

Forum Tackles Challenges Women Face

By Sylvia Moreno
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Samantha Payne isn't just an ex-offender, she's pretty much been a lifer. She entered her first juvenile detention center in the District at 13, made her way into the D.C. Jail, spent a decade in a Maryland state penitentiary and then served time in federal prison.

Now she's on probation on a federal charge of possession of crack cocaine, and living in a halfway house. Next month, she will return to the free world -- for good, she says.

"I'm 40 years old, and I'm just tired," said Payne, who yesterday attended a forum on the special needs of female ex-offenders as they reenter society. "I feel that life has much more to offer. If I stay sober, everything else falls into place, and if I stay connected to God, everything else falls into place."

For other women incarcerated like she once was, this is her advice: "Stay focused, and keep your head up."

It takes that but also a myriad supportive services, said the forum organizers -- the federal Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency and the Faith-Based Reentry Collaborative.

As with male ex-offenders, the four main issues facing women returning to the District are housing, employment, education and health care, said Cedric R. Hendricks, associate director of the supervision agency. But women often face additional burdens, such as reassuming the role of caretaker of children they left behind and perhaps, breaking destructive ties to abusive spouses or partners.

"All this weighs in when somebody's coming back home," Hendricks said.

The agency supervises 15,000 District residents, about two-thirds of them sentenced to parole by the courts and a third released on parole or probation. About 5 percent are women and the average age is 36, Hendricks said.

At the beginning of the year, there were just under 7,000 D.C. residents incarcerated in federal prisons across the country, 380 of them women. Eventually, they will return to the District to face the challenge of reentry that Hendricks defined as changing the "people, places and things" in their lives.

At the same time, Hendricks said, it is the responsibility of his agency, which offers help with job training, drug treatment and housing, as well as that of faith-based and social service groups to help support an ex-offender's transition.

Yesterday, about 150 attended the forum, which featured seminars on how to survive domestic violence, reconnecting with children, legal issues, human service benefits, reentering the workforce and how to start a small business. There was help with housing referrals and a voter registration drive as well.

"There is life after a penalty. Bingo! Look at me," said Rodney C. Mitchell, an ex-offender and new head of the D.C. Mayor's Office on Ex-Offender Affairs. "The whole thing is planning."

That's the practical end of reentry. But for women, there are emotional challenges tied to their children,

said Adrienne Poteat, deputy director of the supervision agency.

Mothers "come out of prison and they wonder 'How do I talk to them? How do I help them with their homework?' "

For Theresa Lowery, 48, her day-to-day challenge is staying sober, which she said she has done for 14 months. On parole, she is enrolled in a faith-based rehabilitation program and is studying to become a drug counselor.

That's her practical goal. Her emotional one: reconnecting with her family. "I now have a wonderful relationship with my kids, and my grandkids are back in my life," Lowery said. "That's a joyful feeling. God has a plan for me, and I'm sticking to it."