GREETINGS and Happy New Year!

In the fall of 2017, the Touro University California (TUC) Public Health Program received a grant from the TUC Intra-mural Research Award Program for the California Exoneree Health and Well-Being Project (CEHW) to study the current state of physical, mental, and emotional health among California exonerees and their needs for immediate and long-term support. The CEHW Project is a joint collaboration with Exonerated Nation, a non-profit organization based in Oakland, California whose mission is to meet the immediate needs of exonerees in California. From April 2 to May 12, 2018, the CEHW research team conducted 12 in-person key informant interviews with California exonerees to understand their health status and needs for immediate and long-term support. The information gathered will be used to design a quantitative survey for a future study of California exonerees regarding their health, well-being and any unmet needs.

Why is this project important?

It is estimated that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 wrongful convictions each year in the United States (Zalman, 2011). According to the National Registry of Exonerations, 2,372 individuals have been exonerated for wrongful convictions in the United States over the last 30 years, 191 of whom have been exonerated from state and federal prisons in California (CA) (National Registry of Exonerations). Despite being legally absolved of the crime or crimes resulting in a wrongful conviction, CA exonerees have historically been denied assistance from state or federal agencies. Few exonerees are compensated and many have been denied access to programs that provide pathways to living wage employment upon release (Wildeman, Costelloe, Schehr et al., 2011). Thankfully, this picture is changing due to the advocacy of CA exonerees and allies. Senate Bill 1050 (October 2018), assuring transitional services within 30 days of release, and Obie’s Law - Assembly Bill 672 (October 2015) which established the right to these services, have started to address the lack of support for CA exonerees in rebuilding their lives. While current research highlights the legal issues surrounding wrongful convictions, the post-prison experiences of exonerees have not been well understood or documented (Konvisser, 2012). The CEHW Project aims to begin filling in this knowledge gap, with the goal of providing recommendations to improve services for exonerees.

What is the current status of the project?

The research team has completed a preliminary analysis of the 12 interviews. Our findings confirm the deep trauma suffered by exonerees as a result of wrongful imprisonment. The exonerees who spoke with us revealed that peer support from fellow exonerees, including formal meetings, individual mentoring, and informal networking was critical to understanding their own well-being and mental health status. They also shared that their engagement in leadership and advocacy activities in support of other exonerees and criminal justice reform provided them with the opportunity to “give back” in substantial and practical ways. Among the exonerees we interviewed, peer support and active engagement in advocacy has helped contribute to their healing post-incarceration.

We have begun sharing our preliminary findings at national and international conferences—see page 2 for more details.
Next Steps

As we continue to analyze the interview data, we are planning the following activities:

- An upcoming presentation at the 12th Academic and Health Policy Conference on Correctional Health, Las Vegas, Nevada from March 21—22, 2019. Presentation Title: Peer Support: A vital coping mechanism for exonerees. Presenter: Gayle Cummings, PsyDc, MPH; and

- Using the findings of these initial interviews to inform the development of a survey to be administered to all California exonerees regarding their health and well-being; and

- Presenting the findings at relevant conferences, in academic journals, and to stakeholders and allies in the wrongful conviction and exoneration advocacy movement.

Related Endeavors

- In December of 2018, Exonerated Nation recently received a one-year $75,000 grant from the Kaiser Foundation to support organizational capacity building.

- In 2017, the TUC Public Health Program began developing a new curriculum concentration for the Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in Health Equity and Criminal Justice, focusing on the public health implications of mass incarceration. To our knowledge, we are the first accredited MPH program in the U.S. to have such an emphasis. Program faculty will give the following presentations at the upcoming Association for Teaching Prevention and Research Conference in Cleveland, Ohio from April 1-3, 2019:
  - Developing a "Health Equity and Criminal Justice (HECJ)" Concentration for a Master of Public Health (MPH) Program: Assessment of Community and Potential Employer Interest. Presenter: Alexandra Hernandez, PhD, MPH; and
  - Process toward the development of an innovative MPH concentration: Health Equity and Criminal Justice. Presenter: Gayle Cummings, PsyDc, MPH.

- In December of 2018, the TUC Public Health Program received a $5,000 grant from Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health to develop and implement its course in "Criminal Justice and Public Health." This class is being offered for the first time during the spring 2019 semester. The grant award will allow for the development of digital storytelling methods with formerly incarcerated individuals. In this way, students will hear directly from those impacted by incarceration.

References


National Registry of Exonerations. (2019). Newkirk Center for Science & Society at University of California Irvine, the University of Michigan Law School and Michigan State University College of Law in conjunction with the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law. Retrieved from https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx

