

## Fredericksburg-area organizations launch pilot program to hire released inmates as traffic flaggers

BY SCOTT SHENK THE FREE LANCE-STAR 4/5/2019

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A 31-year-old father of three sleeps in a car he fears might soon be repossessed.

A 38-year-old mother lives in a home with her two teenagers, but they soon may be forced out.

Both want to work, but it's difficult to find and keep a steady job after spending time in jail for felonies.

Christen Willoughby said she has held several jobs since being released in August after a six-month stint in jail. In two instances, she said she handled bank deposits for fast-food chains without incident, but once the corporate offices got wind that her conviction was for shoplifting, Willoughby was fired.

Brian Stevenson, released from jail last summer after a four-year term in prison, said all he's been able to find is temporary work, most recently at a solar facility. But that work is unsteady and has no benefits, which he hopes to find.

They are among 10 local residents with criminal records taking part in a pilot program aimed at helping them make the difficult climb back into society after incarceration.

The program, Right Road, is a joint collaboration between FailSafe-ERA and the American Traffic Safety Services Association, both locally operated organizations. One facet of the program will place those who complete the 40-hour training with an area company as traffic flaggers on road projects.

Another facet of the program is teaching behavioral skills, the kind of tools that could help them avoid what got them in trouble in the first place.

The participants were screened and interviewed and signed agreements. They were also assigned to a "professional and personal development coach" for one year.

Juanita Shanks founded FailSafe-ERA 10 years ago after her son was locked up. She did it initially to help the family get through the ordeal. She continued running the program to help fill a need for others who end up behind bars, something that can impact a person for life.

She acknowledged that her clientele have to deal with the consequences of committing a crime, but said they deserve another chance after serving their time.

"They're human beings," she said.

Doug Taylor, FailSafe's learning and development director, agrees.

"Peoples' lives shouldn't be chaotic like this," he said of how difficult it can be for people with prison records have to fit back into society.

Often, he said, the inability to find steady work is the very thing that lands people back in jail. Some can't pay fines or child support. Some turn to crime after a paying job doesn't pan out.

Taylor teaches former inmates various tools upon being released and said out of a recent class of 25, only one was a first-time offender.

Taylor's experience matched what a group of counselors heard last week in a presentation by Virginia Department of Corrections Director Harold W. Clarke at an event hosted by FailSafe and Germanna Community College. The program included forums focused on incarceration's impact on children and families.

Clarke, who has a reputation for focusing on reintegrating inmates back into society, became the prisons director in 2010. He told the group there is "disproportionality in crime and punishment in this country." He said incarceration is three to five times higher in the U.S. than in Western Europe, and for blacks the rate is seven times higher than for whites.

"My question to you is: Do you feel safer?" he asked the crowd.

Mass imprisonment of a group of people, he said, is an invisible problem that creeps throughout society and across generations.

"It is overlooked," he said.

Clarke, who started as a counselor in Nebraska and went on to hold various leadership roles in corrections departments in other states, said he has "seen generations of the same family coming through" prisons where he has worked.

This group is being "separated from full membership in society," he said.

Clarke told the group of counselors that 94 percent of inmates are eventually released. That means "people are coming out in droves," he said. "How we prepare them makes all the difference in the world."

Shanks said candidates "are banging on the door" for more opportunities, but added that the nonprofit is limited in what it can do. She has high hopes the Right Road program will work as another tool to help give some a better shot at getting back on their feet.

Willoughby also thinks the program offers a good chance for those willing to do the work.

"We want to show the world what we're really made of," she said.

Ron Dingwell, a 56-year-old with a history of drug arrests, said the program can open the door for him and others in years to come.

"This program gives us hope," he said. "You can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Stevenson said the program makes him "feel like I'm part of society again."

He missed a week's worth of potential pay to take part in the program because he wants a good job with long-term prospects. He was eager for Friday's session, when participants took part in the flagger training.

"I'm bringing my steel-toed boots and work clothes in case they have a job," he said beforehand. "I'll be ready."

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