

REENTRY

Most people who get out of prison go back. According to one study, two out of every three people who get out of prison go back within three years. Breaking that cycle is hard. And, these numbers seem to prove that simply locking people up for a period of time is not enough to break that cycle.

We can break that cycle only if we help people coming out of prison build a foundation for a new, different kind of life. The building blocks of such a foundation are a safe place to live, a job, and a support network.

The City's Correction's Division, which operates both the Medium Security Institution and the City Justice Center, provides a broad range of programs to confined individuals. These include education courses including GED preparation, substance abuse programs, anger management classes, fatherhood classes, and a number of empowering faith-based programming. These are important resources as intake studies have shown that as many as 40 percent of St. Louis City jail entrants don't have a GED or high school degree.

The Correction's Division has also recently developed a reentry unit that includes caseworkers and reentry specialists. This will help ensure that inmates and individuals exiting jail will have the best chance to link up to external supports, programs, and programs. This will ensure a smoother continuum of reentry and decrease likelihood that individuals will reenter the justice system.

We already have many programs designed to help provide these building blocks in St. Louis City. The City has long collaborated with the Federal Probation and Parole Office and the Missouri Probation and Parole Office. In both programs, people released from confinement have access to social services, and both programs follow up with them to make sure they are as stable as possible during the transition back into the community. These traditional programs are strong, and well-run.

But we're not stopping there. We're also identifying new, innovative ways of using all of our resources as a community to help construct those building blocks for people getting out of prison.

For example, we are bringing the City's Land Reutilization Authority, which owns vacant buildings around town, together with federal probation programs, organized labor, and community groups to transform buildings and lives at the same time. The way it works is simple: the Carpenters Union trains people out on probation to rehab vacant houses owned by the City, transforming the houses from vacant buildings into safe places for men and women on probation to live as they start a new life. And, the program transforms the men and women in the program from recent convicts to trained craftsmen prepared for jobs in the construction trades.

In another innovative collaboration, two City agencies—the Corrections Division and SLATE—are partnering with Ranken Technical College. The program, Prison to

Prosperity, connects people to jobs and job training when they're released from jail. So people leave jail with a support structure that will train them in how to hold down a job and how to save money.

The City has also led the way in opening doors to job opportunities for former prisoners. Last year, the City "banned the box" by removing from City job applications the box asking if applicants have a prior felony conviction. Mayor Slay has also supported a state-wide law banning the box from employment applications in public and private employment. This change in process doesn't prevent employers from conducting background checks on employees, but it does ensure that former prisoners aren't weeded out of the employment process without being given a fair chance.

Helping those coming out of prison build a new life, rather than re-offend will help reduce crime. Not only will it reduce crime, but it's also the right thing to do. After all, we've all made mistakes, and we all deserve a second chance.