

Looking Forward

Changing lives with faith, dedication

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Serving California is a faith-based organization that seeks to change the lives of former convicts and benefit the community at the same time.

Dedicated to helping prisoners, women in recovery and military veterans is spelled out on the first page of its website, which states “80-90 percent of California’s prisoners will be released back into our communities and over 60 percent of those will re-offend and go back in.”

That is a statistic Jon Lowry, Serving California’s program director, wants to change. One of the best ways of doing that is through the use of re-entry homes, which Jon describes as a “reception house’ for newly-released convicts. Serving California’s goal is “to better prepare these men for release and then walk with them when they get out to drastically reduce that recidivism rate.”

I learned of Serving California through a student, Anthony Moralez, whose goal is to establish a re-entry home in Santa Barbara County, where presently none exist.

“It is badly needed,” Anthony said. “The closest one is in Ventura.”

The re-entry home’s purpose is to aid ex-convicts in the often difficult transition from prison life to life on the outside.

“Their lives have been so structured that they are thrown into confusion when that structure no longer exists,” Anthony explains. “We want to teach them basic skills, like using a cell phone or a computer, how to plan a budget, how to look for a job.”

While those everyday activities sound simple, they can present real challenges for someone who is unfamiliar with them.

“For these people, time has stood still,” says Lowry, and their difficulty in readjusting to life on the outside can lead a newly-released prisoner back toward his old lifestyle and into associating with the same people he knew before he was sent up.

Anthony said there is a saying: “Gate by eight, spoon by noon, on the run by one,” meaning a man is released at 8 a.m., begins using drugs again by noon, and is running from the law by 1 o’clock.

The re-entry home Anthony wants to establish would help them break away from their old lifestyle and start life over again, this time in a positive environment, and as far away from their former neighborhood as possible.

One of the requirements for residence in a re-entry home is that it not be in the former county of residence, a fact that Lowry says has caused the recidivism rate to plummet.

All too often, it comes to public attention that a parolee reoffends soon after being released, and calls are made for tougher guidelines before a prisoner is released. But there are success stories.

Anthony is not only determined to get his B.A. in sociology and establish a re-entry home in Santa Barbara County, he wants to use himself as an example to others that they too can succeed on the outside.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the developed world, at 2.2 million, with another 4.7 million on probation or parole. In addition, 2.7 million American children have a parent who is locked up. The absence of a father figure, said Lowry, is devastating, and eight of 10 children who have a father in prison will end up in prison too.

“Don’t judge me by my past. I don’t live there anymore,” is an expression Lowry likes to use when discussing candidates for re-entry homes. A person who makes a commitment to change his life deserves all the support he can get, both for his sake and for the sake of the community.

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