

The Washington Times

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Churches help reform parolees

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published 1/9/2002

Churches throughout the District are setting a national precedent by joining a new legal effort to help convicted criminals become law-abiding citizens.

Already, 39 churches have become part of what is being called the "faith community" to announce the program on Re-Entry Sunday on Jan. 13 when churchgoers will express their faith through service.

Pastors will encourage members to become mentors, then on Feb. 7 there will be an orientation meeting to teach mentors how to work with trained reformists to help ex-criminals find housing, get jobs and abide by laws.

"I believe truly this is the breakthrough the city really needs," said D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat.

About 2,500 convicts in the District are released on parole and probation annually. The 62 percent national recidivism rate means 1,550 of those convicts will commit new crimes.

"Too often, we forget these individuals are part of our community, and they come back," said Mayor Anthony A. Williams. "We must mentor our returning inmates just like Moses mentored Joshua."

Keeping track of criminals on pretrial release, probation and parole is the job of the newly formed Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA), which will continue operating halfway houses. But those houses only monitor and work with criminals up to six months.

"Churches, mosques and temples are the cornerstones of community," said CSOSA interim Director Jasper Ormond. "If the returning offender can find a welcome there, then he is not alone. He can tap into the strength of the community and use it to reinforce his resolve to establish a life that is free from drugs and crime."

Most convicts were substance abusers, with an average educational level of no more than fifth grade and few, if any, job skills. Nonetheless, most of them emerge from prison "with high hopes and sincere resolutions" to do right, Mr. Ormond said.

Mentors may help the convicts get jobs. There will be training to help convicts become literate, increase their education, Mr. Ormond said.

Many convicts were abandoned by their parents, and the foster-care system simply could not fill the gap, said Mr. Ormond, who also claimed "abandonment is a prerequisite" for crime and drug addiction.

"These are not children. They are grown up, but they need guidance," Mrs. Norton said.

The District's nonvoting congressional representative praised the faith community for helping D.C. residents overcome the fear of crimes being committed in their neighborhoods.

"I feel so strongly about this. I really do," Mrs. Norton said.

Obie Washington, director of the D.C. Department of Corrections, said his 30 years of experience have shown that convicts are reformed by getting jobs, support from family or friends, by a "change of heart" about right and wrong, and significant substance-abuse treatment.

Lorton's seven local prisons were closed last year, and the 10,000 inmates, convicted of crimes in the District, were sent to prisons throughout the nation, including West Virginia, Ohio and Arizona. Upon release, those convicts are paroled and returned to the District.

The mentoring partnership is supported by the Council of Churches of Greater Washington and the Muslim Society of Washington, and has more than 100 members, Mr. Ormond said.

"It is unprecedented," he added.

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