

Program for ex-convicts aims to grow further

Circles of Support uses volunteers to help former-prisoners

By Paul Srubas • psrubas@greenbaypressgazette.com • December 1, 2008

Circles of Support has grown since it started helping ex-convicts in Green Bay almost two years ago, but it needs to grow more, organizers and participants say.

"I wish they'd expand this to be able to take in a lot of other people who have the same needs," said ex-convict Gene Woods of Green Bay. "There's just a lot of need by people who want to change, but unfortunately, Circles is not big enough to accommodate them."

The program brings volunteers and ex-convicts together for regular sessions of sharing their stories, resources and advice.

"You get support from the group in just about every aspect — substance abuse, behavior, reintegration problems, personal problems. It covers a very wide spectrum," said Woods, 60. "It helps you to know you have somebody there to talk to, to help you deal with the problems that ex-offenders have getting their lives back."

Aside from getting help with housing and medical issues, Woods said he gained in "self-worth, self-esteem, confidence, hope — those things that are very essential to people being released back into society with the stigma of having been convicted as a felon."

David Webster, who has volunteered with the program since it started in Green Bay in spring 2007, coordinates twice-monthly sessions at a downtown church.

The meetings are conducted in the style of a talking circle, with participants sharing highs and lows in their path to re-establishing themselves in society, and volunteers and other participants offering encouragement or advice, Webster said.

"The main issues are housing, employment and transportation, when you first get out of prison," Webster said. Circles tries to steer each participant toward achieving those needs. But emotional support is also a big part of the Circles' function, and participants take comfort and support from each other, Webster said.

"They're not ashamed to talk to each other, because they're all in the same boat," Webster said.

Woods has participated in Circles in Green Bay since it started in spring 2007. Started as a standalone organization by a handful of volunteers, the group recently has joined with similar groups in Appleton and Oshkosh and now finds itself a branch of Goodwill Industries.

That's helped allow groups to share training and expertise and centralize fundraising and volunteer recruitment efforts, said Danel Burchby, program coordinator for the organization.

She agreed with Woods that the organization needs to grow.

"There will be 667 prisoners released into our service area within the next 12 months, and we're currently working with 37 ex-offenders," Burchby said. "There's huge room for growth."

The program, which has about 40 volunteers in Green Bay, Appleton and Oshkosh, serves 10 ex-convicts here, 10 in Oshkosh and 17 in Appleton.

The program tries to do, with each of its participants, what their probation officers don't have time to do.