Semester of Service - Volunteers of America Residential Re-Entry

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Community Relations Internship at VOA Re-Entry
Semester of Service – Spring ‘18

Student Overview
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Spring 2018
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Semester of Service
Semester of Service students take a semester away from traditional classes to work full-time at a non-profit organization in Dayton.

In Spring of 2018, eight UD students participated in the program and worked at sites all over the city – serving clients affected by homelessness, poverty, addiction, lack of educational resources, incarceration, and other social issues.

VOA Re-Entry
The Volunteers of America Residential Re-Entry facility – located at 1931 S. Gettysburg Avenue – houses over 100 men who are transitioning from incarceration.

At VOA Re-Entry, these clients participate in positive programming like Thinking for a Change, Employment Readiness, Life Skills courses, and addiction counseling. They also work to secure stable employment and housing. The goal is that every client leaves the program ready to become a productive and positive member of society.

Criminal Justice
Ex-offenders face a myriad of obstacles when returning from the criminal justice system. The criminal label often prevents ex-offenders from securing fulfilling employment or a stable living situation. Many come from backgrounds of poverty, violence, or addiction – all of which complicate the re-entry process and make recidivism more likely.

In particular, job markets are seldom favorable for individuals who have been incarcerated. Many employers are less likely to hire applicants who “check the box” indicating that they have committed a felony. Ex-offenders often also have large gaps in their work history or educational record, which puts them at a disadvantage when compared with other applicants. Even if hired, ex-offenders can expect to earn about 40% less than people in similar positions who do not have prior convictions, making climbing out of poverty extremely difficult.

Additionally, race plays a significant role in the United States criminal justice system. Following the highly targeted and politicized “War on Drugs,” young black men are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. The majority of these offenders are incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses. Effectively, low income black communities have been demonized in the media and disenfranchised in political elections through national trends of mass incarceration.

Community Relations
My primary role at VOA Re-Entry was to build and maintain relationships with community partners that offer meaningful services for our clients. As part of this mission, I organized the VOA’s first ever “Community Resource Fair.” At this event, representatives from 20 different non-profit organizations in Dayton came to our facility and spoke with clients about their organizations’ programs. Clients were connected with additional support in critical areas like higher education, GED tutoring, addiction support, affordable healthcare, transportation, and employment.

As part of my Community Relations outreach, I made contact with the Dayton Collaboratory – an innovative social space dedicated to collaboratively solving problems in the Dayton community. VOA Re-Entry became a ground-floor partner on the Collaboratory’s X-Factor project, intended to re-imagine the re-entry process in Montgomery County.

X-Factor
X-Factor will be a program by, of, and for ex-offenders. Initially, it will consist of a Citizen Service Corps and a Construction Trades business for employment and up-skilling. X-Factor leaders hope to eventually add a housing component to the program so that ex-offenders will be able to join a stable and supportive community of their peers.

VOA Re-Entry clients will be involved in the Citizen Service Corps, and have already begun gravitating towards leadership positions in the Construction Trades component. They will play a crucial role in removing the stigma from the ex-offender label and changing the way that Dayton sees its returning citizens.

Acknowledgements
Everyone at VOA Re-Entry – both staff and clients – made me feel welcome and helped me stay heavily involved in everything that was happening at the facility. Additionally, special thanks are due to the community partners who offered their support to our clients.

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