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Ohio DYS Seeks New Ways to Help Young Offenders Stay out of Jail

Christina Morgan, WOSU News

COLUMBUS, OH (2007-02-15) Federal studies show 30 percent of young people released from incarceration will be back behind bars within one year. 50 percent will be back in a youth or adult facility within three years.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services is in a new push to develop programs and find volunteers to help reduce the recidivism rate. WOSU talked with corrections officials and young offenders to find out what can be done to improve the odds for a young person leaving jail.

20-year-old Stephanie likes to draw, write poetry and read non-fiction. She has spent six and a half months at the department of youth services Freedom Center in Delaware for possession of crack cocaine. She says she is afraid to leave.

"I'm scared cause I've never done the right thing. I always relapse. It's my fifth time here. My drug of choice is crack. I've been on crack for six years. I'm scared to leave, but I have to go, it's my time to go. There's not much else they can teach me that I haven't already been taught."

The Freedom Center is a residential treatment facility for girls and young women with substance abuse problems. More than 70 percent of the young people incarcerated in DYS facilities have what is described as a "severe" drug problem.

Stephanie explains that she started using drugs when she was 14 years old. After her parents divorced, she felt that she had no friends. She says the drug crowd was willing to accept her, and she was willing to do anything to fit in.

Director of the Criminal Justice Division at the University of Cincinnati Ed Latessa says, hanging around with the wrong crowd is a major factor in delinquent conduct.

"We work with these young people to teach them how to maintain relationships without getting into trouble, how to resist peer pressure effectively, and we do that thru a direct approach and through practice, rehearsal and skill building."

Latessa says skill building and other interactive approaches are more effective than trying to scare young people or using emotional appeals. Latessa points to a study he worked on that shows low and moderate risk youth do better in a community program.

Higher risk young people respond best to institutional programs. DYS Director Tom Stickrath says young people come into the system with years of hurt. They are tough kids, he says, and punishment alone doesn't work.

"Some people might say, are you coddling these kids by giving them programs and education. Well, these kids are going to be back in our communities, and we don't want them re-offending. We don't want more victims. We need to turn their lives around because that's what's going to get them to lead a crime-free life."

Helping kids turn their lives around is what Mark Jackson tries to do. He challenges seven young men in a class at the Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility to think hard about making the transition from prison to the community.

"Should you go back home to the same situation that you left, how do you not do the same thing that gets you the same result?"

Jackson engages the young men in a class-wide conversation - talking and listening, using "please" and "thank you" in a demonstration of social skills. No yelling and no intimidation. Next, they write in their journals and snack on candy. The atmosphere is relaxed.

These techniques are part of a re-entry program he is developing through Alvis House, a non-profit agency that works with juveniles and adults involved with the justice system.

"If they don't have wrap around services and programs and other things in the community that make them feel like they're accepted and supported, they're going

to find that crutch someplace," warns Jackson.

Some young offenders want to avoid repeating mistakes by going from jail to a college campus. One young man in the Marion facility says, "The whole point of me livin' on campus is I can be away from everything like I came from."

More on that in the second report.

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Jail Changes Young Offenders' Views of Education

Christina Morgan, WOSU News

COLUMBUS, OH (2007-02-15) The Ohio Department of Youth Services is introducing programs designed to reduce the recidivism rate among young offenders. Within three years of being released, one-half of juveniles are back behind bars in a youth or adult prison.

Ohio Department of Youth Services Director Tom Stickrath says the educational needs of young people in DYS facilities are considerable.

"They're well behind where they should be academically, on average about four grades behind their chronological age. And about 50 percent of the kids have special education needs."

Mark Jackson directs the Alvis House re-entry program and works with more than 90 young people in five of the 8 DYS facilities around Ohio. He finds that the young people generally do not test well. However, after working with them in small group settings and one-on-one, his view of their reading and writing skills is positive.

"90% of these young people read and write impeccably," says Jackson. "At some point in their life, they listened, they got it. Because these kids are survival of the fittest, they understand in order for them to be in the 'hood and not feel like they're dumb or like they don't add up, there are certain skills they need to have, and they have 'em."

Dion understands survival of the fittest. He is 18 years old. At the age of 14, he was sentenced to four and a half years behind bars for aggravated robbery with a gun specification.

"In a way I'm glad I came here, cause they help me, but it took the good years of my life - time I was supposed to be enjoyin'."

Dion finished high school two years ago in the Marion Juvenile Correctional facility. He regrets college courses are not available there. DYS is a chartered school district, but offers classes only to students in the 6th through 12th grades.

17-year-old Alexandra is at the DYS Freedom Center in Delaware for girls and young women with substance abuse problems. She is serving time for possession of cocaine. Alexandra says she started smoking pot and drinking alcohol when she was 14 years old and moved on to experiment with cocaine, ecstasy and Oxycontin.

"I definitely did miss out on school due to my drug use, going to rehab and getting' locked up and getting' into trouble."

Alexandra finished her GED in December and expects to be released in March. She wants to attend the University of Akron in the fall.

Edgar is also 17 years old. He describes his past experiences in school as "terrible," He was sent to the Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility two years ago.

"Somebody startin' shootin' at me an' I shot him. They call it felonious assault/dischargin' a firearm. I call it life preservation."

He says his past experiences in school were "terrible," but Edgar now sees education as the way to change his life.

"I gotta get this GED, enroll myself in college. I been hustlin' for a long time, ain't got nothing to show for it yet."

Mark Jackson calls the youth "our young scholars" and says they deserve another chance. And Jackson wants young people take full advantage of having another chance. With some, that requires overcoming what he calls "generational curses." More on that in the third report.

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"Generational Curses" Part of Family Experience for Young Offenders

Christina Morgan, WOSU News

COLUMBUS, OH (2007-02-15) The Ohio Department of Youth Services is looking for volunteers and ideas for programs to help young offenders stay out of prison. The goal is to reduce the recidivism rate. Three years after being released from a DYS facility, one out of two young people will be back behind bars in a youth or adult lock-up.

Mark Jackson is developing a program designed to help young offenders stay out of jail. This day, he holds the attention of a small group of young men at the Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility. A number of them are fathers. He tells them they have committed multiple crimes against their families. And what ever they did to end up behind bars is just the beginning.

"But I think it's even more criminal when that somebody else gotta take care of your kid and it's criminal that your child has to wonder when his father's coming home. And, you're somewhere locked up, gettin' 3 meals and a cot, just chillin'. You should be out there handlin' your business. That's what I call a double and triple crime."

19-year-old Mark spent 21 months behind bars for possession of crack cocaine and receiving stolen property. He says he thought he was doing the right thing selling drugs to support his 3-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son. He has changed his mind.

"I sit in my cell and think about it," says Mark. "My kids really need me more than anybody. I can't be incarcerated my whole life. I don't respect my father. He was incarcerated and I don't even know him. I don't want my kids thinkin' of me like that."

Mark Jackson encourages breaking what he calls "generational curses." He tells the young men they have the power to change the way the game is played. Later in the class, he returns to the game analogy, saying, in a family, everybody has a part

"If I play spades, I can't play without the ace of spades. I need the king of clubs, the ace of diamonds. You make up my community, my family. And when you make a choice to remove yourself, we can't play the game the same way."

17-year-old Alexandra says her family visits her on a regular basis at the Freedom Center in Delaware. She is serving time for possession of cocaine and has spent three years in and out of rehab for substance abuse. She regrets the impact on her family.

"I'm the only person in my family who's been to jail. That's not a good feeling. I don't know where I'd be today without my family. They've loved me unconditionally, been supportive, no matter how much hell I put them through, they're still here for me." Alex will be released to her family in March.

In some cases, though, families are not an option. Parents might have their own drug or other problems. Or, the child might have worn them down. 20-year-old Stephanie says she's been experimenting with drugs, running away from home and committing other crimes since she was 14 years old.

"I've burnt the bridges with my family 10 times. I've got my mom's house burglarized twice, put her at risk. I stole all her jewelry and pawnded them."

Stephanie has been returned to the Freedom Center 5 times. One of the experts used by DYS to determine "what works" in juvenile rehabilitation says, a strong, structured post-release program - known as "aftercare" - is essential to help a young person stay out of prison. More on that in the fourth report.

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Post-Release Programs Key to Young Offenders Staying out of Jail

Christina Morgan, WOSU News

COLUMBUS, OH (2007-02-15) Two years ago, the Ohio Department of Youth Services released onto parole two thousand young offenders. By next year, half of them will likely be back in jail. Corrections officials describe the young people sentenced to DYS facilities as "tough kids" who've experienced years of hurt.

DYS officials are placing additional emphasis on finding programs and volunteers to stay out of jail. WOSU concludes a series on reducing the recidivism rate with a look at what are known as aftercare programs.

16-year-old Angelo has been at the Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility for six months for his involvement with a robbery. His age places him in the majority of those behind bars in DYS facilities. Most are 16 or 17-years-old.

Angelo comes from Cleveland where, he says, there is a lot of violence. Like many other young inmates, he doesn't want to return to his former neighborhood.

"My mother moved to Columbus, so I'm goin' back to a new environment that gives me a new setting to start my life off," says the soft-spoken young man.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services is in the first year of expanded emphasis on transitional or re-entry programs. DYS Director Tom Stickrath says, rather than focusing on just young offenders and their behaviors, it's important to involve the family and the community.

"We have them ten and a half months on average. These are not DYS kids. They're Cleveland's kids and Columbus's kids and Springfield's kids."

Some re-entry efforts involving community volunteers take place before as well as after release from prison. Chris Money is a special assistant to Stickrath and responsible for the developing reentry services at DYS and finding volunteers.

"They come to provide services and engage with our kids. And whether that's mentors or sports activities, or religious services, we're seeing that facilities that are saturated with those kinds of activities and volunteers have less incidents."

Young people behind bars are clearly a captive audience for volunteer and mentor programs and for lessons on non-violent ways to resolve conflict, anger management and developing social & communication skills.

But criminal justice researcher Ed Latessa of the University of Cincinnati says the problem is, young offenders don't have a chance to use what they've learned in the real world until they're released.

"And that's why most studies show it's very important to have a strong, structured aftercare program where the youth is continuing to get support and someone's there to help them and correct them and keep them on the right path," says Latessa who does studies for DYS.

Mark Jackson's re-entry program through the Alvis House is one example of connecting lessons taught behind bars to the real world. The Alvis House specializes in the needs of juveniles and adults who have spent time in prison.

While Jackson is working with more than 90 young people in five DYS facilities, he is also in touch with their families. During a recent class in the Marion facility, he tells the young men he is pleased with their work on a recent essay.

"Angelo, I was so proud of what you wrote I had to call your mother," says Jackson. "And your mother said, Mr. Jackson, I already know he can write like that! She was in tears and said thank you for callin' and tellin' me something wonderful about my child!"

17-year-old Edgar has been at the Marion facility for two years for felonious assault and discharging a firearm. As he nears release, he gives himself an 85 percent chance of being able to stay out of jail.

"I been thinkin' a lot about how things gonna be 'cause I've adjusted to here,"

says Edgar. "It's sort of hard for me to define what it's like goin' out. Lotta people gone. Lotta people move. Lotta change. I know I got big dreams, though. I just don't know how I'm gonna fulfill 'em."

Edgar says he wants to rise above the place where he came from and "elevate his knowledge." Angelo has similar goals. He says the Alvis House re-entry program has been a big help.

"Everything you go over is something we should have known but didn't. It's exciting to figure out I could do this or that. He's talking about jobs already - get a job, school, how they gonna help us out, keep us positive, and we look at it like, yeah, we really wanna do this!"

Angelo wants to go to college and major in business and technology. While at Marion, he has developed a business proposal and hopes one day to run his own company. And, in September, 16-year-old Angelo expects to welcome his first child.

Mark Jackson says some programs developed for young offenders fail to consider how complex these young people are on multiple levels. "They need their dignity. They need their respect. They need to feel like they have some control over their lives."

Jackson says he uses the same approach with every young offender every day.

"Children are not what they did. What they did is what they did. And, every kid has a story. Sometime, it just needs to be told."

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