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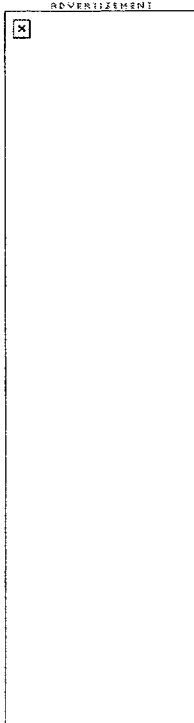
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## Forum informs about inmate support groups

BY AMIE JO SCHAEZNER • OF THE NORTHWESTERN • MAY 12, 2009

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Six-time felon Quinn Johnson said community support is what helped him get a job and avoid criminal activity to finally keep him out of prison after decades of incarceration.



"When I got out, I had to do a check up from the neck up and there wasn't a lot of positive there. I knew I needed to change," said Johnson, 55.

Johnson joined presenters from the Department of Corrections, the Community Corrections employment program, Goodwill Industries and the state Parole Commission Monday at Oshkosh North High School to discuss smarter ways to help prisoners make a positive transition from incarceration to productive members of society. The forum, "Offender Re-Entry: Get the Facts" drew a crowd of more than 50.

For Johnson, a re-entry support group called Circles of Support was his saving grace. The two-year-old program, which started in Oshkosh, employs volunteers who meet regularly with interested offenders to assist in making a smoother transition to the community.

"I heard about Circles of Support through my parole officer," Johnson said. "Without Circles of Support, I would've gone back to what I knew because I had no positive support. All the people I knew were criminals."

Danel Burchby, regional support coordinator for Circles of Support, said 60 volunteers currently provide social support for up to 50 former prisoners in Oshkosh. She said the group meets regularly to discuss issues related to re-entry and assists in finding former prisoners resources to get jobs and rejoin society.

Mary Kay Kollat, re-entry director for Wisconsin DOC, stated in coming years, support networks will be necessary to help improve the perception communities have about felons. She said 90 to 95 percent of offenders would return to the county they were convicted in following their release. In Winnebago County, more than 100 felons will re-enter area communities in 2009.

"It's not a single agency that can create better initiatives for re-entry and move us forward," Kollat said. "I urge you to learn more about the challenges offenders face when they return to the community. We are in this together and we are all working to keep Wisconsin safe."

"It's about preventing further crime. It's about preventing more victims," she said. State Rep. Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, said in the next decade, Wisconsin's prison population would increase by 25 percent. He said the state would need \$2.5 billion more in funds to deal with that growth.

"Prisoner re-entry programs are not only smarter policy, its also fiscally responsible," Hintz said.

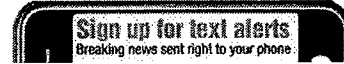
With the state currently facing nearly a \$7 billion deficit, Wisconsin Parole System Chair Alfonso Graham said discussion over better re-entry programs and policies is necessary.

"The cost will bring this to the forefront," Gra-ham said. "I like this re-entry concept where we are saying we should invest in our inmates. I like the ideas of doing things smarter then just locking them up again."

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