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## **Over 2,000 inmates released each year: Coming 'home' not easy**

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AFRO Staff Writer

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, more than 8,000 previously incarcerated persons from federal prisons have returned to the District in the last four years seeking a new start.

Between 2002 and 2005 on average, more than 2,000 offenders have been released to the D.C. Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA). However, CSOSA has a responsibility for increasing public safety and crime prevention programs while reducing recidivism. To do this, CSOSA works to reduce re-arrests, improve education levels, increase employment rates and to reduce drug use among the population it serves.

However some advocates for ex-offenders believe that many previously incarcerated persons (PIPS) are being set up for failure because of government restrictions that do not allow them to prosper once they have re-entered society with good intentions.

"CSOSA must be commended for sticking its neck out there to help us but the feds deliberately destroy opportunities to make a decent living by putting up restrictions that do not allow us to prosper," said Abu Bakr Karim, director of Pathway, a re-entry program for ex-offenders.

"Ex-offenders are restricted from getting Pell grants to go back to school, yet they say 'educate yourselves to have a better life.' They can not live in public housing, yet they don't make enough to live anywhere else. Many jobs have been cut out for us. What are we supposed to do,' Karim asked. 'We want to do better. It seems that the system wants us to fail to make jobs for individuals who live remote places across America working in the prisons.'"

Cedric Hendricks is associate director for CSOSA. He believes that the community can help in big ways to address the problem. "The community can support by volunteering to become mentors or life coaches to provide one-on-one or group support to men and women seeking to transform their lives," said Hendricks.

CSOSA also has Community Justice Action Networks, which are community forums committed to developing resources and opportunities for successful reentry.



Hendricks said the D.C. Department of Employment Services (DOES) has also been a strong partner with CSOSA to provide office space and personnel to support the government's One Stop Reentry Center at 609 H Street NE. The program provides the life -skills training and subsidized job placement for men and women returning to the community.

In addition, the D.C. Department of Mental Health and Department of Health are available to assist ex-offenders in need of other services. There are about 15,000 individuals under CSOSA supervision with about two-thirds on probation. Housing remains an issue for those who opted to return to the District after their families have been re-located by demolished federal housing or voluntarily moved away.

"CSOSA has very limited resources for housing assistance. With U.S. Parole Commission approval, offenders who are homeless upon release can be referred to the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Residential Reentry Centers for 90 to 120 days as a public law placement," said Karim.

"We have fought hard to make the government understand that when you restrict jobs from individuals who need them the most, you are in fact pushing them to a life of crime from desperation," he said. "Their efforts paid off."

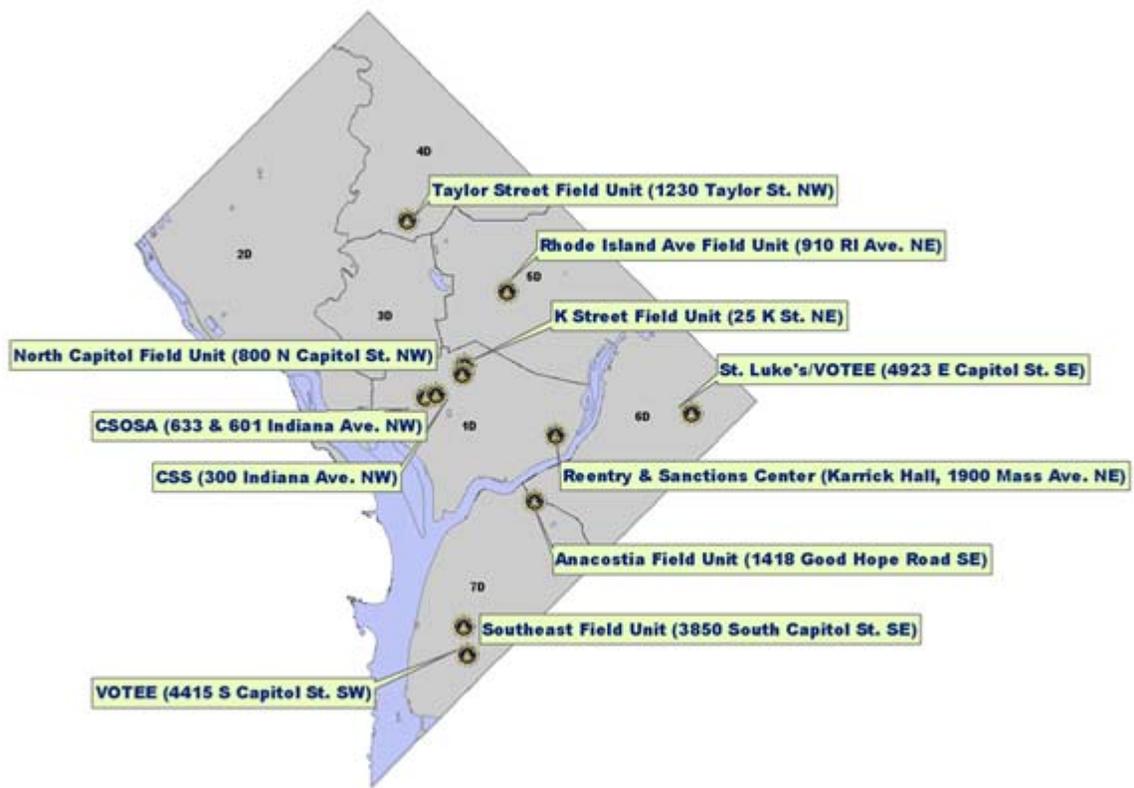
In 2004, the D.C. Councilwoman Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3) sponsored The Omnibus Public Safety Ex-Offender Self-Sufficiency Reform Act of 2004 that lifted restrictions that otherwise prevented ex-offenders on obtaining licenses to work such as:

- \* Asbestos Workers
- \* Barbers
- \* Cosmetologists
- \* Commercial Bicycle Operators
- \* Electricians
- \* Funeral Directors
- \* Operating Engineers
- \* Plumber/Gasfitters
- \* Refrigeration and Air-conditioning Mechanics
- \* Steam Engineers

Eric Newton, 27, spent 11 years of his life in and out of the system. He returned from prison just in time to attend the funeral of one of his best friends who was murdered by gun violence.

He opted to complete all of his time in prison to avoid probation. "I need a job. What do I do. Most programs are for those on probation," said Newton.

"This is real for ex-offenders. It is sometimes complicated. We want and need to define and speak for ourselves to address these problems," said Karim.



*CSOSA Offices and Learning Labs by Police District*

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