

# Faith-Based Programs Give Facilities a Helping Hand

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**Authors' note:** Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Religious groups have long played a role in helping prisoners and their families, and our nation's prisons have a considerable range of religion-based activities. At a minimum, every prison has at least one prison chaplain available,<sup>1</sup> and many prisons are offering more than prayer services or religious study. Increasingly, these programs offer in-prison, prerelease and reentry services to prisoners and their families. Corrections-related faith-based programs, staffed by committed volunteers, offer the potential to reduce the cost of providing services.

Research is inconclusive about the effectiveness of the programs in terms of their impact on recidivism or ability to change behavior, but some programs are building impressive track records and are helping correctional facilities provide much-needed services. This article highlights five of them.<sup>2</sup>

## Marion, Ohio

The Horizon Program is a 48-bed unit for male inmates at the Marion Correctional Institution, which began operations in 2000. The program, which draws volunteers from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith communities in nearby Columbus, helps inmates develop pro-social beliefs and skills. Horizon at Marion has established strong partnerships with the faith community and taps into a remarkably stable pool of volunteers who provide spiritual development and mentoring activities. Each year, approximately 60 volunteers provide services in the Horizon unit. Only the program coordinator and volunteer

coordinator are paid positions. The Marion Correctional Facility provides funding, and private sources such as churches also contribute, according to Program Coordinator Jeff Hunsaker.

Enlisting members of the community who can model pro-social behavior and attitudes is important in creating a change of heart in offenders and restoring them to better lives, Hunsaker said. Horizon targets inmates who have at least two years to serve before their release. This requirement gives inmates time to put into practice what they learn and to reduce behavioral problems while in prison. The selected inmates live in interfaith "families" for 10 months and receive spiritual mentoring as well as services to help change anti-social beliefs and behaviors, reunite with their families, gain basic life skills, and aid in recovery from addiction. Inmates are selected for the program after interviews with administrators and staff to gauge their readiness and commitment to changing their behavior. Last year, Horizon graduates were given the chance to recommend a fellow inmate to participate in the program. Correctional staff and program officials believe that inmates recommended by Horizon graduates could be successful candidates because the graduates would have insight into an inmate's willingness to change.

As of June 2006, Horizon at Marion had served 230 inmates; 179 have graduated and almost half — 86 — have been released. Of the 86, 14 percent have returned to the state prison system.<sup>3</sup> According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report about U.S. reentry trends, 41 percent of inmates discharged by state parole authorities in 2000 successfully completed their supervision terms; 42 percent were returned to prison or jail; and 9 percent absconded.<sup>4</sup> In light of the national reentry trends, the Horizon program has shown a favorable recidivism rate.

## Lawtey, Fla.

In 2001, Lawtey Correctional Institution established a faith- and character-based dormitory to house about 80 men; subsequently, it became the first institution of its kind in the country. Lawtey houses inmates in medium, minimum and community custody. To be selected, inmates must have had no disciplinary confinements within 90 days of application to Lawtey. Religious faith (or lack thereof) is not considered in the application process. The majority of the inmates report Christian affiliations; 4 percent are Muslim; and 1 percent are Jewish. Thirteen percent have no affiliation, and the remaining 5 percent belong to one of 10 other religions.

According to Senior Chaplain William Wright, approximately 600 volunteers have participated in programming at Lawtey, which offers services every day of the week. Inmates participate in a minimum of four hours a month of secular or faith-based self-improvement, including life skills training, mentoring and developing personal integrity. Wright said Lawtey routinely adds new programs to meet inmate needs. For example, Long Distance Dads was added to encourage inmate fathers to reunite with their children and stay involved in their lives, he said.

Program officials believe the atmosphere at Lawtey makes a difference. Inmates know they must "police themselves" and not engage in problem behavior such as fighting or stealing. Any inmate who has disciplinary problems is transferred to another facility. As a result, disciplinary problems at the facility declined to the point where confinement cells were shut down and staff transferred to other duties. In the six-month period ending May 31, 2007, Lawtey had a lower disciplinary rate per 1,000 than comparable Florida correctional institutions.<sup>5</sup>

According to a forthcoming evaluation report from the Urban Institute, at six months after release, male faith- and character-based institution (FCBI) inmates have lower reincarceration rates than a matched comparison group of inmates housed in the general population. None of the 189 male FCBI inmates included in the outcome analysis were reincarcerated within six months of their release, while four (2.1 percent) of the 189 male inmates in the matched comparison group were reincarcerated during that time, reported Nancy LaVigne, senior researcher at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

## Oregon

Home for Good Oregon (HGO) is a statewide community and faith-based reentry initiative involving a partnership between the Oregon Department of Corrections, local community corrections agencies, citizens, communities and faith-based groups in each of Oregon's 36 counties. Four counties — Marion, Linn, Douglas and Josephine — are serving as pilot projects, working with Partnership Steering Committees, which direct the development of volunteers, services and coordination. A network of nine full-time prison chaplains works in eight correctional institutions to help offenders develop spiritually and prepare for release in the last six months of their incarceration. In addition, 45 volunteer community chaplains, trained by the Department of Corrections, recruit and work with hundreds of community- and faith-based volunteers.

HGO has received more than 1,600 applications since September 2004 — about 280 per month. Offenders of all faiths are welcome. Applicants receive the name and contact information for a volunteer community chaplain in their county as well as two or more local community- or faith-based resources. In three counties, an effort called Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) involves highly trained volunteers who meet weekly, giving high-risk offenders additional support and augmenting services provided by corrections professionals. The program is based on the restorative justice model, focusing on the

community. According to Thomas O'Connor, program administrator, volunteers who can model pro-social attitudes and behaviors can help motivate offenders to use available community resources for housing, employment training and other needs. "The community has a vital role in making the reentry process a successful process for both returning offenders and the communities receiving them," he said. At the time of this article, there are no data on the effect of the services provided,<sup>6</sup> but O'Connor says anecdotal evidence indicates that people who have community support have lower rates of failing to report to their parole officers.

## East Harlem, N.Y.

In 1999, the Harlem Exodus Transitional Community (ETC) received \$40,000 in contributions from a church and began providing services to inmates returning to the community. Since then, the program's annual budget has grown substantially, much of it from large grants from the federal government, Esperanza USA and several foundations. ETC received funds under Ready4Work, an ex-offender reentry work force development initiative of the U.S. Department of Labor's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The Ready4Work funding required that the program not have an overt faith focus and participation in the program's spiritual components not be mandatory.

With the exception of sex offenders and those with mental illness, ETC serves all types of criminal offenders, including those with gang-related offenses and histories of violence. However, this community-based program has no formal affiliation with the correctional system. The program is staffed by professionals, many of whom are ex-offenders. Case managers act as mentors and partners. Each participant must have 10 contacts with a case manager in the first month, five in the second and two in the third. Participants can stay in the program for up to a year, with the number of contacts depending on how well they are doing. Volunteers from the faith community serve as life coach mentors and hold mentoring meetings once a week, but the

mentors and participants also meet at other times for guidance as well as friendship and conversation.

The ETC program serves 400 to 500 formerly incarcerated men and women a year. It focuses on employment counseling and training and helps participants build on the skills they acquired in correctional settings to secure positions outside prison. Following their initial five-day reintegration session, participants leave with a professional resume, interview skills and an understanding of the attitudes and habits they need in the workplace. The program's employment specialists reach out to employers in New York City to develop job opportunities for participants. Adam Friedman, deputy director of ETC, said some of the employers recently involved are the #311 information system in New York City; Opinion Access, a market research organization; and a food delivery service for supermarkets.

## Philadelphia

The Rational Emotive Spiritual Therapy (REST) Inmate Restoration and Aftercare Program helps offenders overcome criminal behavior through combined cognitive therapy (viewed as a promising approach to changing behavior) and spiritual intervention. The REST program began in 2000 in prisons across the five institutions of the Philadelphia Prison System. There is now a reentry aftercare component with a small number of participants.

The program operates differently in each of the prisons, but the core program remains the same. It consists of 13 weeks of group sessions, running approximately 90 minutes each week. The sessions are led by a trained, certified volunteer counselor. Once inmates complete their course work, they graduate and are paired with a mentor before they are released. The mentor helps them connect to community-based faith groups that can direct them to resources for training and employment assistance. The aftercare part of the program is not mandatory.

The program relies heavily on volunteers, who go through extensive training and must pass an exam to

become a certified group counselor. About 1,000 inmates participate in the program each year, and since the program's inception, more than 1,400 inmates have graduated.<sup>7</sup> In one survey of REST participants, 84 percent of the inmates said the program had been very useful to them.<sup>8</sup>

## The Promise of Faith-Based Programs

As these five programs illustrate, faith-based programs — both prison-based and community-based — can provide much needed services. Government agencies, given their structure and specific missions, can find it difficult to match some of these services. For example, faith-based groups provide assistance that draws upon and reflects community values and culture.<sup>9</sup> Their position within the community offers ties that are perhaps most important for giving offenders a better chance for success when they return home.

Corrections-related faith-based programs offer the potential to reduce the cost of service provision through the contributions of committed volunteers. This may help explain the proliferation of faith-based programs throughout the United States.<sup>10</sup> Given this, further evaluations of the effectiveness of such programs could garner information useful to correctional institutions nationwide. Several of the programs discussed earlier are working toward this goal by incorporating evidence-based practices into their curricula and developing program structures that support evaluation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Solomon, Amy L., Michelle Waul, Asheley Van Ness and Jeremy Travis. 2001. *Reentry and the faith community: Briefing paper*. In *Outside the Walls Guide: A National snapshot of community-based prisoner reentry programs*, 162-165. Washington D.C.: Urban Institute. Accessed July 30, 2007 at [www.reentrymediaoutreach.org/resourceguide.htm](http://www.reentrymediaoutreach.org/resourceguide.htm).

<sup>2</sup> The five programs were studied by Caterina Roman and her colleagues at the Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. Their 2006 final report is: *Evaluability studies of faith-based programs in corrections*, final report submitted to the National Institute of

Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. Available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209350.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209350.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Horizon Communities in Prison. 2006. State Reports: Ohio, Recidivism data. Winter Park, Fla.: Horizon Communities in Prison. Accessed February 2007 at <http://horizoncommunities.org/Marion.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, Timothy and Doris James Wilson. 2000. *Reentry trends in the United States: Inmates returning to the community after serving time in prison*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Available at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/reentry.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/reentry/reentry.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Florida Department of Corrections. Update on faith- and character-based institutions. Accessed February 2007 at [www.dc.state.fl.us/oth/faith/stats.html](http://www.dc.state.fl.us/oth/faith/stats.html).

<sup>6</sup> O'Connor, Thomas, Tim Cayton, Scott Taylor, Rick McKenna and Norm Monroe. 2004. Home for Good in Oregon: A community, faith and state re-entry partnership to increase restorative justice. *Corrections Today*, 66(6):72-76. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

<sup>7</sup> I-REST Inc. Web site. Accessed February 2007 at [www.restphilly.com/trainingcenter.html](http://www.restphilly.com/trainingcenter.html) and [www.restphilly.com/restphillyproject.html](http://www.restphilly.com/restphillyproject.html).

<sup>8</sup> Cnann, Ram A. and Jill Sinha, 2004. *Back into the fold: Helping ex-prisoners reconnect through faith*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation. (January). Available at [www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/FF3622H352.pdf](http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/FF3622H352.pdf).

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<sup>9</sup> Hercik, J., R. Lewis and B. Myles. 2004. *Development of a guide to resources on faith-based organizations in criminal justice*, final report to the National Institute of Justice. Fairfax, Va.: Caliber Associates. Available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209350.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/209350.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Solomon et al. 2001.

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