



Consultant says communities not ready for influx of ex-offenders

Gaddy: Ex-inmates
need job, coping skills

By DIANA MAZZELLA
Staff Writer

Wednesday, February 11, 2009

While most communities are eager to lock up those who commit crimes, few are prepared for the day when those same lawbreakers complete their prison sentences and return home.

Dennis Gaddy, owner of a Raleigh-based consulting firm, is someone intimately familiar with the problem.

Gaddy was a successful businessman before he says “unwise” financial choices landed him in prison. He served more than five years in the North Carolina prison system before experiencing first hand the difficulties of re-entering family and work life after his release.

Gaddy believes he was fortunate. He was given a work-release assignment at a nonprofit organization. He later began his own organization, Community Success Initiative, and today he helps ex-offenders make the transition from prison life, teaching them personal development and entrepreneurship skills.

On Tuesday Gaddy was in Elizabeth City, helping River City Community Development Corp. begin a discussion about what the community can do to ensure ex-offenders have a place in society once they get out of prison.

Gaddy tried to impart a sense of urgency to the dozen residents assembled for the roundtable discussion. He described the situation facing the country in the next 10 years a tsunami, as 650,000 prisoners a year will be released into society from federal and state prisons. North Carolina communities are not adequately prepared to respond to the influx of ex-offenders, he said.

Once released, the ex-offenders likely need assistance obtaining the skills and vetting needed for a job, Gaddy said. They’ll also need help coping with life outside of prison and avoiding the lifestyle that got them locked up, he said.

About 16 percent of prisoners released have some form of a diagnosable mental illness that may not receive adequate treatment upon release, Gaddy said. Those who used drugs before prison may still need substance abuse counseling now that they are back in the environment

where they took drugs.

River City CDC's roundtable included several community leaders with experience dealing with ex-offenders.

Rickey King, a former police officer and a city councilman in Elizabeth City's 3rd Ward, said he recalls seeing a lot of former convicts getting into trouble after their release. He believes the type of transitional help Gaddy described would be beneficial because it would result in fewer crimes committed and fewer residents returning to prison.

Al Humbert, a Camden County resident, was also in attendance. He has worked in prison ministry for nearly 11 years, since Pasquotank Correctional Institution opened. He's housed former inmates, bought them cars and helped in other ways, he said.

Humbert said he'd like to see a halfway house for ex-offenders in the area, but he doesn't have the financial capital to invest in one. And although not every ex-offender will appreciate what the community tries to do for him, appreciation isn't the goal, he said.

"Some (ex-inmates are) going to take advantage of you, but you have to say 'I did what I could, Lord it's in your hands,'" Humbert said.

One participant in Tuesday's roundtable said her son is in prison. Another said she used to house released inmates when she lived in New York. Robert Lassiter said he narrowly avoided a prison sentence after he was caught breaking and entering a store. Because of his age, he received a lighter sentence, he said.

Angie Wills, small business developer for River City CDC, said several ex-offenders have approached the agency about getting help finding a job. With Gaddy's help, River City is currently identifying resources that can help ex-offenders. The agency is also forming a network that includes other agencies and individuals who can help.

Gaddy advised the group to try to always have at least one former inmate at meetings. That way, the group can be sure it's addressing the real needs and concerns of ex-offenders. He also advised the group to meet quarterly.

For more information on the initiative, call River City CDC at 331-2925.