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Coming home

Groups try to ease transition for ex-offenders

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By **MELISSA FERRARA**

Staff Writers

It's seen by society as an opportunity to start over: Every year, about 2,600 men and women leave federal prisons to return to the District.

The Bureau of Prisons sends them packing with – at most – \$500, transportation back to the District, a change of clothing suitable for a job search and an overcoat.

That's not exactly what most D.C. residents would consider to be adequate tools for success, according to many advocates for ex-offenders, who are initiating programs to decrease the recidivism rate. Pulling from their varied resources -- government aid to their churches to simple volunteerism -- different groups around the District are developing programs to help ex-offenders become contributing members of the community.

The Business Community

Offenders are given a bus ticket, but no direction, when they get out of prison, according to National Business League President Ron Evans. Evans is working to provide a more concrete route to success for ex-offenders, rooted in the business world and, therefore, an immediate connection to jobs.

"There are not many jobs in manufacturing license tags," Evans said.

About 2,600 prisoners are released back into the District every year. This rate will result in about 25,000 new ex-offenders in the D.C. community over the next 10 years, Evans said.

Evans, also a 5A advisory neighborhood commissioner, is leading the league's push for a program focused on housing, jobs, job training and providing family assistance among its ex-offender services.

Evans is using the league to facilitate his new reentry program, hoping to attract other businesses and help create better opportunities for offenders.

"Hopefully, I can take this around the country," Evans said of his new program.

Federal Reentry Assistance

The Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia is a federal agency that oversees reentry in the District. Formed by Congress on Aug. 4, 2000, the agency offers training, job placement, emergency services and housing among its services. Treatment of everything from mental health to drugs is also offered.

"Simply reducing drug use reduces crime," said Leonard Sipes, a spokesman for the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency.

The first eight weeks after an offender is released he or she must be drug tested twice a week. The following 12 weeks, the offender is tested once a week, Sipes said.

The drug testing is in addition to eight face-to-face visits, four in the community and four in the agency's office. The efforts to form relationships through mandatory contact and drug testing fall under the agency's Community Supervision Program.

"Community supervision plays a vital role in keeping our city safe," said Paul Quander, director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, in March 3 Senate testimony. "It is the bridge that offenders must cross to move from bad choices to a better life."

The program provides an accountability aspect to reentry, Sipes said. By developing a sense of responsibility to his or her community, offenders would hopefully be deterred in harming or from leaving that community.

Drug treatment programs and related counseling, through the agency and other community institutions, work to keep offenders substance abuse free and connected to the community.

A 21-bed Assessment and Orientation Center, an eight-story, renovated building located on the grounds of D.C. General Hospital, "provides 30 days of intensive clinical assessment, treatment readiness, and reintegration programming to high risk defendants and offenders with serious drug abuse problems," Quander said in his testimony.

The center has treated about 250 people a year since its inception in 1996. Eighty percent of participants have completed the program. Graduates' arrest rates are almost 75 percent lower than non-participants, Quander added.

"CSOSA offers 2,100, mostly residential, drug treatment slots to D.C. offenders each year," according to agency documents provided to *The Common Denominator*.

In addition to the agency's drug treatment programs, the agency also provides mental health treatment, sex offender therapy, domestic violence treatment, educational services and employment counseling and placement to ex-offenders.

The "overwhelming majority" of the agency's programs are not faith-based, Sipes said. But, "the faith-based initiative is something we would like to see grow."

The Faith Community

In 2001, the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership was formed.

"The partnership seeks to increase resources and opportunities available to returning offenders by

linking the offenders with the support, services, and fellowship of strong community institutions," according to an agency advertisement for Reentry Week 2004 events, held Jan. 24-30.

The partnership consists of more than 40 interdenominational institutions and has developed a mentorship program that has trained more than 200 mentors and placed more than 100 offenders.

"Community supervision lasts only a short time, while the faith community can be a source of permanent inspiration," said the Rev. Donald Isaac, executive director at the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership, in March 3 Senate testimony.

Sharon Best is the Cluster C coordinator for the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership, covering Wards 1,2 ,3 and 4. Initially, she looked to her wards' faith institutions for mentors, but her scope soon expanded to job programs, life skills ministries, and food and clothing gathering and distribution, Best said.

Mentoring is still her largest responsibility.

"I recruit mentors for CSOSA and pair offenders and mentors," Best said.

The agency does thorough assessments of mentors and mentees, looking at their backgrounds, crimes committed, possible substance abuse issues, whether or not there is a community network for the mentee and their hobbies to try determine a successful match, Best said.

The agency also recognizes the importance of the faith community. Video mentoring, conducted in the Rivers Correctional Institution in North Carolina, begins the faith-based mentoring process long before offenders' release.

Samuel Paige is a faith-based, reentry success story who now helps other ex-offenders.

"I have been there and done that," Paige said. "I have been out [of prison] going on 14 years."

Paige credits Marjorie Ransom, coordinator of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church's reentry program, and Pauline Sullivan, executive director of a reentry program called DC-CURE, for his success.

DC-CURE and Sullivan wrote a 312-page book on reentry, a guide for community activists and offenders, called "Starting Out, Starting Over, Staying Out."

Ransom and Sullivan helped him get his first job after incarceration at a fast food restaurant, teaching him to be responsible and enabling him to move out of a halfway house and into his own apartment, Paige said.

"I learned to be responsible and to pay my bills," Paige added.

Paige attributes his achievement to a "spiritual awakening."

After he saw himself achieving and sustaining his lifestyle, he became more confident and able to stay out of prison.

Paige started working with Ransom, as a counselor, about two years ago.

The program enables us "to build strong sincere relationships with individuals who have been incarcerated," Paige said. "It allowed people to come into my life and help me."

The faith community also recognizes its limitations.

"Where we fall down is getting jobs and housing," Ransom said.

The partnership offers job training, but Evans is focusing on job placement.

"It is fine that the faith-based community is involved, but they don't have the jobs," Evans said.

Evans said he would work with the churches to help form his program, having already consulted three or four ministers in the District. Evans and his team have had two meetings with the chairman of the U.S. Parole Commission, Edward F. Reilly Jr., the last one was April 2, to discuss potential sources of funding and other business-based reentry programs and how to possibly incorporate them into Evans' effort.

District Agencies

The D.C. Department of Employment Services works with the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency to help place ex-offenders in jobs. Project Empowerment II, a one-year welfare-to-work program for ex-offenders modeled after a program targeted at welfare recipients, ended in November 2003 after its funding was cut. It still serves the offenders who entered it during the course of its one-year service, said Charles Jones, director of Project Empowerment.

The department started developing a new pilot program from a Department of Justice grant. It will mirror Project Empowerment II. Five D.C. government agencies said they would work with the department on the program, Jones said.

The Department of Human Services, the Youth Services Administration, which is under the former, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the Department of Health and the Department of Mental Health have all agreed to have an office on site at the Department of Employment Services.

The inclusion of the offices should help facilitate ex-offenders obtaining driver's licenses, substance abuse help and mental health assistance, Jones added.

His office also provides employment training and life skills classes. Evans believes the District's educational needs require more than that.

Evans said vocational training could help to reduce the rate of D.C. residents entering the system by offering better, legitimate job opportunities and would offer more practical skills for ex-offenders upon entering the job market.

The Nonprofit Community

Evans is not alone in his efforts, many other D.C. nonprofit organizations target reentry issues.

Ivy Lange, equal justice works fellow and an attorney for the Reentry Project, works with the D.C. Prisoners Rights Project. Her focus is working with people with criminal records and their legal issues. The biggest part of her efforts is a rights education class, informing ex-offenders of how their rights

have changed because of their convictions. Topics for discussion include: employment, credit, raising children and obtaining identification.

The classes are "short lessons that focus on the law and how it treats people in different topic arenas," Lange said.

Technology has played a large role in Lange's success. She developed an Internet listserv of more than 140 individuals and organizations to keep people informed of new reentry issues and addressing solutions to typical reentry problems.

The agency also uses its Web site, www.csosa.gov, to provide information on reentry. The site recently expanded to include a list of victims services available in the District and links to services in Maryland and Virginia.

Lange also helps people with legal issues on an individual basis and runs the Ex-Offender Reintegration Coalition, where offenders and representatives from integration programs meet every fourth Friday of the month to discuss reentry issues.

The coalition met on March 26. Major topics of discussion included the D.C. Council's Required Notice to the Community Act and various juvenile justice bills the council is weighing.

The coalition began as a network of providers discussing reentry, but now it is more participant-focused, including ex-offenders and their family members, Lange said.

The coalition has "more of a presence in this capacity," Lange added.

Lange uses DC-CURE's reentry book as a guide for her clients. For every copy of "Starting Out, Starting Over, Staying Out" purchased, Sullivan and DC-CURE can send two copies to a prisoner, Lange added.

The book, also available on the agency's website, provides resources and instructions for offenders on everything from housing and food, to finding clothing for a job interview, to obtaining a driver's license.

A special section of the guide targets women's issues with reentry, citing the risk of pregnancy and the burden of childcare, most often the responsibility of mothers.

The agency held its First Woman's Reentry Forum on March 27. The agency does offer special assistance to women ex-offenders to meet their unique needs, but this was the first time the agency looked to the community for direct input on its efforts, said Margaret Quick, senior intergovernmental affairs specialist for the CSOSA.

About 299 women from the District are incarcerated, Quick said. The agency works with the Metropolitan Police Department to keep track of D.C. offenders and help them take advantage of reentry programs that they should initiate prior to their release.

Closing Lorton prison created another obstacle for reentry. Lorton, which had been serving as the District's correctional facility, closed in November 2001. The process to close Lorton began in 1997 after the Revitalization Act was passed by Congress. Prisoners were then phased out of Lorton and placed in the federal Bureau of Prisons system, where they could be moved to another correctional facility in any part of the country.

At any time, more than 7,000 D.C. residents are incarcerated, but about 6,000 of those offenders are in the federal system. The Bureau of Prisons tries to have prisoners within 500 miles of the District, but many prisoners are not fortunate enough to be close to their home, Lange said.

The distance complicates reentry for three major reasons, Lange said.

- There is an obvious disconnect for families. Many offenders' families cannot afford to travel far distances to maintain ties with prisoners. Prisoners are then further detached from society, making reentry a more difficult battle.
- The distance creates a disconnect from community services, which the offender should be becoming more familiar with in order to ease reentry. A lack of educational opportunities is a major disadvantage for federally incarcerated D.C. offenders. Prisoners at Lorton could take courses with professors who volunteered from Georgetown, Howard and other D.C. universities and they could earn their GED while incarcerated. There are no correspondence course options for federal prisoners, which leaves them without GED or furthered degree options.
- Housing is a large part of reentry. When prisoners are so far removed from the community, its services and their families, they have a much harder time establishing housing. Public housing, a service a large number of offenders apply for, has restrictions and guidelines that make it very difficult for ex-offenders to obtain housing, solely based on their criminal history.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams's proposed fiscal 2005 budget allocates \$1 million for ex-offender reentry programs, said Sharon Gang, a spokeswoman for the mayor.

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