



Photo for The Post-Crescent by Win. Glasheen

JIM MILLER is a volunteer with the Fox Valley chapter of Circles of Support, a Goodwill Industries program.

HELPING HAND

Volunteer helps former prisoners get back on track

By Toni Hoh
For The Post-Crescent

People being released from prison and back into the Fox Valley community don't have to go it alone, thanks to the Circles of Support program sponsored by Goodwill Industries.

Through the program, former inmates receive assistance in connecting with resources for basic needs — food, housing and employment — as well as the support of caring people who help them get their lives back on track. A large part of that task involves breaking down barriers built on stereotypes of people who have been in prison.

Community members volunteer their time for group meetings with participants once or twice a week, along with being available for additional meetings with participants who request them.

The goals of Circles of Support, according to program coordinator Danel Burchby, include reducing recidivism and promoting self-sufficiency. Statewide, about 50 percent of offenders released back into the community will return to prison within three years.

"Without any extra help at all, 50 percent will do OK," Burchby said. "We're focusing on the other 50 percent."

Participation in Circles of Support is completely voluntary, drawing in people who genuinely want to im-

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prove their lives. Participants are screened and approved based on their willingness to be accountable for their previous behaviors and ability to identify their specific areas of need.

"In this program, we tell them straight out, 'This is your program to manage; we are here to assist you and guide you,'" said Jim Miller of Appleton, who retired from the Department of Corrections in 2006 and was on the ground floor of Circles of Support. Today he serves as a volunteer.

"I had some background. I saw that community support is so vital," said Miller, 64. "Most of them come back into the community, and they burn bridges with their family, or in some cases they don't have family in the area. As a result, they are pretty much on their own after being gone several years. They have no idea where the resources are and how to connect with them."

Circles of Support does not provide the resources but acts as a facilitator to connect participants with those programs.

Volunteers do not need a background in corrections such as Miller's. What is really needed is a genuine desire to help.

Started in Oshkosh in 2006, Circles of Support moved into the Fox Valley in 2007. It also has expanded to Green Bay.

Meetings, held at Harmony Cafe in downtown Appleton, allow participants to talk about the positive and negative things they experienced the previous week.

"Our program is strength-based," Miller said. "We try to rely on what is good and build on the positive. Good habits build good habits."

When problems are presented, Miller said, participants often share advice with each other about similar challenges or how the person might have made a better choice.

"We do problem-solving," Miller said. "We try to keep the focus on constructive issues and how to be more constructive, not negative all the time. We build off hope. It makes them feel good to help one another."

When negative thinking seeps in, it paralyzes someone struggling to fit back into the community, he said.

"They revert back to old habits and get into that cycle. If we can just keep one from going back, there's an economic savings — about \$29,000 or so — and we make that person a productive citizen. The nice result of this program is that by them being successful in the community, the community is safer."

For more information on becoming involved with Circles of Support, call Danel Burchby at 920-968-6832.