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# “Some Place to Turn, Someone to Talk To”

This is the first of a series of articles on ex-offender programs which WORK-LIFE will publish in forthcoming issues.

by Brad Mitchell

In a field office of an Illinois program for offenders sits a nervous young man in a three-piece suit. He has agreed to be interviewed because someone did him a favor, and he would like to say what that favor has meant to him. He asks that he not be photographed, however, and that a fictitious name be used, so we'll call him Bill.

Some time ago, Bill made a big mistake: He took about \$2,000 that belonged to his employer, and he was caught.

“I didn't know where to turn,” he says. “I was confused and afraid. I didn't know what was going to happen next. They gave me someplace to turn, someone to talk to.”

The program that gave Bill someplace to turn is the Community Correctional Services (CCS) program for the 16th Judicial Circuit of Illinois. Its mission: to provide quality vocational and employment services to youthful and adult law offenders.

CCS is funded through Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grants provided by the Governor's Office of Manpower and Human Development (Illinois) and the Kane/DeKalb CETA Consortium in Illinois. It became fully operational in September 1975, when the State and the local prime sponsor each provided about \$50,000 in CETA title I funds. The program served about 250 participants in 1976 and about 260 in 1977.

Kane/DeKalb Consortium Executive Director James Clapper thought from the

outset that CCS would meet a pressing local need. “We recognized that offenders were coming into our field offices and requesting services, particularly employment,” says Clapper. “We also recognized that we lacked skill and expertise in working with offenders. They created a need that we weren't really able to handle, so when we were approached with the idea we were pleased with the opportunity to provide specialized services for a specialized group.”

Specialized is the key word in CCS operations, because as Clapper said, offenders have special problems in seeking employment. Screening Unit Coordinator Shelley Johnson says that the program recruits “every kind of offender under the sun”—from alleged offenders in pretrial intervention to the repeat offender finishing his sentence. The program has served some women, but most participants are male.

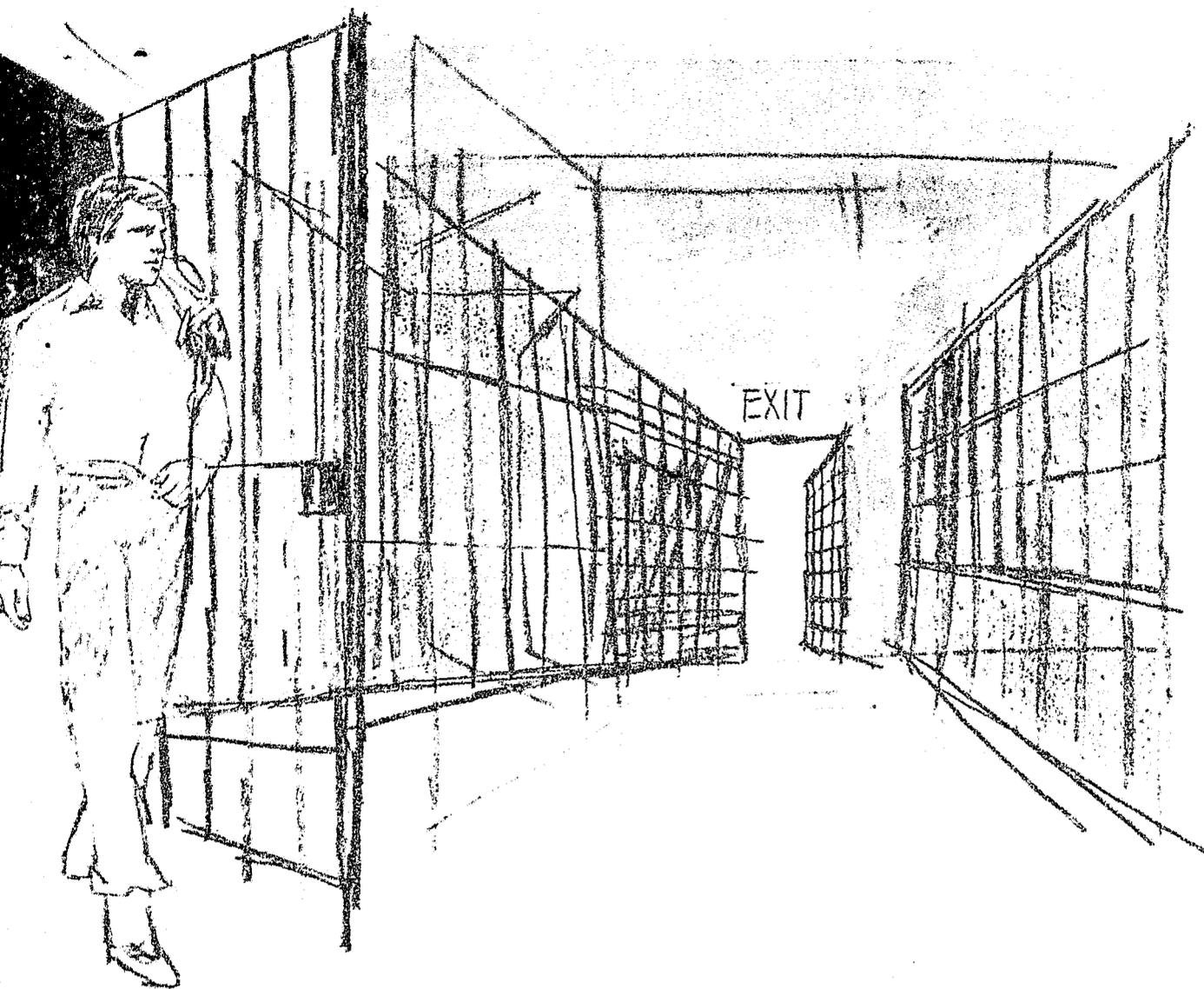
Participants are recruited in a variety of ways. Some are discovered by members of the 13-person CCS staff who attend bail bond hearings. Since CCS works very closely with local criminal justice agencies, many participants are referred by public defenders, prosecutors, private attorneys, police, correctional facilities, and parole officers. Others have heard about the program from friends and former participants and simply walk in and ask for help.

Eligible applicants who are selected for the program first talk to Edmund Reyes or one of the other two intake interviewers on the CCS staff. Reyes says that one of his major responsibilities is to give participants a thorough orientation as to what CCS is, what it offers, and what is

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## Ex-offenders

expected of them. Reyes also determines whether the offender has immediate needs—such as housing, medical care, food, and other necessities—that the program must address, and then discusses the person's work record, educational background, and criminal history.

CCS Career Developer Thomas Lloyd, once an intake interviewer himself, notes that many participants "don't want to talk about their offenses. But we do get into that. We talk about what they've done, what was their crime, how did they see their crime."

CCS Director Anthony Scillia feels that discussing the participant's offense is essential to helping the person find employment. He explains, "We have to be aware of the crime so that we can help the ex-offender deal with questions about it when he goes for the job interview. It's also important in terms of our dealing with prospective employers."

Scillia says that Bill, the young man who had stolen from his employer, is a prime example of a participant who

needed to discuss his criminal history before seeking employment. After receiving a conditional discharge which required that he pay back the money to his former employer, Bill left Illinois for his home State to look for work.

"I didn't have any problem in getting applications to complete," he said, "but when it came to the question, 'Why did you leave your previous employer?' I was stuck." Bill returned to Kane County and asked CCS for help.

"Bill wanted to continue working in sales and we had to tell employers what he had done," Scillia explains. It was difficult, but Scillia and his staff persisted and were finally able to place Bill in the work he wanted.

"CCS prepared the employer before my interview," Bill explained. "They knew what I'd done, but they were still willing to talk to me."

Bill has done well with his new employer. After two promotions, he now supervises a staff of about 50 persons. As far as his criminal record is concerned, he said with a smile, "The owner, the personnel manager, and myself are the only ones who know about it. When we talk

to each other now, it never enters our minds."

Once the intake interview has been completed, the interviewer summarizes all the information that has been gathered and discusses the applicant's needs with Johnson and Scillia. Their recommendations go into a file that the screening committee uses to decide what action should be taken next.

For most participants, the next step is assignment to a career developer whose efforts will lead to employment. But for others, there are problems. "We don't refuse to help anyone," Johnson states. "But we refer persons with drug, alcohol, or psychological problems to an appropriate agency which will help them overcome the problems. We can only help persons who are work-ready, and obviously, a drug addict is not work-ready."

In 1976, the first full year of the program, 482 applicants were identified as eligible. Of these, 295 were selected for participation, and 38 others were referred to other community treatment agencies but urged to return to CCS once their particular problems were overcome.

Work-ready participants are referred to

one of five career developers who operate under the supervision of Services Unit Coordinator Kenneth Klimusko. Klimusko explains that his unit provides "such things as career assessment and counseling, classroom training, training in jobseeking skills, job development, and referral."

With a participant like Bill, the career developer's job is relatively simple. Bill had a college degree and work experience in the field he wanted to pursue. The main problem was finding him work.

Persons who lack skills and are unsure of what type of jobs they would like are harder to serve. Career developers use the information gathered in the intake interview and the results of aptitude tests administered by the services delivery unit to help clients select job fields that might suit their interests and capabilities.

Program Director Scillia believes that career exploration may be the most critical service that CCS provides. "It's done in a way to match up a person's wants with his or her capabilities. I think one of the reasons people don't do well on certain jobs is that they don't explore their wants, so we do considerable research on that," Scillia explains.

Career developers also take pains to insure that participants will be able to perform the jobs they choose. "You can get a man in who says 'I want to be a lab technician,'" Scillia says, "and you find out he's reading on a third grade level. That's unrealistic. It doesn't mean we're going to reject him, but he needs to do some things first, and with a step-by-step approach we can help him get there."

Once such applicants see exactly how much time and study they need to prepare for the fields they choose, they often decide on something more accessible. Klimusko emphasizes, however, that the choice is always up to the applicant.

After participants select a realistic and appealing career path, CCS staff help them overcome educational or work experience barriers, often through the use of CETA programs. They also receive extensive guidance to help them find permanent jobs.

CCS places a great deal of importance on allowing each participant to seek his or her own job and not to rely on CCS for placement. Scillia feels that this emphasis on self-placement is critical to an individual's total development. "We want them to be responsible. We don't want them coming back through the system again," he explains. "So it's important that we make the individual responsible for his or her own destiny."

To do this, the CCS staff guides the

participant through job readiness training that includes role playing for interviews, identification of job resources, and other preparation for securing employment.

CCS's job readiness services are presented to individuals who are still incarcerated as well as to persons who have already been released. Kyle J. and Tino H., for example, were serving sentences at the Kane County correctional facility in Elgin, Ill., when they first encountered the program.

Tino had seen posters advertising the program at local CETA offices, where he was trying to find work before his incarceration for burglary; Kyle didn't know anything about CCS until program recruiters "came and told me this program helps you when you get out of jail, so I said, 'All right.'"

The two received various kinds of job readiness counseling. For Kyle, the most important assistance was interview role playing, which was video taped for future discussion. "I learned I was making a lot of mistakes," said Kyle. "I never realized what I was doing wrong until I saw it on the video tape."

Kyle and Tino were advised to set up CCS intake interviews on their release. After leaving jail, however, Kyle lined up a job on his own. Shelley Johnson explains, "Kyle wanted to test the jobseeking skills he learned while he was in jail. Obviously, they worked."

It's likely that Tino will be as successful as Kyle. Still incarcerated, he is preparing to take the high school diploma equivalency test and has every confidence that things are going to work out for him.

Kyle and Tino are young men, but CCS also assists older offenders, many of whom have long criminal records. For example, 41-year-old Jack L. has been in and out of prisons since he was a teenager. All his convictions have been for burglary.

Jack first heard of the CCS program while at the minimum security prison in Vienna, Ill. "I was a long way from release at the time," he recalled, "but I was transferred to the Aurora (Ill.) work release program." He became involved with CCS after that transfer.

Jack is now holding a public service employment (PSE) position at the Aurora Urban League, where he works as a community research specialist. It's not his ideal job choice, but for now, he said, "I don't have to rip off."

"What we'd like to get Jack into," Scillia says, "is paralegal work in the public defender's office. He has a lot of knowledge about the legal system and he could do well there." That's exactly the

kind of work Jack has in mind and hopes to get when his PSE job expires.

The route that Jack is taking from unemployment to unsubsidized job is typical among CCS participants. Scillia explains, "What we do is get them into PSE or work experience programs under CETA and work towards competitive employment in the future."

On the whole, this approach is working well. About 360 of the 513 participants have been placed in unsubsidized jobs since the program began, and the recidivism rate among all program participants is only about 8 percent. By contrast, estimates of the recidivism rate for all offenders vary from 25 to 75 percent. But program staff are still trying to improve their success record. Scillia says, "We want to deliver a service to everyone. We don't want our clients to fail. They've been through enough failures already."

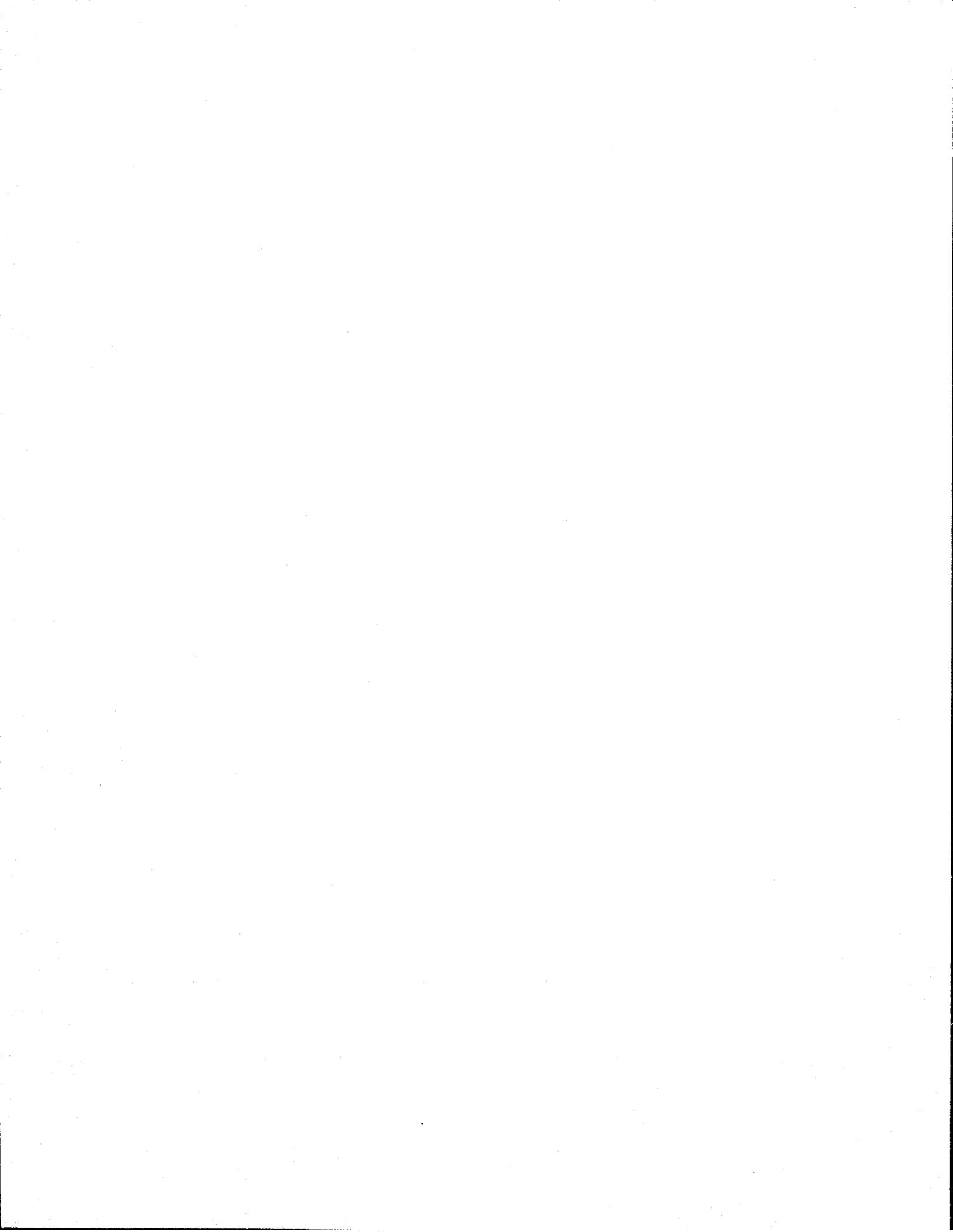
CCS is now undergoing some changes that may indeed help boost its success record. The program has just expanded to serve DuPage County, and a pretrial intervention component was added last August. Funding for 1978 has risen to more than \$203,000; \$45,000 from the Illinois Governor's Office of Manpower and Human Development, \$138,600 from the Kane/DeKalb CETA Consortium, and nearly \$20,000 from the DuPage County CETA Consortium.

Meanwhile, the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) has publicized CCS in "Branch 1," a training film about the employment needs of offenders. ETA is also considering an arrangement whereby CCS staff would help to train administrators of offender programs throughout the country.

Scillia and his staff don't claim, however, to have all the answers to the problems employment and training administrators encounter in serving offenders. Scillia describes for example, "one young man who went through the program, got a job, and seemed well on his way. Then he broke the law again. We put him back in the program and the same thing happened again. He's left the area now and we've sort of lost track of him."

Scillia can't explain why the young man failed. His only guess is that he simply couldn't handle success.

Judging from the program's high placement and low recidivism rates, however, the great majority of participants find success a welcome change in their lives. And like Bill, Tino, Kyle, and Jack, they are grateful to the Community Correctional Services program for helping them achieve that change. □



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