

A second chance: Giving Inmates Hope

Written by By Babette Herrmann Sun Editor
Friday, 02 October 2015 04:00



No matter what they did, or how much time they have to serve, once released, McKinley County Adult Detention Center's former inmates must overcome obstacles and consciously change patterns to avoid what landed them in jail in the first place.

While incarcerated, some don't want help or feign it. But, the local jail does give inmates choices via self-help styled groups and classes. Some are secular, others religious-based.

These type of programs work on reducing recidivism, and the stereotypical notion that jails are breeding grounds for trouble. A place where inmates spend their days in a cell marking their time on the wall one slash at a time, or exploring ways to get into even more trouble, while finding new partners in crime.

With nearly 20 programs available, and plenty of time on their hands, there's not many excuses inmates can come up to avoid the realm of self-improvement opportunities. Whether it's a traditional sweat lodge or Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, there's something for practically every inmate at the facility.

There's another program in the conceptual stages that could eventually serve as a primary model for inmates – a road to recovery from poor lifestyle choices.

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If Warden Mabel Henderson and County Manager Bill Lee have their way – the jail will adopt the Exodus program, currently practiced by Coconino County Detention Facility. This peer-ran inmate program lays claim to lowering recidivism rates by teaming inmates with former inmates, or counselors, to foster self-improvement and confidence. Once on the outside, the support continues and the percentage of recidivism of individuals that complete the program, becomes almost nil.

Lee explained that the Exodus program is highly successful because of its emphasis on sobriety and education, in addition to creating a therapeutic community by encouraging inmates to make positive choices in their lives. This, he said, has contributed to slowing down the revolving door syndrome at the Coconino jail.

In addition, another great program model, similar to Exodus, is homegrown, Lee said. But this one is shaped for teens.

“Within our community we have JSACC [Juvenile Substance Abuse Crisis Center],” he said. “It’s a model program.”

Lee, who has explored ways to reduce recidivism rates learned the details of the Exodus program when he visited the Coconino Jail with Gallup City Councilor Fran Palochak some months back. Lee would later share the story of his visit at a council meeting, when reporting on the cash deficit the jail faces as a result of the B.I.A. severing its ties with the jail.

B.I.A. officials reportedly told county officials that they want their inmates to be detained in jails that offer programs, similar to Exodus.

With the Exodus program, inmates live in a pod or unit as usual that also had some of the comforts of home. Implementing the program will take money and time, Lee said. Rough figures have been thrown out, but it’s still too early to put a price tag on the project.

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For now, the jail relies on volunteers and some committed employees.

Sister Elizabeth Racko of Daughters of Charity for St. Vincent de Paul, who's a regular volunteer at the jail, said "it's going to be amazing to do this."

"We're open to ideas," she said of the Exodus program, or anything that will block the revolving door syndrome. "Yes, they committed a crime against society, but what happens next?"

Henderson, is on the same page as Racko. She's a warden that takes a compassionate stance in a position that requires discipline, structure and downright toughness.

She noted that every inmate has a story, and said about 85-90 percent of the inmates "don't belong here."

Their stories start out from birth, with many born into dysfunction, and poverty, domestic violence, and/or substance abuse stacked on top of it. Henderson said inmates become "institutionalized" in the penal system, but it's a cycle only they can stop, though, and that's where the jail's programs come into play.

No matter how many rehabilitation programs the jail offers, Henderson added, it will take working with the community to help a program like Exodus succeed.

Once the inmates are released, she explained, an extended program should be put into place so they can get jobs and become self-supporting.

"It pretty much has to be set up as a halfway house," she said.

Meanwhile, jail Program Director Dewayne Notah said that he sees some success with existing

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programs. He, and contributing staff, get a morale boost when former and rehabilitated inmates drop by and offer to help facilitate a class or meeting. It also gives Notah, staff, and volunteers the motivation to expand the jail's rehabilitative offerings.

A new program, for instance, "Moral Reconciliation Therapy," models itself after 12-step based programs, but it doesn't just deal with addiction. It uses the prison metaphor to reach a participant's deep-seeded behavioral issues. For example, chapter seven addresses "our first prison," which is essentially the self.

Notah said it's a rigorous program that requires some reading and honest writing.

"Some really break down and cry," he said.

MRT was implemented in June and inmates that complete it receive a certificate of completion. Two inmates, also known as "clients," have already completed the program. Earning the certificate could impress judges as well.

"Ever since this started, inmates said it makes sense," he said. "They're encouraging other cell mates to take this program."

Chester Harry, who teaches the DUI program, said his classes are a mix of volunteers and court-mandated inmates. He often overhears inmates talk about what they are going to do "when they get out."

He encourages them to act now on their behavior, and not to procrastinate.

He reminds them "What's wrong with now?"

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To learn more about the MCADC's inmate programs or to volunteer, call
(505) 726-8474.