

washingtonpost.com

Helping Inmates Find Their Way Home

Program Pairs Ex-Convicts With Houses of Worship

By Henri E. Cauvin

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, February 12, 2004; Page DZ10

Antonio Pinder used to be scared of returning home from prison, stricken by fear that he would fall back into the life that landed him behind bars. He hadn't had a steady job before he was sent away 13 years ago, and he worried that he never would.

A year out of prison, he is still searching for work.

But perhaps more important than a job, he says, what he's found since his release from a federal prison in West Virginia is the resilience to carry him through the inevitable setbacks that bedevil many ex-offenders coming home.

For that, Pinder credits the efforts of the mentors who have been working with him and with dozens of other returning inmates as part of a program that gives churches, mosques and other religious organizations an instrumental role in shepherding such men and women back into the community.

Launched in 2002, the Faith Community Partnership is run by the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, the federal office that serves as the District's probation and parole administrator.

Marked by a criminal record, Pinder is one of the many ex-offenders who find it difficult to land good work. For too many of them, that is the first step on a path right back to prison.

Pinder, 35, could well have been one of those who tripped up. So far, he has found only periodic work through a temp agency. He'd like to work for Metro as a bus driver.

For now, though, what he has is hope. And that, he said, is thanks to the efforts of the new faith partnership.

Now in its second full year, the program costs about \$300,000 annually, most of which is used to pay for the administrative staff who coordinate the program.

From Pilgrim Baptist Church to the Founding Church of Scientology, 42 institutions have signed on to help mentor offenders. About 200 mentors are working with about 100 convicts like Pinder.

"It just gives you that spiritual stability," he said. "You feel someone cares about you other than yourself."

For Pinder, one of those people was Wanda L. Jackson, who works with a group called Reintegrating Alternatives Personal Program, or RAPP. The organization is housed at the Faith Tabernacle Church of Prayer in Southeast Washington and draws many of its volunteers from the church.

They linked up even before Pinder was released from prison, where he was serving time for cocaine distribution. Those final days before his release were fraught with anxiety.

"I didn't know what to expect. I was paranoid, paranoid of going back in the same situation because I couldn't get a job," he said. "I went into prison when I was 22 years old. I grew up in prison."

So as his release date neared, he started telephoning Jackson, one of three mentors he would eventually find through the partnership. "Every Sunday morning, I was calling," he said.

And Jackson was already embracing him, if only over the phone. "I would drop everything and talk to him. I think it helped prepare him. . . . I felt his apprehension."

The mentoring program, spawned amid the Bush administration's enthusiasm for faith-based programs of all sorts, has drawn an increasing number of institutions into its fold, said Paul A. Quander Jr., director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency.

And as word of the program and the opportunities it presents has spread among inmates, interest from those who are soon to be returning has spread as well, coordinators in the program say.

To be eligible to participate, a returning inmate cannot be a convicted sex offender, cannot have a severe substance abuse problem and cannot have multiple convictions for violent crimes.

Many inmates are challenging their status as violent offenders in an effort to be eligible for the program, said Abubakr Muhammad Karim, reentry director for the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership.

"What's happening is the guys that are in prison are starting to recognize the success of the guys who were in the program," Karim said.

A new video link between Washington and the federal prison in North Carolina that houses more D.C. inmates than any other prison has helped the offenders and future mentors begin forging bonds weeks or months before inmates are actually released.

One beneficiary was Joseph Johnson, 48, who was released from the prison on Jan. 22 after serving about 15 years behind bars, originally on drug distribution charges but more recently for violating his parole by using drugs.

Like Pinder, Johnson has no regular job. He nearly landed a \$17-an-hour carpenter's job on a construction project, but that fell through last week after only a couple of days.

"When he said 'We can't use you,' I wasn't discouraged," he said.

But he was, at the very least, disappointed -- so much so that he didn't call his mentor, the Rev. Sharon Best of New Commandment Baptist Church in Northwest, who learned of his setback as he recounted it while speaking with a reporter.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Best, I didn't call to tell you," he told her.

"That's when you're supposed to call," she said.

"It didn't make me do anything bad," he replied in his own defense, alluding to the many days in his life when such a turn of events would have sent him looking for drugs.

Instead, he went back to the list of prospective jobs and kept plugging away. Within a couple of days, he had another job possibility lined up. "I got blessed," he said, "by keeping my composure."

Helping inmates find that equilibrium amid the tumult in their lives is a part of what the mentoring is supposed to do. Along with the officers who are paid to keep track of the parolees, the mentors, all of them volunteers, are another set of ears and eyes.

Quander, a former prosecutor, knows that the program will be judged not on individual stories but by broader measures. "I can't rely merely on anecdotal tales of success," he said. "I have to rely on hard numbers."

By those hard numbers, the success of the program so far would appear to be modest.

The re-arrest rate for D.C. ex-offenders has been falling generally, down to 17 percent in 2003 from 27 percent in 1999. About 15 percent of participants in the faith-based program are being re-arrested -- only a couple of percentage points below the overall rate, and several points above where Quander would like to see it. "If we can get into the single digits, I'll be very happy," he said.

When he took over the offender supervision office, Quander inherited a fledgling faith-based program. It didn't take him long, he said, to conclude that the program could form an integral part of the agency's efforts, particularly at a time when the city would be facing large influxes of people coming home from prison.

"When I looked at the program and what it was offering, and how we could take that to the next level and how we could make a difference, I thought it was not only worth keeping but expanding," Quander said.

The Rev. Herbert C. Bruce, of Pilgrim Baptist Church in Northeast Washington, said that although people were enthusiastic early on about helping, they were also unsure how it would all turn out.

"I think if you have a church saying they didn't go into this with trepidation, they're lying," Bruce said. "We didn't know what to expect."

What they have come to expect are successes like Shirley Hall, also jobless but nonetheless hopeful and enthusiastic about how God has come into her life with the help of her mentors at Upper Room Baptist Church in Northeast.

First sent to prison in 1986 on a heroin distribution charge, Hall served four years of a four-to-12-year sentence. But she couldn't steer clear of trouble once free, and twice landed back in prison.

Now back out -- for good, she hopes -- Hall, 40, is looking for a job. She actually had what she thought would be a good one. She was delivering packages for a courier service and the pay -- \$600 a week -- seemed good, until she discovered that half of that would be deducted for use of the van.

Already she was enduring an arduous commute that forced her to leave around 4:30 a.m. and ride a bus from Naylor Road SE to Friendship Heights. There she would board a Metro train to Rockville. And in Rockville, she would catch a taxi for \$6.50.

It just didn't make sense. So she quit.

But she is confident. It took her a while to find her mentors, too. After three tries, she finally found people who are keeping her strong, among them Deborah Ford and the Rev. Catherine Bego of Upper Room Baptist.

"I don't worry about it," Hall said. "God got me. I'm going to get a job."

© 2004 The Washington Post Company