



Group looks at ways to ease prisoner re-entry into society

Boaz & Ruth contribute to economic revitalization through six enterprises, including an antique store in the Highland Park neighborhood, as well as a furniture and home restoration operation, two cafes and are planning to open a retail co-op in the old Highland Park fire house. These enterprises provide hands-on job opportunities for all program trainees. Here they inspect a tea service from a recent estate sale.

The prison system often has been referred to as a revolving door where offenders are released and then return to jail. Recidivism rates, increasing costs and lack of space for inmates have made prisoner re-entry into society an issue at the national, state and local levels.

Virginia, along with six other states, has been selected to participate in the National Governor's Association (NGA) Policy Academy on Prisoner Re-entry. Participating states are examining barriers to successful re-entry and developing state plans to address those barriers.

Virginia Public Safety Deputy Secretary Barry Green, leads the state's policy academy team. He believes Virginia can reduce its prison and jail populations or at least reduce the growth of these populations with re-entry programs. Community Partnerships Director Jane Brown represents VDSS on the team.

"We receive intensive training on prisoner re-entry issues



Jane Brown

when we begin our participation in the academy," Brown said. "And, as policy academy members, we have an excellent opportunity to share our successes and to identify policies and model programs that can make a real difference in Virginia."

Brown oversees state initiatives that help offenders and their families through existing VDSS programs and through grant-based partnerships with private and faith-based organizations. These may include strategies focused on child support, counseling, crisis intervention, education and vocational training, mental health and physical health, and temporary housing.

"We know that offenders re-entering their communities have multiple issues that must be addressed. VDSS provides outreach to these individuals and connects them with services through community programs," added Brown.

State and national statistics show that offenders have a much higher rate of substance abuse, suffer physical and mental illnesses, are poorly educated and usually lack training to get a job.

"There also are a lot of issues surrounding the family of prisoners re-entering society," Brown said. "Offenders often are not prepared to cope with the changes that have taken place within their own families when they return home. Expectations can be a source of tension and frustration. It's not uncommon to see these individuals homeless and on the street within a month or two because of the stress of re-entry."

More than 200 adult men and women are released from prison each week in the Richmond area alone. Boaz & Ruth is a non-profit organization that helps them prepare for re-entry into society. It is a partner with VDSS in this work.

Boaz & Ruth Chief Executive Officer Martha Rollins said, "Many prisoners re-entering society find the social bars of life on the outside far more confining than the iron bars of prison. They need effective training programs to help them achieve emotional stability and develop life and job skills."

The future often is bleak for offenders re-entering their community, she said. Studies

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have shown that if ex-offenders can't find counseling, financial assistance, job placement programs and substance abuse treatment programs they desperately need, they are much more likely to commit more crimes and return to prison within three years of their release.

While Boaz & Ruth addresses problems at the local level in Richmond, additional work is needed statewide.

"We're learning how to address more of the critical components of prisoner

re-entry services on a statewide level," adds Brown. "The policy academy has helped VDSS manage resources, deliver services to target audiences, as well as review and amend policies. The academy is reviewing strategies and actions focused on improving prisoner re-entry programs currently in place. In addition, it is developing new programs and action plans to address gaps in the re-entry system."

Virginia's policy academy team is developing its re-entry action plan through four sub-committees that are addressing the prioritized needs identified by the overall group. The subcommittees include:

- Financial obligations, housing, and financial and community resources
- Employment and education
- Social re-integration
- Health, mental health and substance abuse

"We think we can make a positive impact on prisoners re-entering society. These innovative partnerships can help," Brown said. "We hope to reduce the number of ex-offenders who commit additional crimes and return to prison or jail. Effective re-entry programs can help ex-offenders in becoming contributing members of society. That positively impacts their families and communities."

The facts

- Virginia's recidivism rate is 29.4 percent.
- More than 71 percent of released prisoners were returned for the same type of crime for which they were originally incarcerated.
- In Virginia, 32 percent of all convicted felons are drug offenders.
- Fifty percent of all convicted felons have evidence of prior drug abuse; 31 percent are alcohol abusers.
- Sixty-seven percent of probationers use illicit drugs; 69 percent of jail inmates need substance abuse treatment.

Boaz & Ruth – A Community Success Story

Boaz & Ruth is a faith-based organization that helps people cope with life's challenges. It is one such agency funded by VDSS to help ex-offenders.

"Boaz & Ruth has more applicants than the program can assist. We're seeing so much

success because this is much more than just a job program. It is a program that prepares ex-offenders for community re-entry, which includes addressing challenges faced with their families and their communities," says Martha Rollins, Boaz & Ruth's Chief Executive Officer. "We're also about changing perceptions about individuals who have been incarcerated and are now ready to re-enter the community."

The name of the organization comes from two Biblical figures and reflects the ultimate community that can result between those who

have more than they need and those who have less than they need. It also is symbolic of relationships that bridge economic, cultural and denominational lines.

In its second year, Boaz & Ruth takes a holistic approach to provide programs for people who need a second chance. To date, Boaz & Ruth has worked with 32 trainees — the title given to all program participants.

To assist ex-offenders, the program focuses on job training, economic revitalization and connecting communities.

"Part of our mission is to be a model program for building healthy community relationships," said Boaz & Ruth's Training Director Lloyd Price. "Our trainees enter

our program for two years. During that time we focus on providing training and counseling on family issues, job skills, emotional competencies, community integration and leadership."

The application process for offenders includes paperwork and face-to-face meetings with Boaz & Ruth staff and with senior apprentices. Together, they decide on the next class of trainees. The two-year program includes two months of core curriculum and 12 months of mentorship and counseling. All participants enter the program as trainees and have the chance to be promoted to the senior apprentice level.

To successfully complete the program, all trainees must obtain a passing score on the General Education Development (GED) test, demonstrate e-mail and computer competencies and successfully complete all classes.

Volunteers and paid staff operate Boaz & Ruth. VDSS provides a grant, which has assisted in covering the costs for some program basics. Other grants, as well as income generated through Boaz & Ruth's enterprises fund the remainder.

Boaz & Ruth has made a significant difference in Richmond, and has replicated the program in Martinsville.

"Boaz & Ruth is family," said Morris, a trainee. "Before this opportunity, I had no direction. The classes have helped me learn how to deal with my family and how to honor the spiritual aspects of life. My goal is to be an electrician. Right now, I'm preparing for my GED."

"Boaz & Ruth is making a difference in my life, a chance to better myself," said Keith, another trainee. "My family sees this. They're getting me back on track and keeping me focused on the positive. I can do it — I will do it."

Some trainees, like Kelvin, often hear about Boaz & Ruth while incarcerated. "I'm currently in jail. I participate in Boaz & Ruth through a work release program. It's good for me. It gives me hope to turn my life around."



Martha Rollins



Lloyd Price