

AMAAD Institute

(Arming Minorities Against Addiction & Disease)

**reFRESH (Reentry Finding Restoration, Establishing Self-Help) (formerly My
Brother's Keeper)**

**Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Underserved Cultural
Communities (UsCC) Unit Mental Health Services Act**

Author: Gerald Garth, MBA

Introduction

The AMAAD Institute's reFRESH initiative—short for Reentry Finding Restoration, Establishing Self-Help—is a culturally responsive reentry training and mentoring academy tailored for Black and African American individuals transitioning from incarceration or justice involvement. The program centers healing, empowerment, and community reintegration through a structure that is affirming, peer-led, and trauma-informed.

Background

Founded in Los Angeles, the AMAAD Institute (Arming Minorities Against Addiction & Disease) provides culturally grounded services to LGBTQ+ communities of color and other historically underserved groups. Recognizing the disproportionate impact of incarceration on Black communities, AMAAD launched the reFRESH program in partnership with the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health and the Black and African Heritage Cultural Communities Subcommittee. The initiative responds directly to the emotional, social, and economic challenges faced by justice-involved individuals, seeking to build a pathway toward healing and long-term success.

Program Overview

The reFRESH project is built around a seven-session curriculum that equips participants—referred to as Community Facilitators—with critical reentry and life skills.

Areas of focus include:

- Behavioral health support
- Life skills and emotional resilience
- Employment readiness and career preparation

- Financial literacy
- Storytelling and narrative reclamation

Incentivized participation (\$25 per session, with up to \$175 for full completion) helps reduce financial barriers and promote sustained engagement. Following the academy, participants are encouraged to host Community Conversations, peer-led dialogue events for which they receive an additional \$125 stipend. These events serve as a platform for healing, leadership, and community engagement.

Methods

The reFRESH model is rooted in culturally affirming and trauma-informed practice. Key methods include:

- Facilitated group sessions co-led by behavioral health professionals and reentry experts
- An interactive curriculum tailored to lived experience, covering wellness, relationships, and technical skills
- Emphasis on storytelling as a healing modality
- Incentives to support consistent participation and reduce access barriers

This peer-led structure empowers participants not only to learn but to lead—extending program impact beyond the academy into the broader community.

Learnings and Insights

The inaugural implementation of reFRESH yielded several important insights:

- Cultural Relevance Drives Engagement: Participants were more invested when the curriculum reflected their lived realities and cultural context.
- Peer Mentorship Enhances Empowerment: Facilitators found purpose and

strength in sharing their stories and offering guidance to others.

- Holistic Support Is Crucial: Addressing emotional wellness, practical needs, and personal identity together proved more effective than focusing on a single area of reentry.

Challenges

Despite meaningful successes, reFRESH faced several challenges:

- Participant Retention: Sustaining consistent attendance across seven sessions required significant outreach and flexible support.
- Resource Constraints: Funding limitations restricted the number of Community Conversations that could be supported.
- Deep-Seated Trauma and Stigma: Many participants carried longstanding trauma and institutional mistrust, necessitating sensitive and intentional facilitation strategies.

Successes

The reFRESH initiative demonstrated powerful and measurable outcomes:

- High Participant Satisfaction: Feedback emphasized the value of safe, affirming spaces that fostered honesty, vulnerability, and transformation.
- Community Ripple Effects: Community Conversations extended the reach of the program, engaging broader networks of families, friends, and allies.
- Tangible Skill Development: Participants reported greater confidence in job interviews, managing personal finances, and cultivating healthy relationships.

Findings

Through its early implementation, reFRESH reinforced the following principles:

- Culturally tailored reentry models resonate more deeply and produce better outcomes for Black and African American communities.
- Storytelling and narrative reclamation are powerful tools for individual healing and community education.
- Incentivized, peer-led learning creates more equitable access and improves retention.

Recommendations

To strengthen and scale the impact of reFRESH, we recommend the following:

1. Expand funding and partnerships to accommodate more cohorts and increase the frequency of Community Conversations.
2. Deepen integration of mental health supports throughout the curriculum to address complex trauma.
3. Develop an alumni network to sustain engagement, support continued growth, and foster peer mentorship.
4. Strengthen ties with employers and housing providers to create tangible reentry pathways post-program.

Considerations for the Future

As AMAAD explores future iterations of reFRESH, several strategic questions arise:

- Scalability: How can this model be adapted for other populations or scaled across Los Angeles County?
- Evaluation: Would formal impact assessments help secure future investment and guide curriculum refinement?

- Sustainability: Continued community ownership and investment are key to long-term success.

Conclusion

The reFRESH project represents a promising, affirming model for culturally grounded reentry services. By centering the voices of those directly impacted by incarceration, AMAAD's approach promotes restoration, resilience, and leadership. With continued investment and strategic partnerships, reFRESH has the potential to become a cornerstone in the reentry ecosystem of Los Angeles and a national model for reentry justice.