



FRESH START @ YOUR LIBRARY

#MyFreshStart #MyJourney #MyLibrary

History

Long Branch Free Public Library Director Tonya Garcia conceived the idea of providing library support services for citizens returning from prison to local communities. Garcia's passion for criminal justice reform grew after seeing many of her community members, including relatives, returning to prison. She believed there is a correlation between low literacy and incarceration, so she endeavored to fill those educational gaps the only way she knew how—through her work at the library.

In 2009, Garcia launched Fresh Start in LBFPL's technology lab. She led group workshops that taught computer, job search and resume writing skills. Despite her enthusiasm, early attendance was dismal. Garcia attributed the low turnout to citizens' privacy concerns. The myths and stigmas related to incarceration caused fear and embarrassment for returning citizens as they struggled to become functioning members of society. Garcia had to redevelop her programming and decided to focus on one-on-one support. Returning citizens could now count on up to 12 private, individualized training meetings.

The reentry program finally found its stride, and it was time to expand. Through a partnership with Monmouth University, Garcia enlisted the help of an intern who redesigned the library's website and promoted the reentry program to the local community, while Garcia focused her energy on developing programming and establishing additional partnerships with nonprofit organizations and local business owners. Garcia has since partnered with the New Jersey State Parole Board and the Monmouth County Reentry Task Force. These relationships enabled Garcia to expand her library's calendar of offerings, hire a social worker who assesses patron needs, and renovate the branch to include a movie theater, classrooms and a boardroom that anyone can rent.

The New Jersey State Library has been an ardent supporter of Garcia's work, and it recognizes that public libraries have long served as reconnection centers for returning citizens and their communities. In an effort to broaden this effort, the State Library applied for and received the National Leadership Grant sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The State Library will use the grant funding, in partnership with the New Jersey State Parole Board, and the New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, to provide public libraries with a model to build their capacity to serve



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returning citizens. This model centers the libraries as a linchpin that will connect returning citizens with the variety of available services in their communities and at the libraries.



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