



Everything Michigan

Kent County Jail aims to seize 'opportunity to change behavior' with new community re-entry program

By John Agar | The Grand Rapids Press

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Elunda Burrell, 46, of Grand Rapids, spoke at the press conference about the Community Re-entry Center describing how the jail community project that helps inmates return to society served her after she was arrested.

KENT COUNTY -- When an inmate is booked into the Kent County Jail, odds are it isn't the first time they've heard the bars slam shut behind them.

For 53 percent of last year's returning inmates, it was at least the sixth time they had been

locked up.

Elunda Burrell doesn't want to be one of those statistics. She took advantage of a re-entry program at the jail and, while staying at House of Prayer for women, has been sober and looks forward toward to her future.

"They provided everything in my time of need," Burrell, 46, of Grand Rapids, said Thursday.

She is an enthusiastic supporter of the Transition from Jail to Community project, launched in six communities across the U.S., including Kent County. The program seeks to coordinate efforts by police, courts and social service agencies to address needs of inmates before they are released from jail, and afterward. The jail population poses challenges, with a large number facing issues of substance abuse, mental illness, unemployment and homelessness.

But if the project is successful, it can improve lives and families, along with the public's safety, Sheriff Larry Stelma said.

"It's the right thing to do," he said.

Stelma spoke about the project, launched in 2007 by the National Institute of Corrections and Urban Institute, during a press conference at the Kent County Re-Entry Center. Local leaders were excited about the project, which is federally funded and coordinates efforts across the community to reduce recidivism.

"One of the key components is teamwork," retired Grand Rapids District Judge Patrick Bowler said.

He described the process as "reuniting the community with the people that are in jail."

The Community Re-entry Coordinating Council, which oversees the project, has representatives from law enforcement, courts, Community Mental Health, sheriff's corrections, state Department of Corrections, Grand Valley State University, the county Office of Community Corrections, Friend of Court, probation, county administrator's office, Grand Rapids Coalition to End Homelessness and Family Outreach

BY THE NUMBERS

Corrections officials say projects like Transition from Jail to Community are needed, based on these national figures on jail inmates:

- 68 percent have a substance abuse problem
- 60 percent did not graduate from high school
- 30 percent were unemployed when arrested
- 16 percent suffer from mental illness
- 14 percent had been homeless in the previous year

The Transition project's goals for inmates facing release:

- Reduce recidivism, substance abuse and homelessness
- Improve health
- Increase employment
- Increase family connections
- Increase collaboration of agencies

Sources: National Institute of Corrections and Urban Institute

Center.

The council has met monthly since August 2008.

The effort is considered "data driven," and designed to put help where it is needed.

As a faculty member of the National Drug Court Institute, Bowler said drug courts have effectively kept people off drugs, and that this effort can be successful, too. He noted 80 percent of those in jail today will be released within 30 days.

He said about one-fourth of the state's 50,000 prison inmates will be released this year.

"We know that what goes in, comes out," Bowler said. "We have a fantastic opportunity to intervene in people's lives. We have an opportunity to change behavior."

Grand Rapids Police Lt. Ralph Mason, who works with Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative, said the project will "give people the opportunity and tools they need to change their lives."

The effort goes far beyond law enforcement, said Jack Greenfield, president of Arbor Circle, which provides counseling and support services.

"This is not just about the jail. This is about our long-term public safety."

Burrell, the Grand Rapids woman staying at House of Prayer, was earlier jailed for a probation violation after a shoplifting conviction. She said the current re-entry program saved her.

"If it wasn't for the deputies here, and the sergeant and lieutenant, I don't know where I would be today."

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