

## **SPECIAL REPORT, PART 2: Circles of Support seeks to end cycle of recidivism**

By Sharon Roznik • The Reporter • August 9,  
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More than 8,000 prisoners will be released from Wisconsin prisons this year.

The majority will be returning to their hometowns, looking for a chance to start a new life.

Circles of Support, a re-entry program of Goodwill Industries and Lutheran Social Services, wants to stop the revolving door in the state's criminal justice system — the cycle of crime followed by incarceration followed by parole followed by repeat crime.

In Wisconsin, 38.2 percent of offenders released from incarceration are convicted of a fresh crime within three years, according to the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

Steve, 25, joined Fond du Lac's Circle after being released in January from Stanley Correctional Institution. He served four years for a burglary charge.

"It's scary getting out. You spend so much time behind bars. You're not used to freedom and communication with others. You have choices, but you don't have a job," he said.

### **Re-entry efforts**

Just 4 months old, the local Circle mirrors a model first developed in Oshkosh in 2006, which later expanded to include all of the Fox Valley. Key players from faith communities, the Department of Corrections, United Way and the Fond du Lac County Sheriff's Department have come together to plan ways the community might rally around re-entry efforts.

Ray Salm of Fond du Lac stepped forward to lend his experience. For years, he served in a mentoring ministry run by Holy Family Catholic Parish for people who left incarceration.

"What's good about this is we work with probation and parole officers who can focus on transition issues. They give us leads and let more people know what we are all about," he said.

Fond du Lac County parole agents Jennifer Kindschuh and Marti Crockatt recommend ex-offenders whom they feel would benefit from the program.

"We are looking for someone who is transitioning back into the community, is willing to come to meetings, and needs support," Kindschuh said.

Some people leave prison with little money, no housing or family, and no support system.

"It can be difficult for them to explain their periods of unemployment. I always tell people to be honest. Explain you did your time; now, you are ready to move forward and you don't want to go back to that situation," she said.

Volunteers go through a screening and training process. As mentors, they contact potential employers to secure transitional or permanent job placements, help with finding housing, family and peer support, and pro-social behaviors.

### **Barrier**

Unemployment is one of the biggest barriers to success, Salm said.

"I mentor Steve, and right now he's working two jobs and has some goals he wants to reach," Ray said. "It hasn't been easy. The economy is not helping one bit. Even a person who isn't facing these kinds of challenges can't find a job."

Growing up, Steve did not live what most would consider a normal life. His mother also served a prison sentence.

With help from his grandmother, he found a place to live after his release and a job, by filling out up to seven applications a day. He calls Salm his "friend and backbone."

"I have to pick and choose my friends carefully. I'm pretty much starting over. I wish people would understand that I did things wrong when I was younger, but I really want to change," he said.

Program coordinator Danel Burchby said Fond du Lac's group is strong. Volunteers include a local attorney, retired teacher and a physician's assistant. The group meets every first and third Saturday at St. Mary's Church.

"Connections are being made in the community with places like Solutions Center, Arc, the Fondy Food Pantry, to see how we can best serve this population. Really, our bottom line is safer communities, and we are doing it through welcoming these people back," she said.

Fond du Lac's Circle of Support has five participants and is looking for more volunteers in order to connect two to each ex-offender.

"We lift up our hearts to a higher power. We talk about what problems they have encountered, the different challenges, but we don't look at the past," Salm said. "Steve, to me, is a success story. He deserves a second chance, just like a lot of us have been given another chance in life."

