

FORGE: Facilitating Opportunities for Reentry, Growth & Empowerment

A Peer-Led Mentorship Development Program at Dooly State Prison, Georgia

Sponsored by the Positive Outreach Development Society, Inc.

What Is FORGE?

FORGE is a 36-week, evidence-based mentorship development program that transforms incarcerated men from participants into certified peer mentors. Operating at Dooly State Prison in Unadilla, Georgia, the program trains men to facilitate evidence-based programming, mediate conflicts, lead restorative circles, and serve as credible messengers of change across their housing units.

The program exists because of a simple recognition: the people closest to a problem are often closest to the solution. Incarcerated men are stakeholders in the system that holds them. They have both the ability and the responsibility to shape dorm culture, reduce violence, and support the wellbeing of those around them. FORGE gives them the tools, training, and structure to do exactly that.

FORGE's motto is "**Service Over Self.**" Its founding principle is that lasting personal transformation happens not through passive instruction, but through the active process of helping others.

How It Works

Structure

- **Duration:** 36 weeks (9 months)
- **Sessions:** 3 per week (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday), 2 hours each
- **Total program hours:** Approximately 216
- **Cohort size:** 12-15 participants
- **Total curriculum pages:** Over 790 pages of facilitator guides plus 107 pages of participant workbooks

The program moves through three distinct phases, each building on the last. Participants cannot advance to the next phase without meeting specific gate requirements evaluated through written assessments, peer evaluations, staff observations, and demonstrated competency.

Phase 1: Foundation -- "Know Yourself" (Weeks 1-12)

Phase 1 is entirely focused on personal development. Before anyone can mentor others, they must first do their own work. This principle -- called the *parallel process* -- is borrowed from the Oregon Mentors Certification Program and is foundational to FORGE's design.

Over 12 weeks and 36 sessions, participants learn to:

- Identify and interrupt their own thinking errors using cognitive behavioral techniques
- Name and regulate their emotions using evidence-based tools (4-4-4 breathing, 5-4-3-2-1 grounding, escalation curve awareness)
- Understand trauma and its effects without requiring personal disclosure
- Communicate assertively using "I" statements and the SBI (Situation-Behavior-Impact) feedback model
- Resolve conflict using the FORGE 5-step conflict resolution model
- Take full accountability for past harm through impact awareness exercises
- Develop empathy and perspective-taking skills
- Make decisions using structured problem-solving frameworks
- Cultivate a growth mindset and articulate a personal vision for the future

Each week includes facilitator-scripted lessons, group exercises, role-play scenarios, reflective writing, and homework assignments. Participants maintain a portfolio of completed work that serves as evidence of their growth.

Gate requirements to advance: 85% attendance, completed portfolio, passing score on a written knowledge check, no code of conduct violations, endorsement by at least two peers, and no concerns flagged by staff.

Phase 2: Development -- "Build Others" (Weeks 13-24)

Phase 2 transforms personal growth into the ability to help others grow. Participants learn to teach, facilitate, and mentor.

Key training areas include:

- **The Mentor Identity:** Understanding the difference between a mentor, a friend, and an authority figure. Establishing boundaries and ethics.
- **Teaching and Facilitation Skills:** Adult learning principles, lesson planning, classroom management, adapting to different learning styles.
- **Motivational Interviewing:** The OARS framework (Open-ended questions, Affirming strengths, Reflecting meaning, Summarizing) for conversations that support change without coercion.
- **Simulation Training:** Four weeks of realistic scenario-based practice. Participants face simulated dorm conflicts, resistant mentees, crisis situations, and ethical dilemmas -- then debrief with peers and facilitators.
- **Restorative Practices:** Facilitating restorative circles, community accountability processes, and harm repair through dialogue.

Gate requirements: Pass 3 of 5 simulation assessments, demonstrate 2 co-facilitation sessions scored by rubric, complete a teaching portfolio with 3 original lesson plans, endorsement by 3 peers, and no staff concerns.

Phase 3: Practicum -- "Lead and Serve" (Weeks 25-36)

Training becomes reality. Phase 3 participants work under graduated supervision in the field:

- **Weeks 25-28:** Supervised mentoring -- paired with a certified mentor, co-leading Phase 1 sessions with the next incoming cohort.

- **Weeks 29-32:** Increasing independence -- leading sessions with decreasing oversight, conducting one-on-one mentoring, handling real conflicts.
- **Weeks 33-34:** Community leadership -- independent facilitation, conflict mediation, running community circles.
- **Weeks 35-36:** Certification -- portfolio completion, presentation to a review board of peers and staff.

Weekly supervision sessions address real cases, provide feedback, and build reflective practice habits that sustain mentors long after formal training ends.

Certification requirements: 60 hours of supervised mentoring and facilitation, 4 independently delivered sessions observed and scored, a final panel evaluation, a completed FORGE Mentor Portfolio, and a commitment to 6 months of post-certification service.

The Self-Sustaining Pipeline

FORGE is designed to renew itself. Certified mentors from each cohort become the facilitators for the next incoming cohort. The first cohort is trained by program founders; the second is trained by first-cohort graduates; and so on. This creates a permanent, self-sustaining infrastructure of trained peer mentors that does not depend on outside facilitators to continue operating.

Where the Training Materials Come From

FORGE did not invent its curriculum from scratch. It studied more than 25 successful correctional programs across 8 states and drew from the best available evidence in cognitive behavioral therapy, trauma-informed care, mentorship development, and restorative justice. Every session in the FORGE curriculum traces back to one or more evidence-based sources.

Primary Curriculum Sources

Thinking for a Change (T4C) is a 25-lesson cognitive behavioral curriculum developed by the National Institute of Corrections. It integrates cognitive restructuring, social skills development, and problem-solving training. T4C is one of the most widely used evidence-based programs in U.S. corrections. FORGE draws heavily from T4C for its thinking error identification, the Think-Feel-Act cycle, active listening components, perspective-taking exercises, and structured problem-solving frameworks.

Moral Reconation Therapy (MRT) is a 12-step cognitive-behavioral system focused on moral reasoning development with over 200 published outcome studies spanning three decades. FORGE adapted MRT's accountability spectrum and moral development framework for its sessions on integrity, accountability, and ethical decision-making.

Seeking Safety is an evidence-based model for treating trauma and substance abuse, supported by over 40 published outcome studies. Critically, it does not require participants to disclose personal trauma -- making it appropriate for group settings in a prison environment. FORGE uses Seeking Safety's approach for its trauma awareness and coping/safety plan sessions.

SAMHSA's Trauma-Informed Care Framework provides the overarching lens for all FORGE programming. The framework's Three E's (Event, Experience, Effect), Four R's (Realize, Recognize, Respond, Resist re-traumatization), and Six Key Principles (Safety, Trustworthiness, Peer Support, Collaboration, Empowerment, Cultural Responsiveness) are woven throughout every phase of the program.

GRIP (Guiding Rage Into Power) is a year-long program developed at San Quentin State Prison in California. FORGE borrowed GRIP's approach to emotional literacy (particularly the concept of "the anger beneath the anger"), its normative culture model where participants co-create and enforce program standards, its three-modality session structure (instruction, emotional processing, and practice), and its emphasis on peer co-facilitation.

Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) contributed workshop materials and approaches for creative nonviolent conflict resolution.

MENTOR National Mentoring Partnership provided the Elements of Effective Practice that shaped FORGE's mentoring program design, supervision structure, and quality standards.

Program Models That Shaped FORGE's Structure

Program	Location	What FORGE Borrowed
GRIP (Guiding Rage Into Power)	California	Normative culture, peer co-facilitation, emotional literacy curriculum, three-modality session design
PEP (Prison Entrepreneurship Program)	Texas	Servant leadership pipeline, cohort model, participants teaching the next cohort
RSVP (Resolve to Stop the Violence Project)	San Francisco	Therapeutic community approach, peer accountability, dedicated housing culture

Program	Location	What FORGE Borrowed
Defy Ventures	Multiple states	Identity transformation framework, entrepreneurial framing of personal change, 4-tier progression model
ARC/HART (Anti-Recidivism Coalition)	Los Angeles	Credible messenger model -- those closest to the problem are closest to the solution
OMCP (Oregon Mentors Certification Program)	Oregon	Parallel process principle, formal mentor certification, focus on long-sentence individuals
CDCR Peer Programs	California	Mentee-to-mentor pipeline structure, 100+ hour training requirements

Specific Methodologies Used

- 1. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** The foundation of Phase 1. Thinking reports, thinking error identification, cognitive restructuring, and the STOP technique.
- 2. Motivational Interviewing (MI):** Taught in Phase 2 using the OARS framework for supporting change without coercion.
- 3. Restorative Justice:** Circle processes, community accountability, and harm repair through structured dialogue.
- 4. Simulation-Based Training:** Realistic scenario practice that distinguishes FORGE from classroom-only programs.
- 5. Trauma-Informed Care:** The SAMHSA framework integrated throughout all three phases.
- 6. Normative Culture:** Participants co-create behavioral standards and hold each other accountable to them.
- 7. Stakeholder Model:** Participants are positioned as active agents responsible for their environment, not passive recipients of programming.
- 8. Credible Messenger Model:** People who have experienced incarceration and transformation are the most effective messengers of change.

Evidence of Effectiveness

FORGE is a new program. It does not yet have its own outcome data. However, every component of its curriculum and structure is drawn from programs with substantial evidence of effectiveness. The following results come from the programs FORGE is modeled on:

Recidivism Reduction

- **GRIP:** Among 421 participants released from California prisons, only 2 returned -- a recidivism rate of **0.5%**, compared to California's statewide average of 41.9%.
- **Thinking for a Change:** A 2009 evaluation found a recidivism rate of **23%** among T4C participants versus **36%** for the control group.
- **Defy Ventures:** Less than **10%** recidivism among program graduates, with **85%** employed within 6 months of release.
- **Project Rebound:** **0%** recidivism among participants, with **87%** in full-time employment.

Violence Reduction

- **RSVP (Resolve to Stop the Violence):** **80%** reduction in violent rearrests among participants.
- **Hustle 2.0:** **91%** of participants with prior violent misconduct records avoided further violence during and after the program. **93%** had no further misconduct of any kind.
- **Credible Messengers (NYC):** **57%** decrease in convictions among young people served by credible messenger mentors.

Institutional Impact

- **PEP (Texas):** **90%** of current program staff are graduates of the program -- demonstrating the self-sustaining pipeline model that FORGE replicates.
- **ARC/HART:** Documented **13%** improvement in relationships and **11%** increase in self-esteem among participants.

The Economic Case

The RAND Corporation's landmark 2013 meta-analysis of correctional education found:

- Participants were **43% less likely** to recidivate than those who did not participate in programming.

- Every **\$1 invested** in correctional education yielded **\$5 in savings** to taxpayers through reduced incarceration costs.
- Program participants had a **13% higher employment rate** after release.

Why These Numbers Matter for FORGE

FORGE integrates the specific curricula that produced these results -- T4C, MRT, Seeking Safety, GRIP's emotional literacy approach, and the simulation-based training methods that programs like Defy and PEP have validated. By combining the strongest elements of multiple proven programs into a single comprehensive system, FORGE is designed to produce outcomes consistent with or exceeding those of its source programs.

The program also adds structural elements that research identifies as critical for sustained impact: a self-renewing mentor pipeline (like PEP), normative culture accountability (like GRIP and RSVP), formal certification standards (like OMCP), and a credible messenger foundation (like ARC/HART).

Assessment and Quality Assurance

FORGE evaluates participants across six competency areas using a 1-4 scoring rubric:

Competency	What It Measures
Self-Awareness	Ability to recognize thinking errors and behavioral patterns
Emotional Regulation	Capacity to manage emotions under stress using learned techniques
Conflict Resolution	Skill in de-escalating and resolving disputes constructively
Communication	Clarity, active listening, and ability to facilitate group discussion
Accountability	Willingness to own mistakes and create a culture of responsibility
Mentoring Readiness	Capacity to support others' growth and facilitate programming independently

Participants must score Proficient (3) or higher in all areas to advance through each phase gate. Certification requires Exemplary (4) performance across all competencies.

Assessment methods include written knowledge checks, simulation-based performance evaluations, peer endorsements, staff observation reports, portfolio review, and a final review board presentation.

Summary

FORGE is not a lecture series. It is a 9-month developmental system that turns incarcerated men into certified peer mentors through a carefully sequenced progression of personal work, skill building, supervised practice, and community service. Every session draws from curricula validated by decades of research. Every structure mirrors programs that have produced measurable reductions in violence and recidivism.

The program creates a permanent, self-renewing infrastructure of trained mentors within the prison -- men who lead through service, resolve conflicts before they escalate, and model the accountability they want to see in their communities.

FORGE was built on the conviction that the men inside Georgia's prisons are not just problems to be managed. They are resources to be developed. The evidence says this works.

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