

A Spiritual Path to Freedom

D.C. Agency Urges Congregations to Help Inmates Make Transition

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D.C. native Howard Chambers has spent half of his 37 years in and out of prison for dealing drugs, robbing people, getting into fights and taking cars that weren't his own.

But things changed when Chambers returned home 13 months ago from his last 3 1/2-year incarceration, and he said he's not going back. He has a job, for which he received a 12-month service award, and plans to get married soon, and he has found spiritual stability through a church -- Faith Tabernacle of Prayer in Southeast Washington.

"God works through people, and if it were not for God working through those people, I'd be back in prison," Chambers said of his fiancée, his pastor and a deacon in the church who helped him get a job at Bates Trucking, a trash removal and recycling company in Bladensburg.

"People who come home from prison need support," Chambers said. "I never had that before."

Most ex-offenders don't get that kind of support, said Cedric Hendricks, special assistant to the interim director of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency of the District of Columbia. And because they don't get help finding a job or place to live, dealing with drug addiction and emotional problems or getting other needed assistance, many will commit crimes that get them thrown back into prison, he said.

In an effort to create a broad-based support system and reduce the recidivism rate, Hendricks's agency this week announced a partnership with local houses of worship to help ex-offenders reintegrate into their communities.

At a news conference Tuesday, Mayor Anthony A. Williams called the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership an "important demonstration of support for our neighbors, friends, relatives, acquaintances and fellow D.C. residents to help them transition into living productive lives."

Successful reintegration of ex-offenders is also "crucial . . . to enhancing public safety more generally in the District," he said.

Each church, synagogue, mosque or temple will be asked to provide at least three people to mentor ex-offenders, and these support teams will receive special training. About 40 religious leaders have expressed interest in joining the partnership and will introduce the concept to their congregations this weekend.

Court Services, created by the D.C. Revitalization Act of 1997, supervises more than 10,000 people on parole, probation, and supervised and pretrial release in the District.

That number will increase significantly when an estimated 2,500 D.C. men and women are released from prison this year, making it virtually impossible to provide support with existing government services, Hendricks said.

Many are completing long sentences mandated by get-tough drug sentencing guidelines of the late 1980s and early 1990s. And some will return from federal prisons as far away as Texas, North Carolina and Michigan after being transferred during the four-year process to shut down Lorton Correctional Complex in Occoquan.

"Those coming back have likely been away for longer periods of time and been further away," Hendricks said. This new wave of ex-offenders will "feel more isolated, and their relationship with members of the community [will be] more difficult than in the past."

The success of the agency's partnership with the faith community depends on signing up as many religious organizations as possible, said Elmira Gwynn, senior quality assurance officer at Court Services. Some congregations might worry that they cannot take on another outreach ministry, she said.

But some churches already have prison ministry or reentry programs, and all provide some form of assistance to the community -- drug abuse programs, computer training and literacy workshops and work assistance programs, Gwynn said. "All we're asking is that they have the tolerance to accept ex-offenders as well as others."

Federal funds eventually may be available to participating congregations.

The Rev. Stephen E. Tucker, pastor of New Commandment Baptist Church in Northwest, applauded the faith-based prisoner reentry program and said it has been too long in coming.

"We're on the verge of a real breakthrough in church cooperation across denominational and location lines," said Tucker, whose 225-member church has graduated 50 to 60 ex-offenders in 12-week job training courses it has offered the last two years.

The Rev. Judith Talbert, Howard Chambers's pastor at Faith Tabernacle, has been involved in prison ministry for two decades and said she believes a partnership between the city and its religious organizations is necessary in helping ex-offenders and the neighborhoods to which they return.

"We must have the inclusion of the church family and the community as well as government to bring permanent behavioral change," she said. "To quote the proverb, 'You give a man a fish, you can feed him for a day. But if you teach him how to fish, he can feed himself for life.' "

The Rev. Michael Bryant, the D.C. jail chaplain for 22 years, called the program "the most positive thing" he has seen happen in the local court system and challenged the city's hundreds of congregations to get involved.

"Shame on us and all citizens of the religious community if we don't respond to this effort undertaken at this time," he said.

Information on the CSOSA/Faith Community Partnership is available by calling 202-220-5320 or going to the agency's Web site at www.csosa.gov.

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