



Program gives ex-offenders a future

by Ashley Saluga

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After Vincent Thomas served a three-year sentence for a conviction of possession of a controlled substance, he was uncertain of his future outside of the cell walls.

He said at some point after being released from prison he overheard a conversation while riding a bus. He thought the conversation, about a program, might have something to offer him.

The program he is referring to is the ex-offender employment service network, which offers training, employment and support services for ex-offenders in North Lawndale and surrounding communities.

About 57 percent of all North Lawndale adults are in the Illinois criminal justice system, according to a Center for Impact Research study.

The report also said narcotics-related arrests represented the majority of that number.

"The crimes of North Lawndale ex-offenders were not violent," said the Rev. Wilson Daniels, pastor of the United Baptist Church on Chicago's West Side.

After noticing that a staggering number of North Lawndale residents were ex-offenders, the North Lawndale Employment Network formed the ex-offender network in August 2002 to help reintegrate them into the community.

Community-based organizations, service providers, training organizations, economic development agencies and businesses work together to meet the needs of North Lawndale residents.

The network's program manager, Walter Boyd, said it is important that the organizations are community-based to help ex-offenders make the transition.

U.S. Rep. Danny D. Davis, a Chicago Democrat, has been a supporter of the program and became an advocate after teaching in the community for six years.

Davis said he believes no community in America has been more affected by the increasing prison population than North Lawndale.

The ex-offender network has gained support from foundations and state and federal government funding.

However, the network will lose a \$300,000 grant from the Illinois Workforce Advantage after Gov. Rod Blagojevich recently made some budget cuts.

Therefore, support from alternative sources will be the key for all non-profits, said Brenda Palms Barber, executive director.

In the faltering economy, the Steans Family Foundation will work with the network to help leverage other funders to provide support, said Greg Darnieder, the foundation's executive director.

After examining five different communities, the foundation decided to concentrate on North Lawndale and has made it a priority to fund job placement and training, Darnieder said.

Other foundations that have lended their support include the Woods Fund of Chicago, Polk Brothers Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation.

"The next step for the ex-offender network is the construction of a community job resource center," said Brenda Palms Barber, executive director of employment network.

The center will have voicemail capabilities so jobseekers will be able to receive and return employer's calls. There will also be available computers with internet access and a reference and resource library.

"In the last six months, there have been 140 interviews where 66 people have been placed," said Tom Wetzal, director of business relations for the employment network. He is careful to note that in today's economy, jobs are not stable and many people recycle through a variety of jobs.

Although officials said a success rate is hard to measure because of the variety of factors, there are many positive stories.

For the first time, Advocate Healthcare has partnered with the network and saw the partnership as a unique opportunity, said John Schwartz, chief executive officer of Advocate Trinity Hospital on Chicago's South Side.

The hospital already has coordinated with high schools and colleges, said Hedy Gist-Haynes, coordinator of volunteer and community service programs at Trinity.

Trinity employs three people who have been in the ex-offender's program. As more positions open, opportunities for additional program participants will be available, Schwartz said.

The partnership between the ex-offender program and Trinity has opened the doors to ex-offenders and given Vincent Thomas a second chance.

"I was given a chance to get back to society," he said.

Thomas, who has been employed at Trinity for a month as a service worker, added that the best part is being able to enjoy working with a smile on his face.