

Ray Rogers ([00:06](#)):

I am Ray Rogers.

Annie Evans ([00:07](#)):

And I'm Annie Evans, co-host of today's episode.

Ray Rogers ([00:11](#)):

You are listening to Fix This, a podcast exploring tech ideas and solutions to some of today's largest challenges.

According to the World Prison Brief, a database maintained by the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research at Birkbeck University of London, the US incarcerates a larger share of its population than any other country for which data is available. And according to the US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, recidivism, or convicted individuals committing another offense is common, with 50% being incarcerated again. So while the justice system looks to rehabilitate and help justice-impacted people reenter society, the reality is it often fails individuals.

Annie Evans ([00:52](#)):

Justice-impacted people often have minimal access to the outside world, including family and friends, despite the importance of strong social networks as determinants to success. Modern tools are needed to reform the way justice impacted people engage with the outside world and build the skills and relationships they need to reenter society. For example, imagine if you had to spend \$10 every time you wanted to chat with your friends and family. That would be hard for most people to manage.

Ray Rogers ([01:22](#)):

In US prisons and jails, personal calls range in price by the minute, and these costs pose massive barriers to maintaining strong relationships with family and friends. And similarly, access to educational opportunities can be expensive and hard to come by, but at the same time, having access to educational opportunities is key to changing outcomes.

Annie Evans ([01:43](#)):

Cloud technology can help power low-cost scalable solutions to address the needs of justice-impacted people. To address this issue, the American Prison Data Systems, referred to as APDS, creates cloud-based tools to provide individualized education, rehabilitation, job training, and reentry services for individuals involved in the criminal justice system.

Ray Rogers ([02:05](#)):

APDS has been building on Amazon Web Services (AWS) since 2014, and in 2020 it went all in on the cloud. At no cost to inmates or their families and friends, APDS built a first of its kind video communication tool on Amazon Chime called Therapeutic Interactive Video Engagement, or ThrIVE for short. Building on AWS, it has also created a virtual classroom application, and it is working with AWS to create job pathways for justice impacted individuals.

Annie Evans ([02:32](#)):

To learn more about how the cloud is helping inmates and their families connect and safeguard their future, Ray sat down with Arti Finn, co-founder and chief strategy officer at APDS. Take a listen.

Arti Finn ([02:45](#)):

For as long as I can remember through my career in corporate affairs, business development, sales, I've been really curious about human potential and the notion of second chances. The United States was founded on second chances, and unfortunately our current system of incarceration doesn't help rehabilitate the people we incarcerate, or empower them to do better upon release. The US spends I think something like 80 billion dollars on incarceration, more than any other country in the history of the world, and we incarcerate more people than any other country in the history of the world.

([03:22](#)):

We're great at punishing them, warehousing them, and making people better criminals. And so when we thought about starting APDS and what led to my current career, I really wanted to understand, what it is that makes some people struggle and others thrive? And the answer to that is education. One out of three US citizens justice-impacted. Sixty-eight percent of the folks we incarcerate in this country do not have a high school equivalency or a high school diploma. So they've been failed by the traditional K-12 system. I thought "you know what? There's an opportunity to do better." And so APDS was really born out of that idea.

Ray Rogers ([04:06](#)):

How are some of the specific programs and work that the organization is doing, how is it aiming to respond to these specific challenges around education that stem from the corrections system? And how are states and facilities working with APDS?

Arti Finn ([04:20](#)):

Our mission is to create pathways to living wage employment. We do that by charging the jurisdictions themselves to pay for access to our motivational and educational programs that provide real outcomes people can use. So whether that's a vocational credential, a high school diploma, a post-secondary education, and we combine that with a number of rehabilitative programs because I think something like 60% of the folks we incarcerate, 60% to 70%, have mental health problems. So you can't just provide the education. You actually have to provide the resources they need to become stable and keep themselves stable.

Ray Rogers ([05:05](#)):

And in 2020, APDS announced that it was what we call "all-in" on AWS. How has building on the cloud helped the organization to advance its mission and to begin to put actual programs and solutions to some of these challenges?

Arti Finn ([05:21](#)):

AWS really is the backbone of everything we run programs on. APDS then takes best in class programming and individualizes that programming by doing assessments on the front end, providing a pathway through the programming for that individual. So at the end of it, they get what we call a transcript. And that transcript idea really allows folks to showcase what they've done while they've been incarcerated, and how they have improved their educational achievements and their mental health. And

the idea that AWS really is the leading provider in technology and everything that we have can be built on it allows us to scale these resources in a very significant way.

Ray Rogers ([06:16](#)):

So let's dive into one of the solutions that APDS is currently building and working with. It's called ThrIVE. Can you tell us what spurred the idea to create this video communication tool and what it's really providing for justice-impacted people?

Arti Finn ([06:30](#)):

ThrIVE is built on Amazon Chime. The idea is that we can give access for free to jurisdictions to allow folks to communicate with their friends and family. And so from one study done by the Minnesota DOC (Department of Corrections), and keep in mind this is for paid video visitation, each unique visitor to an incarcerated person reduced the risk of reconviction by 3%. Each unique visitor. And if you combine that with the number of people who received visits during incarceration, their felony reconviction rates were down 13%, and revocations for technical violations for people on parole was 25% lower.

Ray Rogers ([07:16](#)):

How else are justice-impacted people using ThrIVE to make sure that they're staying up to date with not just family and friends, but also with their legal counsel and things like that?

Arti Finn ([07:28](#)):

There's an aspect of ThrIVE that allows for privileged communication between attorneys and those who are incarcerated. The reason we did that is that a number of folks have problems connecting with their attorneys. The phone calls are expensive as I mentioned, and the video calls are expensive. So to make a free platform that allows them an opportunity to advocate on their own behalf and communicate with their attorneys was really a key part of what we wanted to do. And this is something that's just launching across the country. The state of Utah is using ThrIVE now. They've had over 2000 justice impacted people using ThrIVE over the last couple of months, and I think we've seen over 10,000 hours of use.

Ray Rogers ([08:22](#)):

Do you have any anecdotes to share about individuals who have benefited from ThrIVE?

Arti Finn ([08:27](#)):

Yeah, so we have a couple of stories. When we launched ThrIVE, we did it actually on Christmas Eve in the state of Utah. And there we saw... I think people need to understand this was during COVID, people had been prevented from coming into the facilities because fear of COVID spread, and so folks were really dependent on any way to communicate. And so for us to be able to provide ThrIVE to folks in the state of Utah, we saw families celebrating Christmas together, we saw husbands and wives celebrating birthdays that they had missed, and we even saw one mother who told us she had not been able to visit her son for the last five years, and that ThrIVE was the first time she'd even been able to communicate or see him over the last five years.

([09:23](#)):

While ThrIVE is a newer aspect of our business, we really see it as a key component to the support that our justice-impacted learners need to be successful post-release. And the fact that it's free is another really important piece of what APDS provides, and it's part of our approach to corrections in general.

Ray Rogers ([09:47](#)):

In addition to ThrIVE, what other cloud powered projects are in the works at APDS?

Arti Finn ([09:52](#)):

So at APDS, we know that... I think I've mentioned this before, less than 20% of the folks who we incarcerate in this country get access to real programming. So our criminal justice system is really just warehousing people. And we thought "technology can really be a key differentiator here." So programming is limited inside correctional facilities by two things. One, lack of classroom space. And two, lack of teachers. And so one of the programs that runs on the backbone of AWS is Virtual Classroom. It allows anyone from their housing unit or their cell to participate in classes remotely and in real time, which has been a game changer for many correctional facilities.

Ray Rogers ([10:45](#)):

And this aligns really well because AWS has a commitment to provide free cloud computing skills training for 29 million people by 2025. How is APDS part of turning this vision into a reality?

Arti Finn ([10:57](#)):

So we are doing a pilot with AWS inside the DC jail where we are offering a certified cloud practitioner credential to those who are justice impacted. Whenever we launch any new programs at APDS, we always pilot them. And in particular, jails are a tougher environment to pilot, which is what we like because the turnover is very high. So we started with 21 folks enrolled in this course. The only prerequisites were a high school diploma or a high school equivalency, and you had to take four networking classes that were available on the device. If you did that, you were eligible to sit. So of those 21 folks, we've had 16 who have made it through the program. The other five have been transferred to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, which is where folks from the DC jail go if they're sentenced.

([11:54](#)):

And we are super excited that we'll have 13 folks ready to sit for the exam in about a week. And we have fingers crossed that our pass rates will be above 50%. I know these guys have been working super hard. I think once this pilot is done, we'll know how to scale it, we'll know what it takes to support it. And interestingly, we were able to pilot this with folks who were really propelling themselves through the course rather than teacher led, which means that it can scale across the country. So in over 20 states, in our hundreds of facilities, I think everyone has asked for this program and I'm excited because this is just the first of what we're going to be doing with AWS.

Ray Rogers ([12:47](#)):

How do you see the work that APDS is doing and piloting and thinking about, impacting the rest of the country?

Arti Finn ([12:54](#)):

Ninety-five percent of the people we incarcerate in this country are getting out, yet 60% to 75% of formerly incarcerated individuals remain unemployed one year after release. So when you talk to

employers, you know workforce staffing is struggling. You take those two opportunities and... Employers already know that when they hire justice-impacted folks they perform at level or at par or even better than folks who are not justice-impacted. So APDS really is trying to bring, through education and programming, those two sides together so that employers have a pathway to hire people who really want an opportunity to change their lives. Employers are really the key to breaking the cycle of incarceration, and we look forward to working with many more. And we are super excited that AWS has really stepped in to be our first. And we look forward to many more partnerships with other employers who will follow suit.

Annie Evans ([14:02](#)):

If you liked today's episode, stream some of our other episodes covering diversity, equity, and inclusion, including episode 67 to hear how Creative Assembly uses the cloud to foster a creative and inclusive games industry. And remember to join the conversation on social media with #FixThisbyAWS.

Ray Rogers ([14:21](#)):

A huge thank you to our guest, Arti, and thank you for tuning in. If you liked today's show, please remember to subscribe, rate, review, and share. We'll be here on the next one.