

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2006 12:00 AM

Groups focus on ex-cons' success

Initiatives aim to cut recidivism by giving offenders life tools

BY GLENN SMITH

The Post and Courier

Each year, about 1,000 inmates are released onto Charleston-area streets, many hoping for a clean start and a chance to turn their lives around.

If patterns hold true, however, more than two-thirds of that group will go on to commit more crimes and end up under arrest once again, statistics show.

A coalition of nonprofit and faith-based groups is hoping to break this cycle of recidivism with various initiatives to help ex-convicts move beyond old behaviors to become productive members of society.

The idea is not to shower offenders with more handouts but to help them find the tools, support and connections they need to secure housing, jobs and spiritual stability, said Ashley Pennington, president of the nonprofit Noisette Foundation.

"When you address someone coming out of prison, it's not enough to say 'OK, you're sick. Here's a prescription' and move on," said Pennington, a former Charleston County public defender. "What's being missed is that person has to want and desire a new life and then be able to connect to healthy pathways to be successful."

To further that goal, groups are working to bring a nationally recognized substance abuse treatment and career training program to the former Charleston Naval Base to work with released offenders. Other efforts include mentoring and life-skills assistance for ex-convicts, an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) project aimed at finding ways to steer people from crime and poverty, and a voluntary association called the Civic Justice Corps in which released offenders perform service projects to give back to the community.

"We're encouraging people to live more deeply and to grow into who they are supposed to be: the parents and leaders of our community," Pennington said.

A special briefing on the programs was held for law enforcement officials, magistrates, clergy and other community leaders Monday at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in North Charleston. The goal was to build support for a regional advisory committee on the issue and encourage greater community participation in dealing with the problem.

"We've got to stop thinking of this as 'we' and 'them,' " said Jack McGovern, president of HIS Way Ministry. "If we're going to solve this problem it's got to be 'us.' "

A key element of the plan is an effort to replicate the Delancey Street Foundation treatment and training program, which started in San Francisco in 1971 and reportedly has helped more than 15,000 people turn their lives around. The program provides a structured educational and living environment in which released offenders can learn skills needed to rebuild their lives. The Delancey Street Foundation and Milton Eisenhower Foundation picked North Charleston as one of five new sites across the nation, and property has been set aside on the old base for the program, which will provide the only free, long-term substance abuse rehabilitation program along the South Carolina coast, Pennington said.

The effort is being dubbed SC STRONG for South Carolina Sustaining, Teaching, and Rebuilding Our New Generation.

Freddie Baca, a Delancey Street resident who runs the organization's Los Angeles operation, said he had used heroin most of his life and was facing several robbery charges when he arrived at Delancey Street 12 years ago. He lost his father and two brothers to drug overdoses, and he had only a sixth-grade education. Through the program, he was able to conquer his addiction, earn a high school equivalency diploma and go on to obtain a college degree, real estate license and contractor's license.

Lt. Mike Delane, a San Francisco firefighter, said the program helped him kick crack-cocaine and heroin habits when nothing else worked. "It saved my life," he said.

With roughly 23,000 inmates, South Carolina has the sixth highest incarceration rate in the nation and a system that operates like a revolving door. Charleston County sent roughly the same number of people to prison last year as were released. And with tougher sentencing laws reducing opportunities for parole, nearly half of those released end up on the street with no supervision, authorities said.

The average South Carolina inmate is 34 years old with an eighth-grade reading level. Nearly half have a substance abuse problem, and most have children. Nearly 40 percent will return to prison within five years, and many others will be arrested for minor offenses, statistics show.

The Palmetto State is hardly unique. A 15-state study of 272,111 prisoners released into society in 1994 found that two-thirds committed at least one serious crime within three years of leaving custody. Those with the highest rearrest rates were inmates who had been incarcerated for stealing motor vehicles, committing property crimes and robbing others, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Reach **Glenn Smith** at 937-5556 or gsmith@postandcourier.com.

This article appeared in The Post and Courier and updated online at Charleston.net on Tuesday, February 14, 2006.