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Ex-offender program in Camden tailored to meet women's needs

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For the Courier-Post

Last year, some 14,000 people were released from New Jersey prisons. About 42 percent were released at the expiration of their criminal sentence or for related reasons. The rest were released under the State Parole Board's supervision.

The Parole Board plays a vital role in the transition of inmates from prison to community life. Many ex-prisoners re-enter society without job skills, employment contacts or a legitimate work history.

Many don't know how to fill out a job application or present themselves during an interview.

Many lack basic education or face addiction or mental health issues.

Crime deterrent

Without training, education and counseling, these individuals will remain a danger to society. Fortunately, the numbers show the Parole Board's community-based programs improve public safety by reducing rates at which offenders are incarcerated for new crimes after release from prison.

In our continuing crime-prevention effort, the State Parole Board is giving new attention to female ex-prisoners.

In August, we will launch FORGE-Camden -- or Female Offender Re-entry Group Effort -- at Volunteers of America Delaware Valley Garrett House, a community release program in Camden.

FORGE will provide a gender-specific, one-stop location for rehabilitative services aimed at female parolees already in Camden. Staff members and female parole officers will connect them with state Department of Labor and Workforce Development career programs, which include resume writing, job search classes and job referrals.

FORGE will tackle the full range of factors that lead to new crimes, with links to mental health and addiction counseling, social services and Rutgers University Law School legal resources.

Unique issues

Such programs are not unique, but exist for parolees across the state. So why a parole program exclusively for women? Women returning to society face unique challenges, with needs that are different from males who are released from prison.

Their most important needs involve childcare. For obvious reasons, after leaving prison, many must overcome significant hurdles -- such as proof of a legitimate income and stable life -- if they are to regain custody of their children.

Criminal conviction creates a Catch-22 for individuals without a viable work history. On one hand, ex-offenders with families have a hard time making a living wage. On the other, conviction may restrict them from subsidized housing or other public assistance. Providing quality childcare becomes nearly impossible in such situations.

Added to these issues, many female ex-prisoners report a sense of stigma, saying once a woman is labeled a convict she will amount to nothing else. Female parolees in nongender specific programs have said the presence of male offenders can strengthen the feeling of no escape.

Safety improved As a gender-specific location, FORGE-Camden will inspire hope and responsibility, factors crucial to successful rehabilitation.

Helping these women turn away from crime is more than a service for the women. It also helps their children and families, saves untold taxpayer costs in criminal investigations, victim injuries and incarceration, and enhances the safety of families across New Jersey.

The writer is vice chairwoman of the New Jersey State Parole Board.

Published: June 29, 2007 3:10AM