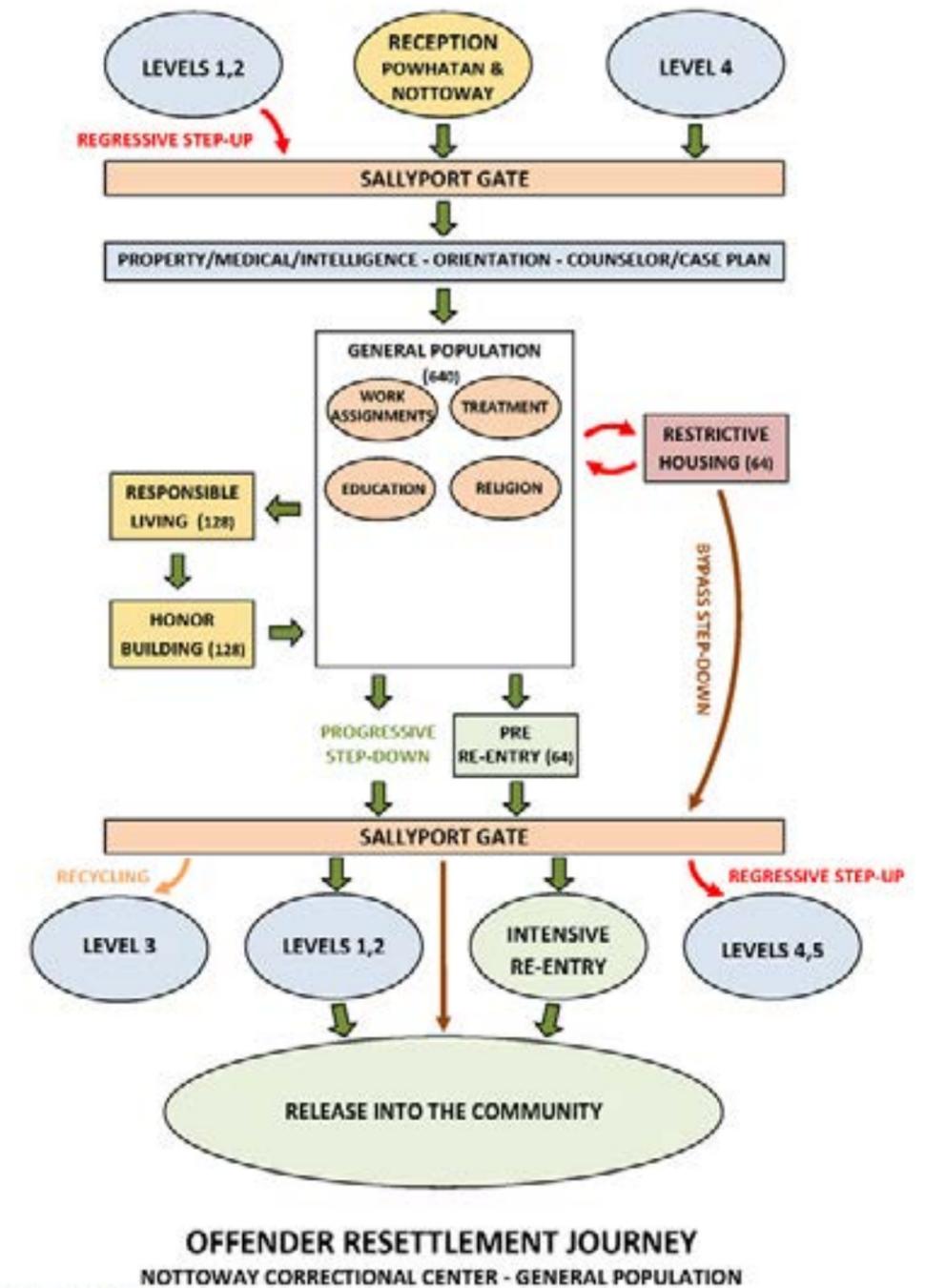
continued next page





The Nottoway Correctional Center ORJ covers two very different situations: The first is the entrance to the VADOC, the Reception Center where offenders arrive from jails and are held for 2 or 3 months before transfer based on their classification. Partners in the enquiry here include the jails, the other reception centers, central classification and the various recipient prisons, and improvement to the ORJ depends on better communication and partnership between them. The second is the longer-term general population where offenders usually have 10 to 12 years to serve before release, and one of the challenges is to maintain a sense of progress on the journey. These very different situations will lead to different proposals in support of the success of different phases of the ORJ.

continued next page



The Patrick Henry/Martinsville/Danville ORJ tracks the journey of the offender through re-entry into the community and to eventual successful resettlement where ex-offenders become contributing citizens to their community. In many ways the Community Corrections have a much harder job than the facilities. In the community there is a less structured life, more choices to make, more opportunities for the offender to get it wrong and greater challenges monitoring and coordinating support. Many offenders, particularly younger drug-takers, find their journey to be like a ‘revolving door’ where they repeatedly travel in and out of incarceration. The ORJ pilot here is largely concerned with aligning the efforts of the many agencies in the area to improve partnership and collaboration, particularly by reducing the duplication of services and plugging critical gaps in support for re-entry, and longer-term resettlement. Martinsville is strengthening its Re-entry Council through introducing Dialogue Skills and insights provided by the ORJ engagement with other stakeholders, while Danville are looking to mirror that success by getting their own Re-entry Council up and running through this ORJ pilot.

These Offender Resettlement Journey pilots are original pioneering research that is financially supported by the National Institute of Corrections who have funded Peter Garrett and Jane Ball to consult to the initiative.

Submitted by Peter Garrett

