

Circles of Support volunteer helps ex-prisoners succeed

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"They're really good folks, I'll tell you," said Verstegen, 70, a volunteer with Circles of Support, a prison reentry program in the Fox Cities. Circles, which began in 2008, is a program of Goodwill Industries North Central Wisconsin.

The stigma that surrounds incarceration leaves them struggling with how to fit back into society, Verstegen said.

"It seems like they need help once in a while."

Circles of Support offers recently released prisoners a support network to provide guidance in all areas of their life.

"Circles is a prison reentry program that offers three main things: pro-social support, encouraging and acknowledging good choice and personal accountability; breaking down barriers to success; and linking participants to area resources that can help them succeed," program coordinator Danel Burchby said. "Circles meet weekly in the Fox Valley and are entirely volunteer run by citizens like Lyle who believe in second chances and helping our participants make a successful transition from incarceration to the community."

Verstegen, who is retired, first began his work with prisoners through a program offered by Empowerment, Solidarity, Truth, Hope, Equality, Reform, or ESTHER, in Appleton.

He discovered a different kind of people in need.

"They get out of prison, and they have nothing," he said.

Later, the Circles program was formed. Verstegen wants to help released prisoners return to society and stay out of jail. Many of the Circles participants served jail time for drug- or alcohol-related crimes.

"They seem to have more than their fair share of challenges," he said, noting that most struggle to find employment because of their jail time.



Lyle Verstegen is a volunteer with Circles of Support. Photo for The Post-Crescent by Wm. Glasheen

Without support, they could fall back to bad habits, Verstegen said.

Circles volunteers meet with the participants weekly, either in a group setting or on an individual basis.

"Mostly we meet with them and talk to them about problems and challenges, success, encourage them," Verstegen said. "We listen to them, work with them and hope they can make it."

They also refer the participants to resources such as LEAVEN, the Community Clothes Closet and food pantries.

"We tell them we don't have any resources, but we will be your friend and work with you and help you stay on the right side of life," Verstegen said.

He said participants want a new social network when they get back into society.

"They say, 'If I go back with those friends, I'll end up going back into prison,'" he said. "They really need some place to go and hopefully Circles can provide it."

Burchby said Verstegen is passionate about the program.

"Since the beginning of Circles in the Fox Valley, Lyle has worked with passion and dedication both on the front line, with the participants, and quietly behind the scenes, never asking for any recognition but only wanting for the best of our participants," she said. "Lyle believes in the human good and sees people as different from their behaviors."