

Brown County crafts program to help former inmates (7.9.06)

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Brown County crafts program to help former inmates
Citizen Circles aims to keep ex-prisoners from re-offending

By Jean Peerenboom

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Brown County and volunteers in the community are working on a program that would help former prisoners ease back into life outside prison walls and prevent them from becoming repeat offenders.

The Brown County Corrections Relations Board is set to launch the program in October that will help former inmates "change from offender to citizen," said board member Jim Golembeski.

"More than 95 percent of people who serve time in prison or jail will come home," he said. More than 2,500 offenders are under community supervision in Brown County. A national study, Golembeski said, indicates that about 30 percent of those released are rearrested within six months.

Fashioning the program after a successful venture in Ohio, the Brown County group has come up with Citizen Circles of Support. A circle is a group of community members who volunteer to meet with five or six former prisoners monthly for as long as the ex-inmate needs support, Golembeski said.

"The purpose is to provide support, help them get the services they need, help them to be accountable."

According to Jim Miller, Department of Corrections regional administrator, the idea of these circles "is to 'reach in' before the offender gets out." The volunteers begin their meetings at the jail or correctional facility and build a relationship with the person about to be released.

"They develop an accountability plan. What does he need to be successful in the community?" Miller said. "The more successful an ex-offender is, the more it enhances the entire community."

"The idea is to get to know the individual so when he comes into the community, there is a group of people who will meet regularly with him and talk about how to meet his goals. They will help with employment, transportation and contacts on where to go."

"When someone goes away for four or five years, things change. This allows them the opportunity to find out where community resources are. It gives them a hand up, not a hand-out."

The program ties in with faith-based programs and prison ministries already in existence, said Golembeski. This fall, "we will begin the first pilot. The Department of Corrections will identify people being released back to our community. An oversight committee will take over. We are recruiting volunteers for the first circle, then we will train them and oversee their work," he said. "By the end of October, we hope to have a group going."

Barbara Schiffer, who is with JOSHUA (Justice Organization Sharing Hope, United for Action) and is also on the corrections board, is excited about the project. She sees this as an extension of work JOSHUA has done on Treatment Instead of Prison programs.

"People benefit from treatment," Schiffer said, "but this reaches people on the other end who haven't had the benefit of intervention. It is such a hopeful way for neighborhoods to get a better pulse on what's happening in their neighborhood and to help people just getting out of prison."

"I really believe in this," said Kathryn Chapman, executive director of Golden House, a home for abused women in Green Bay. She recently was part of a class presentation at the Green Bay Correctional Institute. "It hit home with me how important it is to provide support for these men when getting out. I think some of them are afraid of getting out."

"We work with victims all the time here at Golden House. It's easy to think all men are bad, but that's not true. They may have grown up in an abusive home. That's not an excuse. But, if we work with them, there is less chance they will revictimize others."