

Bridges To Life

GuideStar Exchange Charting Impact Report * Last Updated on 04.24.2014

This report represents Bridges To Life's responses to Charting Impact, a joint project of **BBB Wise Giving Alliance**, **GuideStar USA Inc**, and **Independent Sector**. Charting Impact uses five simple yet powerful questions to encourage strategic thinking and help organizations share concise information about their plans and progress toward impact.



Bridges To Life

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Mission:

The mission of Bridges To Life (BTL) is to connect communities to prisons in an effort to reduce the recidivism rate (particularly that resulting from violent crimes), reduce the number of crime victims, and enhance public safety. The spiritual mission of Bridges To Life is to minister to victims and offenders in an effort to show them the transforming power of God's love and forgiveness.

The content of this Charting Impact Report is the sole product and responsibility of Bridges To Life. This report does not in any way represent an endorsement from Independent Sector, BBB Wise Giving Alliance, or GuideStar, nor does it represent fulfillment of the BBB Wise Giving Alliance's *Standards for Charity Accountability*. For more information on Charting Impact, visit www.guidestar.org/chartingimpact



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1. What are we aiming to accomplish?

The Bridges To Life program has two main goals: (1) To reduce recidivism (re-offending) rates of program graduates, thereby enhancing public safety and saving taxpayer dollars; and (2) To facilitate the healing process for victims and offenders.

2. What are our strategies for making this happen?

Bridges To Life (BTL) is a Restorative Justice process with a unique approach: it rehabilitates criminals, reduces the number of inmates who return to prison, and promotes healing for victims of crime. Victims “tell their story,” which encourage the offenders to accept responsibility and not commit further crimes. By telling their stories in prison, victims—who many times feel alienated, afraid, and re-victimized by the criminal justice system—begin a healing process that allows for forgiveness and empowerment. Offenders, many of whom have never even considered how their actions have affected their victims, their families and friends, and the larger society, hear firsthand from victims of crime and explore the concepts of accountability, responsibility, restitution, and reconciliation. This approach addresses the very core of why people offend: anger, a lack of empathy for others, and a resistance to taking responsibility for one’s own actions. For perhaps the first time in their lives, offenders are required to be active participants with a voice that is heard and given value. They are treated with respect so they can learn to respect themselves and make the necessary changes to lead a respectable life.

3. What are our organization's capabilities for doing this?

Bridges To Life is led by Executive Director and Founder, John Sage, and a Board of Directors that provides fiscal and practical direction. The BTL board is comprised of nine members with established interests in social services, philanthropy law, accounting, and business. Every board member contributes financially to BTL; and in addition to their financial support, all assist with fundraising efforts, six of our board members provide in-prison volunteer service, several provide legal and business-related advice and counsel, and all provide the social and spiritual support needed for BTL staff and volunteers to fulfill the mission of the organization. Mr. Sage leads a team of eight full-time regional coordinators, two part-time regional coordinators, a Development Director, and a part-time Administrative Coordinator. All regional coordinators were BTL volunteers before becoming BTL staff. Because BTL staff is located throughout the state of Texas, monthly conference calls are held and meetings are arranged whenever possible. Bridges To Life works in close collaboration with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Chaplaincy Department and the wardens and chaplains of each of the prison units in which it conducts programs. BTL also works closely with the leadership of the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department and the personnel at the juvenile centers in which it conducts programs. Organizational meetings are conducted at each prison when a new BTL program is launched, and consistent verbal and written communication is utilized to ensure that all BTL staff and volunteers are in compliance with TDCJ rules and security regulations. Bridges To Life works closely with the Harris County Adult Probation Department to implement project a project in a women’s facility in Atascocita, and with Volunteers of America to implement a program in a halfway house. We also work closely with the staff at the Bexar County Probation Department to implement projects at two alternative settings in San Antonio. Experienced Bridges To Life volunteers are working with the St. Luke's Methodist Church Revision Project on special projects as mentors to incarcerated youth in Harris County. In addition to TDCJ, Bridges To Life staff work with numerous community based agencies, faith based organizations, faith communities, and government entities. BTL could not provide services without the generous donation of volunteer time. Community support includes thousands of hours donated by volunteer facilitators and victim volunteers as well as the use of facilities in which to conduct the projects at correctional units throughout Texas. Our volunteers contributed over 36,000 hours in 2013, which had an “in-kind” value of \$823,127. The volunteers are absolutely essential to fulfilling the mission and goals of the program. Since its inception in 2000, more than 1,200 volunteers have participated in the Bridges To Life program, 35% of who are victims of violent crime.

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4. How will we know if we're making progress?

The Bridges To Life program has two main goals: (1) to reduce recidivism rates of program graduates, thereby enhancing public safety and saving taxpayer dollars; and (2) to facilitate the healing process for both victims and offenders. Both of these program goals are long-term and far reaching. The reduction in the rate of recidivism among BTL graduates means that not only are our communities safer because there is less crime, but also that our prisons are safer. In fact, we have been told by prison personnel that the Bridges To Life program and other volunteer programs have actually begun to transform the attitudes of offenders and staff in our prisons, resulting in less violence within the prison walls. Furthermore, a reduction in crime means a reduction in victims of crime in our communities. Both quantitative (data and statistics) and qualitative (reports from program participants) are used to evaluate the achievement of Bridges To Life's goals.

5. What have and haven't we accomplished so far?

The latest three-year recidivism study of BTL graduates is very encouraging. The large, diversified sample group includes 1,693 inmates who participated in BTL in 18 different prisons and were released from 2005 to 2009. The recidivism rate for this group is 18.6%, (including only 2% of offenders returning to prison for committing a violent crime) compared to the national average of 38 to 40% for this same time period. The 18.6% recidivism rate for this BTL group is broken out into: • Offenders returning for committing non-violent crimes—14.2% • Offenders returning for technical violations of parole—2.4% • Offenders returning to prison for committing a violent crime—2.0% A subset of the above BTL study includes 737 inmates released from 13 various TDCJ Institutional Division (ID) Units, long-term prisons that house more violent offenders. We are pleased to report that the recidivism rate for this group is 15%, with only 1.6% returning for a violent crime. This is in comparison with Texas reports that inmates released in 2005 and 2006 from ID prisons had a recidivism rate of 26 to 27% (Texas Legislative Board Report, 2009 and 2011). BTL is one of the programs that has contributed to a decrease in recidivism in Texas, and BTL graduates show a significantly lower recidivism rate than the average for the nation and for Texas. The economic impact is profound. The average cost to taxpayers to incarcerate an offender in a Texas prison is approximately \$90,000 (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2011), and that's in addition to the significant costs incurred at the county level, such as arrest and jail, prior to incarceration. As an example, the Harris County Jail has an average daily population of 8,842. At an average cost of \$62 dollars per detainee per day, Harris County spends nearly \$550,000 a day on housing offenders. These figures do not even include the significant collateral costs, which were recently delineated in a study by the Pew Center for the States (2012). For example, incarceration lowers an individual's earning power by 40% and severely limits his/her future economic mobility. This has an extreme impact on society's families, especially children, 1 in 25 of who now has a parent behind bars and is significantly more likely to live in poverty. These collateral and county costs are potentially much higher than the actual cost of incarceration, resulting in a total economic loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars for each offender incarcerated. In 2013, The BTL program provided services to nearly 3,100 offenders at a cost below \$230 per offender! Since inception, more than 20,000 offenders have graduated from the BTL program. BTL has worked in 46 Texas prisons, and its curriculum has also been used in 10 other states and four foreign countries. Based on the reduction in recidivism rates, the increase in public safety, and multiple costs listed above, BTL is saving taxpayers millions of dollars every year.