

PRISONS

Getting a leg up on the outside

7 reentry councils coordinate efforts to help convicts succeed in life after leaving prison

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CRANSTON — For the first time in 15 months, Kevin Williams walked out of the Moran Medium Security Prison on Thursday, carrying his possessions in a large, white plastic bag.

His sister was waiting for him in the parking lot, ready to give him a ride home. She had a line on a possible job for him as a painter, she said. "We've got our fingers crossed."

Of the approximately 3,400 inmates who are released from the Adult Correctional Institutions each year, Williams was one of the lucky ones. He had family to help him readjust and find work.

"There are a lot of guys in there," he said, jerking his head back toward the razor-wired building he'd just left, "who don't have anything."

And for those guys who don't have anything, and even for some who do, Corrections Department Director A.T. Wall said the odds were one in three that a released inmate would be back in state custody within a year.

"When the number is that big, and they are returning that quickly, that tells us something about transition back to the community," Wall said.

To try to better those odds, the Correction Department's probation and parole division has been relying more and more on assistance from local government agencies, non-profit organizations and church and community groups to give released inmates the psychological and logistical support they need to adjust to life on the outside.

The centerpiece of the effort is a network of seven reentry councils, in Westerly, Newport, Warwick/Kent County, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Providence and Cranston; an eighth is being organized in East Providence. The councils are committees of representatives from church groups, job-training, drug-treatment and mental-health programs, housing agencies and others that are in a position to provide advice and referrals for released inmates.

Roberta Richman, the department's assistant director of rehabilitative services, said inmates go from prison, an incredibly restricted and regimented environment, yet one where their basic needs have been provided, to the outside world, where they are free to act as they choose, but also must fend for themselves.



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Mandy Booth, probation and parole officer for Newport Regional Probation, talks with an inmate about his upcoming release to probation.



Corinne Henry Brady, probation and parole officer for Providence County Regional probation, talks with an inmate.

Cheryl Robinson, president of Newport's Turning Around Ministries and vice chairwoman of the Newport Reentry Council, said the idea is to give the released inmates a new social circle to move in, to help them establish relationships with people and organizations that want them to do well, rather than the old ones that made it easier for them to get in trouble.

"People can't change immediately," she said. "If the situation you left is still there, then nothing is going to change."

After-release programs are important for Rhode Island's correctional system. The state uses what's called a split-sentence system, in which rather than meting out long prison sentences, inmates get shorter prison terms, but once out, they stay on probation for years.

A 2009 study by the Pew Center on the States found that in 2007, 1 out of every 187 adult Rhode Islanders was in prison, which ranked the state near the bottom, 46th in the nation. But Rhode Island

also had 26,843 people on probation and parole, about 1 in 31 adult Rhode Islanders, fifth-highest in the country.

Who supervises that many people is the question. Richman said the state could never hope to have enough staff to do the job.

Russell Partridge, program director at the WARM Center in Westerly, said that's where reentry councils come in. They're made up of groups that were already doing much of the work that needed to be done, but they were doing it on their own. With the coun-

cil system, he said everyone is, literally, in the same room, planning together.

Councils will get a list of inmates who are about to be released, about six months ahead of time, he said, with breakdowns on their individual cases. The council groups are then able to put together unique support programs to address each one's needs. They can also arrange for follow-ups to make sure the recently released men and women are keeping their various appointments.

Robinson said the nuts-and-bolts of daily life can be an issue for former inmates. Groups such as Turning Around help with services, such as bus tickets and rides, she said, because released inmates often don't have driver's licenses, let alone cars.

"It doesn't do any good to make an appointment to Newport County Mental Health when the bus doesn't go there," she said.

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