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Mentors Guide Inmates Through First Stages of Freedom

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Deep inside Rivers Correctional Institution, a federal prison in North Carolina, D.C. inmate Thomas Holston is getting his first look back at his hometown in a little more than a year.

Holston, 38, is a few days from release after serving 13 months for distribution of marijuana. So, Tuesday night, he is sitting in front of a video camera and a monitor that link him via closed circuit television to a conference room in Washington, where a volunteer mentor is smiling back at him.

"Just be sure to make your kids your priority," Shea Taylor, a volunteer from Redemption Ministries, is saying. "You've paid your debt to society. Now's the time to live your life . . . but if you can't make it, your kids aren't going to, either."

"I hear you," Holston says, nodding.

The 12-minute conversation, with awkward pauses and the normal drops in conversation between strangers getting to know one another, is part of a growing number of state, federal and faith-based programs that are trying to change the way the nation deals with its ever-ballooning number of former prison inmates. In these programs, the returning offender is seen not so much as a criminal to be feared, but rather as a returning member of the community who needs a little encouragement to start anew.

That is an especially emotional point in the District, where a 1997 study showed that one in two African American men ages 18 to 35 were under some form of correctional supervision. Given those statistics, and with an estimated 2,500 inmates returning to the District this year alone, law enforcement and church groups have set up a pilot mentoring program that involves church volunteers. The \$312,000 program pairs inmates with personal mentors to help them navigate the first tricky months out of incarceration, where everything from applying for a driver's license to navigating the Metro can be a frustrating challenge.

Run by the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, a federal agency that oversees the District's released inmates, and a faith-based advisory committee chaired by the Rev. Donald Isaac, associate pastor of Southeast Tabernacle Baptist Church, the year-old program has so far matched about 100 inmates and mentors. The idea is to focus intense attention on each inmate in the hope that none returns to drug use or other criminal habits once released, said Cedric Hendricks, the agency's associate director for legislative affairs.

"It's more rewarding than anything you can imagine," said Tom Woodson, who coordinates volunteers in Wards 7 and 8. "For the first time, you have law enforcement, churches and volunteers working to keep people straight, to keep people home. . . . You get to see families reuniting, people changing their lives forever."

Pulling about 200 volunteers from 45 congregations across the city, churches send prospective mentors through eight hours of workshops. The sessions teach them basic communications skills, how to respond to potentially difficult scenarios with released inmates and how to help someone overcome substance

abuse.

Agency officers screen inmates still in prison who have volunteered for the program. Sex offenders, repeat violent offenders and people with serious drug histories are barred.

The inmate/mentor pairs then meet and talk, in person or on the phone, developing a relationship that might last into the future.

"The incarceration rates for the city are so high that this has become one of the fundamental issues in our community," Isaac said. "The real test for these guys is those first 60 to 90 days when they are released, and that's when we want to be there for them."

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