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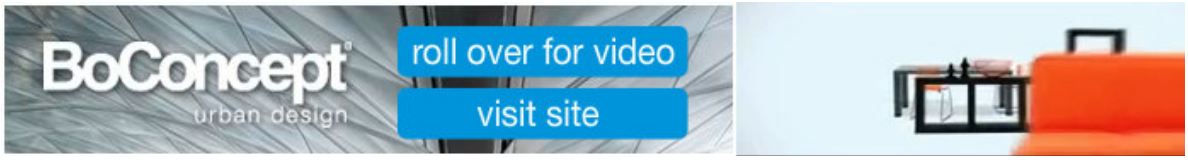

Even for former Delaware inmates, prison can be hard to escape

Building a new life is hard work

BY ESTEBAN PARRA • THE NEWS JOURNAL • APRIL 18, 2010

Andre Owens is nearing the end of his eight-year prison term for carjacking and robbery.

The 36-year-old former Bridgeville resident has had several stints behind bars and hopes this will be his last. But he knows the odds are against him.

"I'm scared to death," Owens said recently at Georgetown's Sussex Correctional Institution. His fear: His criminal record will prevent him from getting a job.

For Owens and thousands of other ex-cons, the ability to get a job to pay for food and a place to live is key to preventing a relapse into a life of crime. Despite their good intentions, without a job, many ex-cons return to what they know -- drug dealing or other crimes -- to bring in money.

The chances of an inmate getting re-arrested within three years of release are 47 percent to 67 percent, according to national statistics. Experts believe that rate is higher for Delaware, but a true number is unknown because the state does not track re-arrests among the approximately 20,000 people released from its prisons each year.

When Wilmington saw a record 26 homicides two years ago, more than half of those suspected had been out of custody less than a year before they were re-arrested in connection with the slayings, according to court records.

Those who return to crime -- and get caught -- also place a financial burden on taxpayers.

Each inmate at Delaware's four prisons costs the state nearly $33,000 a year. The state has a daily average of more than 5,500 inmates, not including those at work-release centers or awaiting trial.

"That's a huge cost," said Christy A. Visher, a professor at the University of Delaware's Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice. "Correction costs are eating into money that could be used for education, recreation for children and other kinds of activities that all of us engage in."

Newly released prisoners who are looking to change need to have access to resources and support, said Joanna Champney, executive director of the nonprofit criminal reform agency Stand Up for What's Right and Just, based in Wilmington.

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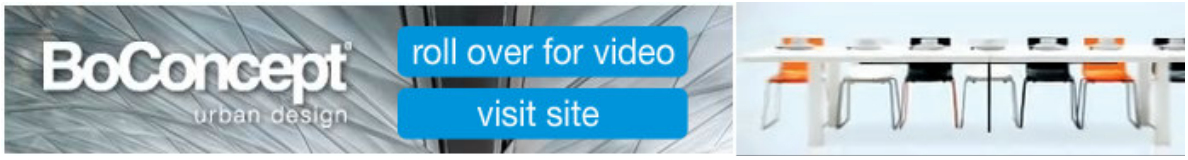

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(2 of 5)

"A lot of them want to change," she said, and, "It's good when people are motivated. But it's even better when motivated people can be hooked up with people that have access to resources and can really help them make connections that will support them."

But job-training programs that offer former offenders new skills are becoming harder to get into, said Janet Leban, executive director of the Delaware Center for Justice, a nonprofit in Wilmington that helps former inmates find transitional housing and employment.

The state Department of Labor offers help but because of high unemployment, former offenders are competing to get into programs with people who have long work histories, she said.

"Services in the community are not adequate to meet the needs of men and women coming out of prison," Leban said. "They are too few. They are oversubscribed. There are waiting lists and the demand exceeds the availability."

A decade is a long time

It took Owens nearly a decade in prison to realize he needed to change.

Raised in Wilmington by his mother and grandmother, Owens learned early that he could get away with bad behavior if he hung out with the wrong people. He explained how his mother would reprimand him if he cursed. But when the same language made his uncle laugh, Owens found himself going to his uncle.

"I know I'm not supposed to say it in front of my mom, but my uncle liked it," he said. "So I'm expanding my boundaries. Next time it ... would get worse and worse."

Owens began hanging out on the streets and staying out late to drink with friends while still a minor. He began smoking marijuana and trying other drugs. Wanting to have money to impress women, Owens started dealing drugs and eventually fathered two daughters, though he never married. He also carried guns in case he was robbed.

"When you grow up on the streets, you live in a facade," he said. "You never really want to show your emotional state of who you are or what you are going through because it's like urban warfare."

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(3 of 5)

Street life also means getting into fights and reaching a point where you no longer fear selling drugs or having a weapon on a street corner, he said.

"That's not commonplace to an average working citizen," he said. "But their normal is not my normal."

Even prison didn't faze him.

"I used to be all right with coming through here," said Owens, who has been in state prisons at least 14 times before this stint. "It really didn't matter."

That changed on Jan. 15, 2002, when Owens, then 28, held up an Exxon station south of Bridgeville.

"It all started with an assault and a robbery and from that point, it was, 'I got to get out of here,' " he said.

Knowing this would send him to prison for a long time, Owens got into a 1997 Dodge Ram pickup and fled. When police came after him, Owens drove into a sign, four tombstones and another vehicle before the pickup died and he abandoned it. He was found hiding under a trailer near a Seaford motel.

Facing 38 offenses, Owens pleaded guilty to seven, including carjacking, robbery and vehicular assault. Sixteen days before his 29th birthday, he was sentenced to eight years in prison.

"When I was 20, I thought 'Ten years in jail. OK, I'll be about 30 when I come out. That ain't about nothing,' " he said. But as he got older, Owens realized a decade is a long time.

That's when he began to question himself.

"It's a shame that you got to be in a tragic situation," he said. "Jail is tragedy."

Programs inconsistent

Inmates can get help in prison but they have to dedicate themselves and avoid the pitfalls that sent them there, said Leban, of the Delaware Center for Justice.

This can be difficult because their participation in programs sometimes is interrupted because of a lack of space in the Delaware Department of Correction.

That happened to Owens when he enrolled in the Key Program -- a substance-abuse program run by Community Education Centers, a West Caldwell, N.J., company that specializes in prison treatment and education. Owens was learning to deal with drug abuse as well as how his actions today will affect him tomorrow.

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Andre Owens, 36, sits on his bunk earlier this year at Sussex Correctional Institution, where he is nearing the end of his eight-year prison term and facing the challenge of a new life on the outside. (The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH)

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(4 of 5)

"I can't just live impulsively in the moment," Owens said. "I have to say this action is going to get me this and this is what's going to happen off this action."

After graduating from the Key Program, inmates are usually sent to another program called Crest, which continues to help them overcome their problems. Crest is for inmates ready to leave prison -- or probation -- and is offered in the correction department's work-release facilities. Together, the Key and Crest programs boast a re-arrest rate of 14 percent to 26 percent within 11¼2 years of being released.

But instead of moving from one program to the other, Owens was returned to the general prison population after graduating from Key last month because he has 14 more months to serve.

"This is a major issue that needs to be resolved and is a major cause in the recidivism rate," Owens said.

Carl C. Danberg, commissioner of the Delaware Department of Correction, said the break in services cannot be fixed because of the number of openings the department has among probationers. He also said the state doesn't have enough beds to accommodate all the people going through the programs.

"It happens too frequently," Danberg added. "Moving them back to the general population we know is a mistake. That is not helpful to the individual's rehabilitation."

The break in training also goes against a reassimilation program that Gov. Jack Markell announced nearly a year ago to help prisoners return to society.

Markell's plan calls for state agencies to work together to help inmates before they are released, tackle problems such as finding jobs, securing places to live and fighting addictions. The plan also requires agencies to coordinate their outreach to inmates, deliver services effectively and begin developing a re-entry plan at the start of incarceration, rather than at release. Although Markell introduced the plan in May, the pieces were not put into place until earlier this year.

Once out of prison, offenders face another challenge -- the economy.

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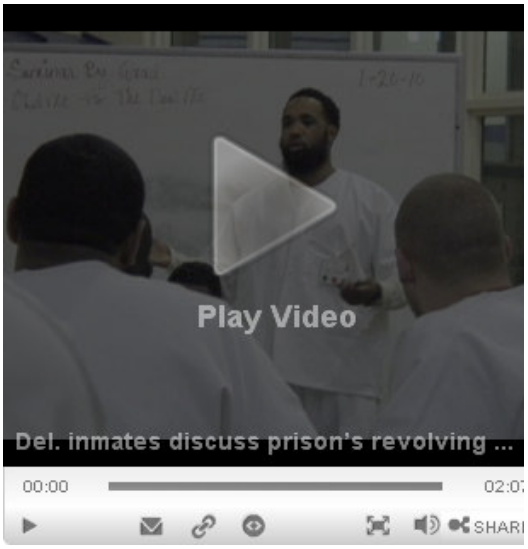

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While the downturn has been hard on many, it has been particularly difficult on former inmates, said Tammy Robinson, who operates an employment readiness agency in Wilmington's Gateway House for chronically homeless men. In particular, they are affected by ongoing unemployment, which in March remained at 9.4 percent in Delaware.

Most people Robinson works with continue to go to her program despite being rejected for jobs. But she wonders for how much longer.

"After a while, anybody would get discouraged," she said. "They really want to turn their lives around, but then they feel like there is no hope."

Losing habits that led to prison

Georgetown's Key Program is operated in a two-story building made up of two large pods. There are no cells. Instead, inmates bunk in beds along the walls with their possessions neatly stacked beside them. Their artwork decorates the walls. The pods' lower areas have large open spaces where participants meet for group classes and counseling.

This is where group and individual therapy is intended to help inmates overcome habits that helped put them in prison.

Before Owens started the program, he said, he had a problem with authority and often got into trouble by acting on his first thoughts.

But the program helped him learn to think things out.

That message was reinforced when he saw his daughters mimicking some of his old behaviors.

"Just the way they talk and the way they view things about life," he said. "I don't want them to go down no slope that I slipped down."

As soon as he understood this about himself, Owens tried to help others.

That happened during a January session when inmate Derrick Bivings, 26, of Chester, Pa., questioned

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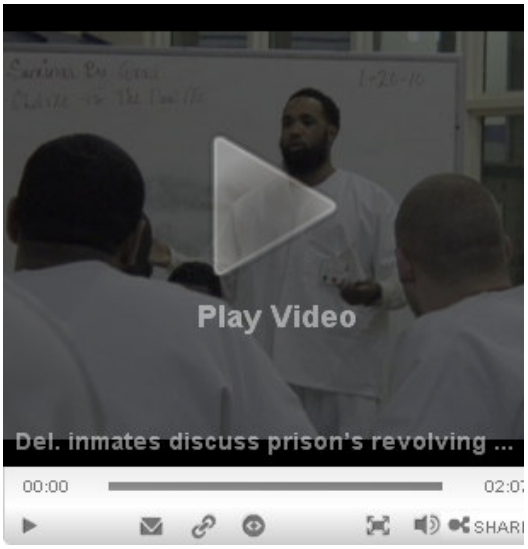

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whether they would forget what they learned as soon as they got out of prison.

"Not to say that they don't work, but I just know from experience when I went home before, it was, 'OK, I'm just going to leave the drugs alone. I know what I got to work on. My family comes first, so on and so forth,' " said Bivings, who is serving two years for drug trafficking. "But then after 30, maybe 90 days, it's, 'OK, things are not working out. I'm a felon. Family issues are not working out and just too much stress.' "

He said he had trouble finding a well-paying job. Because of that, he started selling marijuana and eventually all sorts of drugs.

"After that, you are full-fledged into the drug game," he said. "That was my experience."

Owens and others encouraged Bivings that opportunities would come no matter how bleak things seem. "Hold on a little bit longer," Owens said. "It's people who hold on that their opportunity comes."

Owens knows life on the outside is going to be difficult. But he's hopeful, adding he has marketable culinary and barber skills.

"I don't know what the future holds," he said. "All I know is if I change my pattern of thinking, then I got a better shot than I ever had before to not come back to jail. And that's all I really want. I just want to give myself a chance."

Contact Esteban Parra at 324-2299 or eparra@delawareonline.com.

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Andre Owens, 36, sits on his bunk earlier this year at Sussex Correctional Institution, where he is nearing the end of his eigh year prison term and facing the challenge of a new life on the outside. (The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH)

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Andre Owens talks with fellow inmates earlier this year in Georgetown's Sussex Correctional Institution. Inmates in the prison's Key Program go through group and individual therapy help them overcome substance abuse and to change other hat that would lead to their returning to prison. (The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH)

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Inmates at Sussex Correctional Institution take part in a group discussion on preparing for life on the outside. (The News