



Fighting for a second chance

Reentry services work to provide opportunities for former offenders
By Matt Weyrich

Martez Tolbert grew up boxing, often getting into fights with other kids on the street. His aggressive nature has since subsided, but his love for the gym remains. Tolbert now works out in his basement, sparring with close friends who also put an emphasis on staying physically fit.

Martez Tolbert grew up hustling. “Even as a 3-year-old, I was selling drugs for my uncle and didn’t even know it,” he says. “He was just giving me little backpacks to go up the street.”

When he was 11, Tolbert moved with his family from Detroit to Charlottesville, landing in Westhaven. He was raised by his mother and aunt, both of whom struggled with substance abuse, and Tolbert got caught up in using and selling drugs.

“I loved the game,” he says. “Loved hustling, loved the streets, loved people in the streets, loved everything about the whole street network because that’s all I was raised on. That’s all I saw.”

He managed to graduate from high school, but continued selling drugs and decided he needed a handgun to protect himself.

When he was 19, Tolbert was charged with illegal possession of a firearm while handling narcotics. He fled from the police officers who found the drugs, running into a ravine before stumbling and being tackled to the ground. A struggle ensued, resulting in an officer injuring his ankle and Tolbert being knocked unconscious. He later woke up in a hospital bed, handcuffed to the support bars.

A judge handed Tolbert six years, citing the cop’s injury as justification for a harsh sentence. But the time in prison did nothing to help Tolbert change his life. When he got out, he went “wild” and ended up back on the streets.

He served two more stints in prison, for a total of nine and a half years behind bars. But during his third sentence, Tolbert trained with the staff at Powhatan Correctional Center to become a motivational speaker, facilitating workshops with fellow inmates, earning as many certifications as he could, and becoming “almost part of the staff.”

By the time he got out for the third time, in 2013, he was 32 years old and determined to have a different outcome. But the road to redefining his life was a daunting one.

Easing the reentry burden

More than 650,000 people are released from prison each year, and roughly two-thirds end up back in prison within three years, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Ex-offenders often struggle with the debt incurred from court costs, lawyer fees and fines, and the challenge of finding a job while carrying a criminal record.

Finding housing can be another obstacle, especially since Section 8 and other housing assistance is off limits for those with certain felony convictions, and landlords can be reluctant to rent to ex-offenders. On top of the practical concerns, people who have been incarcerated may be alienated from their families or feel detached from society, or still struggle with whatever issues got them in trouble in the first place.

The longer you spend behind bars, the more likely you are to return. Locally, 1 in 3 inmates booked at the Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail between 2012 and 2016 returned to custody within those four years.



TRISTAN LOREI

Phillip Sparrow has always wanted to open up an auto shop, and after moving to Harrisonburg he was finally able to do it. At Foreign Car Auto, Sparrow works on everything from cars and motorcycles to ATVs. It hasn’t become his day job yet, but he has no problem spending late hours working under the hood.

But among those incarcerated for more than 30 days, the recidivism rate shot up to more than 75 percent. In an effort to reduce those numbers, a range of local organizations are working to help ex-offenders transition back into the community.

The Albemarle Charlottesville Community Reentry Council, which includes organizations like the ACRJ, Charlottesville Department of Social Services, Offender Aid and Restoration, Piedmont Virginia Community College, and several nonprofits, meets quarterly to discuss strategies for easing the burden of reentry.

For Tolbert, the first problem was getting a driver’s license. Buried in debt from court fines and costs, he wasn’t able to obtain a license—a basic requirement for landing a job—due to a Virginia law that was only overturned in July. It wasn’t until 2017, when The Fountain Fund, a local nonprofit started by former U.S. attorney Tim Heaphy, stepped in, that Tolbert was able to pay those debts.

“Governors, Congress, everyone’s starting to get it now, what’s going on in our country,” Tolbert says. “A little too late [for me], but it’s not, because there are still people coming up who need it. But I was one of the ones who had to go through it.”

The Fountain Fund paid off Tolbert’s court costs and set him up on a low-interest payment plan that’s allowed him to reset his bearings. His new goal? To help others in prison get their priorities in line before they cost themselves additional years of their life.

Tolbert is a candidate for the Home to Hope mentoring program organized by the City of Charlottesville and sponsored by Mayor Nikuyah Walker. He’s currently in training for a peer support specialist role

where, if selected, he’d have a full-time job with the city visiting local inmates and helping them craft a successful future.

“I’ve been branding myself the last five years, and [it’s led me to] this,” Tolbert says. “It’s been an ongoing process, but last summer when it first got initiated, it opened my eyes to what I really want to do.”

Programs like The Fountain Fund and Home to Help are designed to not only show current or former inmates the things they need to do in order to successfully reenter society, but help walk them through those steps as well.

Reducing recidivism

In Charlottesville and Albemarle County, that process begins when they first arrive at the ACRJ. All inmates take a 160-question risk assessment that determines what factors led to them being arrested: substance abuse, lack of education, social groups, unemployment, etc. That allows the jail to understand what it needs to address in order to put the medium- and high-risk inmates in a position that’ll help prevent them from coming back.

According to Martin Kumer, superintendent of the ACRJ, the average person only spends 35 days in jail, so it’s important for the jail to take advantage of the time it has to meet with inmates who are considered at risk of recidivism.

“Once we ask all those questions, we have a good idea of who you are, where you are, and why,” Kumer says. “We are not the end-all-be-all. We rely heavily on our community partners...to pick up the slack that we can’t fulfill when they leave. So we try to in-

troduce them to the processes before they’re released to try and keep that ball rolling.”

Those who are leaving state prison (there are 18 within a two-hour drive of Charlottesville, in addition to two federal facilities) get help from a state-funded program that works with nine different service providers, both public and nonprofit, to assist with reentry.

For inmates who spend an extended amount of time at the ACRJ, there are many certification courses and programs they can enroll in to help gain skills like money management, cooking, and parenting that help them after they get out. Those without a high school diploma are enrolled in GED prep, while PVCC offers several college courses and identifies employers that are willing to hire formerly incarcerated people.

“We’re usually looking for employers that have almost a family orientation towards their employees where they’re willing to bring them in and coach them and pay attention to them,” says Valerie Palamountain, dean of workforce services at PVCC. “If they’re late for work, they’re not going to fire them the first time. They’ll talk to them and make sure it gets corrected.”

“One thing that we found is a lot of the employers prefer this population because they want to stay local. It’s not like the UVA grad who graduates and leaves, these are the people who are going to become the base of the community.”

Adopting a new mindset

Nonprofit organizations on the reentry council also play a huge role in providing services for incarcerated people. Spread the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23

“I had to teach people to get out of that mindset that you can’t do it...you can do it. Take that idea and make something of it.” PHILLIP SPARROW

Vote has a program called Project ID, which coordinates with the DMV to help inmates get their paperwork squared away and order an ID so they have one fewer hoop to jump through once they're released. In fact, the DMV Connect program, launched in 2012, sends representatives to jails with camera equipment and a DMV database computer so that they can take their photo right there and verify information in person.

About 30 days before inmates are scheduled to be released from the jail, OAR staff pays them a visit and talks to them about their risk assessment and transition plan. Although not every offender takes advantage of these reentry services (many turn them down but reach out weeks or months later after struggling to adjust), OAR offers assistance with emergency needs like clothing and shelter as well as constructing a long-term employment plan.

To help make former inmates more attractive to employers, OAR works in conjunction with the city to run the Coming Home to Work program. Companies that participate have a portion of the offender's salary supplemented by the city for the first six months, making the idea of hiring someone with a troubled background more attractive.

Charlottesville native Phillip Sparrow spent 20 months in jail for a malicious wounding charge he picked up in his early 30s. He waited too long to enroll in any programs while incarcerated but saw signs around the jail about reentry programs. Sparrow planned to take advantage of them, but three days before he was supposed to be released, his best friend, Jamie Mays, died in a car crash.

Mays' death sent Sparrow into a downward spiral, and he decided to move to Harrisonburg to get a fresh start. By the time he got there and settled in, it'd been six months—but he decided to reach out anyway. Despite coming out of jail with nothing but a \$100 bill to his name, Sparrow was able to utilize these services to find a job and, thanks to The Fountain Fund, get a loan that's helped him achieve a lifelong dream of opening up an auto shop.



Daniel Herrlein's biggest passion has always been cooking. The Fountain Fund is helping him work toward opening his own restaurant, featuring American-style food "with a twist."

"[Other inmates] think that there's no such thing as going out and getting a good job because you're a felon and all that," Sparrow says. "Doesn't matter. What it is, I had to teach people to get out of that mindset that you can't do it...you can do it. Take that idea and make something of it."

Benefiting the community

Dedicating resources toward reentry programs makes financial sense, too. According

to OAR, it costs \$93.82 a day for the jail to house an inmate. The cost to incarcerate the 469 people targeted for reentry services in 2018 was more than \$5.6 million. Even though some costs are fixed (mortgage and utility payments are factored into the per-day rate, for example) keeping those ex-offenders from returning to jail would result in significant savings. And the council says its work benefits the entire community as well. If ex-inmates are successfully reintegrated into society, it reduces crime rates, boosts the local economy, increases the number of taxpayers, and helps make it possible for people with troubled pasts to have a positive impact on others.

Daniel Herrlein is another client-partner of The Fountain Fund. He's been in and out of jail four times, spending a total of two years and two months behind bars for failing to pay child support and violating probation.

As someone who's dealt with bipolar disorder and anxiety and twice attempted suicide, Herrlein has struggled in the past to maintain a positive outlook on both life and himself. But he's since received the help of mentors who've assisted him in adjusting his perspective and not getting overwhelmed by the amount of work he needed to do to get his life in order.

Herrlein has worked closely with Carl Brown, the program manager at The Fountain Fund. Brown has emphasized two keys to happiness that Herrlein has adopted: patience and process. Even though Herrlein has sat down with mental health professionals before, Brown—who's a former juvenile

probation officer—has been particularly helpful to him for staying grounded and maintaining a positive attitude.

Herrlein now spends more time with his kids and has worked full-time at a local sandwich shop for the last six months. He hopes to soon open his own restaurant, which The Fountain Fund is working to help him do.

As Tolbert, Sparrow, and Herrlein show, every case is different, and the nearly 50 members of the reentry council all play different roles in assisting with the reentry process. "All of us are intertwined, but these risk factors are intertwined," local OAR Director Ross Carew says. "You can't put somebody in the [cooking program] that's in full-blown substance abuse addiction right now. A lot of these things you've got to address simultaneously."

They know there's still work to be done. OAR Criminal Justice Planner Neal Goodloe points out, for instance, that while crime rates have fallen nationwide, the number of incarcerated people has remained stable.

Although that's a problem for lawmakers to tackle, the reentry council is focused on expanding reentry services and using programs like Home to Hope to ensure convicted offenders in Charlottesville and Albemarle County have the opportunity to better themselves and contribute to society once they're released. It's a mission based on the idea that people deserve second chances.

"We all have bad days," Herrlein says, "but...next day you open your eyes and slate's clean. You take another step forward." ☺



Project ID is helping Stacey Shifflett get a new ID, since someone who has been a "negative influence" on her life has her old one. Shifflett, who's in jail on a credit card fraud charge, is hoping for a fresh start when she is released, and plans to move to Harrisonburg to be closer to her parents.

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