

Circles of Support aims at turning former prisoners' lives around (3.26.07)

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Circles of Support aims at turning former prisoners' lives around

Brown Co. program helps ex-offenders readjust

By Corinthia McCoy, Green Bay Press-Gazette
Photo by Marc Larson/Press-Gazette

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Before he was released from prison, Terry Pamanet knew he wanted to attend today's Brown County Community Circles of Support meeting at First United Methodist Church in Green Bay.

"I was very glad to hear there was such a thing," said the 36-year-old Pamanet. The program, Coming to Stay Home, utilizes volunteers in the community to act as resources and mentors to ex-offenders as a means to help them get back on their feet and become assets to the community.

Pamanet was released from prison last week after serving 20 months for his fifth operating-while-intoxicated offense. It was his second time in prison, but this time, as a free man, he plans to be patient. This time, he plans not to make the adjustment into the community alone. I am "kind of anxious to see what it (Community Circles) all involves," he said.

Community Circles, a byproduct of the Brown County Corrections Relations Board, began in 2006 after board members saw a need for a continuum of care for those released from correctional institutes or on community supervision, said Michael Schmidt, corrections board member and Community Circles volunteer.

Schmidt, the deacon and director of social concerns at the Nativity of Our Lord Parish in Ashwaubenon, said according to statistics, 95 percent of people who are incarcerated and released would return to the community where they committed the offense.

The circles program mirrors an Ohio program known as Citizen Circles. While conducting research, members found developing circles in Oshkosh and the Fox Cities, Schmidt said.

During the circles, ex-offenders tell their story, express their frustrations while volunteers offer a listening ear and help each establish goals for their lives and how to reach them.

Members from the Ohio program provided training sessions for the local circles, and now, after its first meeting, the Green Bay circle is recruiting ex-offenders, volunteers and funds.

As of now, ex-offenders returning to Green Bay are referred through the Drug Abuse Correctional Center, north of Oshkosh, said David Webster, volunteer coordinator for Community Circles.

It was through the drug abuse center that Richard Rotell received his referral.

Rotell, 39, of Green Bay attended the first circles meeting on March 12.

"I really appreciate the fact that some people care enough to give a guy support and help him out," Rotell said.

Rotell, who spent 18 months in prison for his seventh drunken driving offense, said he was not sure about attending the meeting.

"I was hesitant to think that maybe it was another watchdog organization that was just going to keep tabs on me," he said. "I know that's not the case."

Eventually, the program would like to have circles throughout the community and receive referrals from other agencies, Webster said.

Other plans include raising enough funds to hire staff members through the Dennis Maloney Fund. Known both locally and nationally for his work in criminal justice, Maloney suffered a fatal heart attack in February.

"That's how we're going to keep him alive, is work very hard to see that this program is a success," said Mary McDonald, Maloney's sister and circles volunteer.

Maloney worked for the Boys & Girls Club of Green Bay and later became the director of the Deschutes County, Oregon Juvenile Department.

"He just gave his heart and soul in making sure that everyone had a second chance," McDonald said.