

An illustration in a comic book style. Three people are on the deck of a ship, looking through a red telescope. The person in the middle is holding the telescope. The person on the left has long brown hair and is wearing an orange shirt. The person on the right has curly hair and is wearing a green shirt. They are looking out at a lighthouse on a distant shore, which is emitting a bright light. The sky is dark blue with stylized white clouds and swirling patterns. The ship's deck is visible in the foreground.

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

**STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES
AS A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESSFUL
REENTRY ORGANIZATIONS**

Ascendium[®]

RTI
INTERNATIONAL



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INTRODUCTION

Reentry Support Structures

Reentry organizations provide vital support to formerly incarcerated individuals as they seek to reintegrate into society. These organizations often offer access to crucial services such as employment assistance, housing support, and mental health treatment, all of which can contribute to more successful reentry outcomes (Link et al., 2019; Pleggenkuhle et al., 2016). Policymakers and correctional authorities rely heavily on the staff at these organizations to help guide individuals through this process. Although reentry organizations may differ in their approaches, effective operational procedures are essential for success because they enhance operational sustainability by providing ongoing procedures and promoting adherence to the program. The success of these organizations often depends on their organizational structure and effectiveness in carrying out stated goals and missions, the stability of their program model and consistency in service delivery, and their ability to adapt to the diverse needs of the individuals they serve.

Standard Operating Procedures

One key element that supports this organizational structure is the establishment of standard operating procedures (SOPs). **SOPs are generally categorized in two ways:**



SOPs provide written instructions for staff on how to perform specific tasks, detail roles and responsibilities, and help ensure organizational consistency.

Purpose

This brief explores the role of SOPs in enhancing the operational sustainability of reentry organizations by ensuring consistency, helping improve communication, and supporting adaptation to the diverse needs of formerly incarcerated individuals. A case study is presented to show how SOPs guide staff and help support the stability and success of reentry organizations by formalizing the processes of program delivery, ultimately contributing to the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of reentry organizations.

UNDERSTANDING SOPs IN REENTRY ORGANIZATIONS

SOPs and Organizational Policies

SOPs and organizational policies, though related, serve somewhat different functions within a reentry organization. Organizational policies document broad principles that guide the mission, values, and strategic direction of an organization. These might include policies regarding ethical conduct, employee compensation, or conflicts of interest. Operational and staff SOPs, on the other hand, provide detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to complete specific tasks, such as how to conduct and document the intake of a new client into a program or how to create a purchase order. However, policies can still influence the need for new SOPs or updates to existing SOPs. For example, if a policy changes regarding how participant personal data are collected, the related SOPs will need to be updated to reflect the steps now required by the new policy. By documenting staff and operational knowledge in SOPs, reentry organizations can increase the likelihood of a consistent approach to tasks and reduce the chances for miscommunication and errors.

Foundational Framework

Reentry programs regularly contend with staff turnover or rely on volunteers. Organizational and staff SOPs provide a foundational framework for quickly onboarding new team members, ensuring that they understand the organization's processes, mission, and client needs right away. Additionally, clear and well-structured SOPs allow for more effective support systems to be in place for clients and connect them to housing, employment, mental health services, or other community resources. SOPs ensure that each person receives equitable and appropriate services in a timely and organized manner, which in turn can lead to an increased chance for successful reentry and reduced recidivism rates. The consistent framework created by an organization's SOPs is imperative for building trust and providing clients with a stable environment during an otherwise challenging time.

Staff SOPs

Staff SOPs specify the roles and responsibilities of each staff member, from the executive director to the office manager. Each staff role is aligned with specific tasks and responsibilities, and the SOP outlines the steps necessary to complete those tasks.



Operational SOPs

Operational SOPs, on the other hand, focus on the procedural guidelines for the organization's functions, such as financial operations or program delivery. These operational guidelines describe the processes, personnel, and resources required for each task.

Formatting

SOPs can be formatted in various ways, including as a checklist or bulleted format. At a minimum, SOPs should include the elements shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1.

BASIC ELEMENTS

for Staff and Operational SOPs

SOP ELEMENT	DEFINITION	STAFF SOP	OPERATIONAL SOP
Header	The organization name and address, title of the SOP, author(s), SOP number, date implemented, date reviewed, author of review, page number, and version number on the first page. Abbreviated to title, version number, and page number on subsequent pages.		
Purpose	Why the organization needs this SOP		
Scope	Specifies the personnel assigned to the procedure		
Personnel Responsibilities	Summary of personnel responsibilities for the activities in the SOP		
Definitions	Definitions necessary for personnel to perform the tasks stated in the SOP		
References	Documents or regulations cited in the SOP		
Tools	Documents such as tables, figures, checklists, flowcharts, visuals, etc. to demonstrate the procedures in the SOP		
Procedures	Detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to complete a task		

Note. SOP = standard operating procedure.

SOPs are meant to be living documents that are regularly updated and edited to reflect changes to organizational procedures.

IMPORTANCE OF SOPs FOR REENTRY ORGANIZATIONS

Ensuring Consistency and Quality in Service Delivery

One of the primary advantages of SOPs in reentry organizations is that they help ensure consistency in service delivery. Reentry programs serve individuals with diverse backgrounds and needs. The success of reentry initiatives often hinges on their ability to deliver uniform and high-quality services to individuals across various stages of their reintegration (Lattimore & Tolbert, 2021). SOPs increase the likelihood that all participants receive the same level of quality care and support, regardless of differences in their personal situations or the staff assigned to them. For example, a staff SOP can direct all of an agency's case managers to have their clients complete the same educational and employment readiness training, thus maintaining a baseline standard for services that is clear across a staff position. Consistency is critical in reentry programs, where the success of participants often depends on the coordinated efforts of various professionals, including case managers, counselors, and social workers. Without clearly defined procedures, accountability can be diluted, leading to potential lapses in service provision.

Clear, standardized procedures allow organizations to maintain operational integrity, especially when dealing with complex processes (Fraser, 2011). This applies directly to reentry programs, where the risk of inconsistent service delivery—due to staff turnover, varied levels of training, or resource limitations—can undermine program success. SOPs mitigate this risk by providing a clear framework that staff can follow to ensure that all aspects of the program are delivered in a uniform manner.

Facilitating Sustainability Through Adaptability and Flexibility

Another often-overlooked benefit of SOPs is their potential to increase an organization's sustainability. Expanding a reentry program from one site to another requires clear and consistent procedures to ensure that the new location mirrors the practices of the original site while adapting to meet its own unique needs. An SOP can provide a framework for this expansion. SOPs allow an organization to consistently direct staff to the correct procedures for program delivery while allowing individualization as needed. A common misconception is that SOPs are rigid and inflexible; however, well-designed SOPs enhance adaptability by providing a clear foundation upon which changes can be made when necessary (Power, 2013). In the context of reentry programs, where participants' needs can change rapidly, SOPs help staff respond swiftly to challenges.

SOPs create a structured environment in which deviations from standard processes can be managed effectively. This flexibility is particularly valuable in reentry programs, where participants may have urgent or unique needs that require immediate intervention. For instance, if a participant encounters an unexpected mental health crisis, a well-established SOP can provide a step-by-step guide on how to respond immediately and appropriately while still maintaining the integrity of the program's broader objectives.

Improving Accountability and Evaluation

SOPs are also key for enhancing accountability within reentry programs. Accountability through detailed SOPs increases the likelihood that programs are implemented effectively and efficiently. One of the most important aspects of SOPs is that they establish clear roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations for staff members (NPACT, n.d.). Consistency in services allows for a testable theory of change that can be evaluated for impact.

SOPs make it easier to assess whether the program is achieving its objectives by creating useful documentation for an evaluative framework. One of the highlighted features of effective reentry programs is the use of data-driven assessments to monitor progress (Alliance for Community and Justice Innovation, 2022). SOPs could facilitate these assessments. For example, an SOP related to the use of data should define the specific metrics, processes, and timelines needed to track participant outcomes. This structured approach ensures that the program can be assessed objectively and that any needed improvements can be identified and addressed.

Supporting Leadership and Delegation

SOPs enable reentry organization leaders to delegate tasks confidently and provide staff with clear instructions and expectations. For example, a staff member whose job includes record-keeping duties will have a staff SOP that explains how to carry out those duties (e.g., when to enter, how to enter, what to include), along with all the other tasks they are responsible for completing, whereas the operational SOP would provide the step-by-step process of keeping various records across the entire organization. The availability of SOPs can foster leaders' confidence that all staff have a solid understanding of the record-keeping task. An SOP is an essential leadership tool and should be created for leadership staff as well, such as executive directors and chief operating officers (COOs). The procedures outlined in leadership SOPs will allow the leadership team to know what their key roles are and what they should delegate to organization staff.



CASE STUDY

EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT OF A REENTRY EDUCATION PROGRAM



PROGRAM INITIATION

An evaluability assessment for a small, New England-based reentry education program was completed in 2023, and training and technical assistance were provided in 2024.

BELIEFS

The reentry education program believes education is the key to a successful return to life after incarceration and aims to make postsecondary education accessible, affordable, and efficiently delivered to individuals as they prepare to exit incarceration or have transitioned from incarceration.

THE PROBLEM

Since approximately 2017, the program has grown in both its numbers of staff and its volume of students served. During this period of growth, staff roles and responsibilities grew clouded, as roles were not always clearly defined.

SOLUTION

A set of staff and operational SOPs was developed for current and new staff members, with input from both leaders and staff. Thus, team members now have a clear understanding of individual responsibilities, policies, and procedures.

The COO described the process as “bringing clarity to folks who were unsure of their roles or expectations.” When discussing how quickly their organization grew, the COO explained they “had this expansion really quickly but didn’t have all the systems and protocols in place to onboard people,” further describing the SOP process as “a road map” for the work they complete.

BENEFITS OF SOPs

FOR REENTRY ORGANIZATIONS

Enhancing Leaders' Efficiency

SOPs play an important role in enhancing leaders' efficiency by providing clear frameworks for daily operations. With well-defined SOPs in place, leaders can transition from micromanaging to focusing on strategic goals. SOPs reduce the need for leaders to oversee daily activities, as these procedures set clear guidelines for how tasks should be executed, thus enabling leaders to dedicate more time to long-term planning, innovation, and other high-level decision-making activities. By delegating operational consistency to SOPs, leaders can build more efficient and effective teams, thus driving organizational growth and success. Well-crafted SOPs can even make leadership more flexible, as they allow leaders to respond quickly to changes while maintaining consistent operational standards (Power, 2013).

Fostering Trust

Additionally, SOPs contribute significantly to fostering trust within an organization. By providing a structured and transparent approach to decision-making, SOPs help create a culture of fairness, accountability, and predictability. Employees understand exactly what is expected of them, which promotes a sense of security and fairness. SOPs empower staff by clarifying roles and responsibilities, enabling them to make informed decisions and work more autonomously (NPACT, n.d.). This clarity promotes a sense of ownership and accountability, as staff are better equipped to execute their roles without constant supervision. Ultimately, SOPs not only streamline operations but also establish an environment of trust, transparency, and empowerment, which positively influences overall organizational performance.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING SOPs IN REENTRY ORGANIZATIONS



Effective leadership is paramount for the success of reentry organizations. One of the foundational responsibilities of leaders is the creation and implementation of well-defined SOPs, which ensure that staff understand their roles and responsibilities, as well as the steps they need to follow to provide effective services.

Recommendations for doing so include the following. By following these recommendations, reentry organization leaders can create a structured, adaptable environment where staff are empowered to work effectively, leading to better outcomes for participants.



Determine What SOPs Are Needed

The development of SOPs should actively involve all stakeholders within the reentry organization. Leaders should reach out to staff to ask for input with developing the SOPs. Incorporating staff into the process can increase buy-in and improve staff acceptance of any new responsibilities added through the SOP development. Staff contribution can also increase accuracy of the SOPs by identifying tasks that are unknown to leaders (i.e., steps that staff have incorporated while on the job). Leaders should be open to feedback and incorporate as necessary. Agreed-upon staff tasks are crucial for establishing a strong foundation for each SOP, and the development and understanding of SOPs helps staff feel involved in a process that will directly affect their work. Some examples of operational SOPs for a reentry organization include student enrollment, mentoring, and data management and security.



Communication

Leaders must effectively communicate the purpose, benefits, and expectations of each SOP to ensure its successful implementation. It is important that staff understand and appreciate the importance of SOPs and adhere to them consistently.



Document and Present SOPs Clearly

Investing in SOP development should be a priority for reentry organization leaders. SOPs should be well-documented and accessible to all staff members. Clear communication across the organization leads to greater alignment across staff when it comes to organizational procedures and expectations.



Regularly Review and Update SOPs

As the organization grows and changes, the SOPs should be regularly revisited and updated to reflect new needs, challenges, and insights gained from practical experiences and feedback from staff and participants (Fraser, 2025). Continuous improvement of these documents ensures that the organization remains responsive to evolving conditions. SOPs should be easily accessible for all relevant personnel. Additionally, SOPs should align with the reentry organization's mission, values, and culture to ensure that they are fully integrated and embraced within the organizational environment.



Provide Continuous Training for Staff

To complement SOP development, continuous training and support for staff are essential for success. Even the best-written SOPs are effective only if staff members are aware of their existence, understand them, and can implement them correctly. Regular training sessions that reinforce the procedures and provide real-world applications can help bridge any gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In addition, fostering an environment of support—where staff feel comfortable asking questions, seeking guidance, and providing feedback—ensures that SOPs are flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of the organization and the population served. Ongoing professional development enhances staff competence and confidence, which directly contribute to higher engagement and better program outcomes (Alliance for Community and Justice Innovation, 2022).



Frequently Evaluate SOPs

Reentry organization leaders must prioritize the regular evaluation of the impact of their SOPs through feedback surveys from their staff. Conducting assessments to measure the effectiveness of SOPs on organizational operations, staff engagement, and overall performance is significant for long-term success. These evaluations ensure that leaders can identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Organizations that regularly review and adjust their SOPs on the basis of feedback and performance metrics are more adaptable and responsive to external and internal changes (Power, 2013). By committing to this iterative process, reentry organizations can continue to improve their impact, offering better services to individuals in need while building stronger, more cohesive teams.

CONCLUSION

SOPs are indispensable to the success of reentry organizations. They provide a structured framework that promotes consistency, quality, and accountability in service delivery, while also allowing for flexibility in responding to participants' changing needs. SOPs facilitate stakeholders' communication and coordination, which are essential in supporting individuals through their reintegration into society. Though challenges in implementation exist, particularly in balancing structure with flexibility, the overall advantages of SOPs make them a significant component of any successful reentry program. Reentry organizations that invest in well-designed SOPs are better positioned to achieve long-term success in reducing recidivism and promoting positive outcomes for individuals transitioning from incarceration.



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