

Jefferson County anti-recidivism effort making a difference in inmates' lives

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, June 17, 2015 9:20 am

JEFFERSON — The vast majority of jail inmates will return to society someday after serving time for their crime. So it's imperative that jails serve not merely as holding pens, but as places of rehabilitation.

That's the reasoning behind Jefferson County's comprehensive anti-recidivism initiative, an effort that has ramped up during the past few years.

Recidivism is the rate at which former inmates return to jail after being released from an initial incarceration. The goal is to minimize repeat offenders as much as possible by giving inmates the tools, while they're in jail, to overcome challenges and move forward with their lives.

As some of these programs are in their infancy, no long-term statistics are available about how well Jefferson County's anti-recidivism efforts have been working, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they are making a positive difference in the lives and futures of many inmates.

The Jefferson County initiative has many different components, from the Seeds of Hope garden and Restorative Art projects to substance abuse support groups, to Huber work-release privileges and comprehensive efforts to connect inmates to the resources they need to improve their lives.

These efforts came out of the new Reducing Recidivism Coalition and have required the involvement of numerous local agencies and organizations, including the Jefferson County District Attorney's Office, the Community Action Coalition, the state Department of Corrections, the Jefferson County Health and Human Services departments, the Jefferson County Literacy Council, People Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse, the Wisconsin Dream Center, the Jefferson County Circuit Courts, and other stakeholders, including ex-offenders.

"It really takes a group effort to make this possible," said Tina Blake, programming classification officer at the Jefferson County Jail.

Her position was created to coordinate the various anti-recidivism efforts at the jail.

"When people wind up in jail, they've usually been through the system before," said Jefferson County District Attorney Susan Happ. "In fact, the tendency is to re-offend.

"We are not making excuses for their behavior, but if we can help with the underlying issues that landed a person in jail in the first place, we'll do a better job in keeping them from offending again," Happ added. "The question is,



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how can we make their time in jail fruitful?"

The efforts begin within a few days of a new inmate being booked. The 72-hour delay is necessary to give inmates a chance to cool down and to detox from any drugs that might be in their systems.

Blake said that at this point, she sits down with inmates to fill out paperwork, determine their needs and begin to work on a plan.

"What are you going to do with your time here?" Blake asks.

Through this process, inmates share information about their families, their crimes (if they've been sentenced), different jobs they've had and other relevant background information. Then the inmates get a look at all of the resources that are available to them through the jail.

Among the new programs established in recent years that have seen a lot of success are the "Celebrate Recovery" groups offered through the Wisconsin Dream Center, a nonprofit outreach coordinated by a local faith group.

"Sometimes Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous don't appeal to you," Blake said. "No one approach is right for everyone."

If they have learning difficulties, English as a Second Language needs or literacy deficits, inmates are connected to the Jefferson County Literacy Council to help work on those issues. The JCLC also does a jail Storybook Project providing the resources for inmates to be recorded reading a book to the child or children they have left behind at home.

This makes a big impact on the families and strengthens the parent-child bond that naturally is stressed by a parent being incarcerated, Blake said.

"At Christmastime, it's huge, but it does run all year long," Blake said. "Seventy-percent of our inmates are parents, and it's important for them to try to maintain some connection with their children."

Blake herself delivers the storybook DVDs to inmates' families throughout the county, and she said the children are overjoyed to receive such a personal gift from their incarcerated parents.

"I try to make it a positive interaction," Blake said. "We've had lots of letters from inmates and family members about what a big difference this made."

County officials look at inmates' medical needs, too, for example, if they're diabetic and need treatment, or if they need to be connected to Badger Care to receive health insurance coverage.

Also in connection to health, the Jefferson County Health Department does a lot of on-site workshops on topics of importance such as Shaken Baby Syndrome and other child safety issues; a father's rights if he has any doubt a child is his, and more.

"What we've heard from the inmates was that this was very valuable information," Blake said.

Fort HealthCare, meanwhile, provides specialized training at the jail as a free community service. Recently, Fort Memorial Hospital officials came in to provide CPR training to inmates who have been hand-picked as responsible individuals who might benefit from such training.

“What a great thing to show these guys,” Blake said. “It’s a great opportunity to do something positive. They can list the training on a job application, and perhaps someday they will use that training to save a life ...”

Inmates with mental health needs are connected to Jefferson County Human Services.

“So many inmates come in with mental health issues and they’ve been self-medicating with drugs and alcohol,” Happ said.

“The Health Department can help them regulate with proper medications.”

Blake said that many of the inmates, particularly the women, have a history of sexual and/or physical abuse, and PADA can help people deal with the abuse issues in their past.

In addition, the local jail provides guest speakers on issues relevant to inmates, including offenders like a person whose life was turned upside-down following a drunken-driving conviction.

This kind of presentation helps both the speaker and the listeners, while keeping all involved right in the jail, where there’s no danger of contraband or unauthorized contacts.

Local attorneys and the public defenders office also have become involved in the anti-recidivism effort. Blake serves as the conduit for attorneys to see what their clients have been doing since they were in jail.

Recently, Blake worked with a local attorney to facilitate the transfer of a Jefferson County inmate to the Waukesha County Jail, where that inmate could connect with needed services not yet available here.

“This was a very ill person with acute mental health needs who wasn’t going to improve in our facility,” Happ said. “We worked hard to get him where he needed to go.”

The local churches also have a role to play in addressing inmates’ needs, both spiritual and tangible.

Many churches step up to provide needed items for inmates’ families, particularly at Christmastime. Meanwhile, different denominations provide on-site religious services and Bible study options.

Some inmates already are members of a particular church and jail officials will work to bring in someone from the inmate’s own church to talk with them.

Some churches send volunteers into the jail to work with inmates on various issues. The Wisconsin Dream Center’s substance abuse support groups, for example, are an outreach of CrossPointe Community Church.

“When an inmate has a chance to sober up, a lot of times they realize they have a problem they want to work on, and it’s our job to make that possible,” Blake said.

Another major outreach of the Wisconsin Dream Center is the Seeds of Hope Community garden, located on a remote farm in Sullivan.

Faith volunteers run the garden, which just kicked off its third growing season. This summer, as in the past two years, inmates will have the opportunity to work in the garden, learning sustainable skills and serving in a way that will give back to their families and the community at large.

Produce from the garden has gone back to the jail to feed inmates, has gone to inmates’ families, has been donated

to help the community, and has been sold to support the program.

Blake explained that it makes a real difference in people's attitudes when inmates who previously have not been able to support their families are now sending produce home.

There are even community events at the garden, with activities for inmates' families and children.

Getting out into the fresh air and the reward that hard work provides are invaluable to inmates who are struggling with various issues in their lives, but even more important is the chance to build positive relationships with each other and the volunteers who work alongside the inmates in the garden.

"For some, it's the first positive experience they've had," said Jefferson County Sheriff Paul Milbrath. "It gives them a sense of pride."

"We've even had inmates return to the garden to volunteer after being released," Happ said.

The Restorative Art Project, another initiative that's just a few years old, has given inmates an opportunity to work on art projects, from yard ornaments to signs and posters for local charity events. Local stores even have dedicated space to sell some of the items that inmates create, with funds raised going back to jail programs, GED supplies and other needed items.

The emphasis of the Restorative Art Project is on giving inmates a chance to repair the harm they've done through giving back to the community. It also strengthens inmates' connection with the community and the partnership between the community and criminal justice system.

Jefferson County Child Support also becomes involved when inmates have children.

While they're in jail, most inmates are unable to earn money to pay their child support, but their responsibilities keep adding up. When appropriate, Blake and others at the jail work to connect with job opportunities that will allow inmates to earn some money to pay off those obligations even while they're serving time.

Officials said that Tyson Prepared Foods and various other local employers have been very willing to work with the jail to provide supervised work opportunities for those deemed responsible enough for that privilege.

Work experience, whether inside the jail or elsewhere through Huber work release, is part of the transition back to society for many inmates.

Depending on the nature of their crime or other needs, inmates might start with volunteer work, then internal responsibilities within the jail. Once it is deemed that they can work outside the jail in strictly monitored settings, they might go through training to develop their resumes and interview skills.

Tyson even sends a human resources representative to the jail to do interviews.

"It's a big investment by Tyson, but it has paid dividends in what this has done for the inmates involved," Happ said.

"A lot of these inmates have stayed in close contact with me, and they said this ability to transition gradually back to society and the working world has been really valuable," Blake said.

Finally, as an inmate's scheduled release date approaches, Blake and other jail officials help inmates plan for what

happens when they get out.

“Will they have a ride home? Do they have a place to go?” Blake said.

She said she doesn't want someone from La Crosse, for example, being released and either having to walk home or to feel like they need to commit a crime to get back to their home community.

She shared a story of one jail inmate who walked 14 miles from Jefferson to Watertown and then, being really hungry, was picked up almost immediately for stealing candy.

Happ and Blake said the Jefferson County Jail and the rest of the partners in the local anti-recidivism effort want to give inmates the best possible tools before their release to allow them to become contributing members of society for the long term.

Editor's note: This part series on Jefferson County's programs designed to help inmates so, upon being released, they do not reoffend and return jail.

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