



County's re-entry court makes impact

By Ed Balint

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CANTON — Shannon Ballas flashed a bright smile when she appeared before the judge in re-entry court.

She was given a certificate for complying with program rules and making progress. It also means she won't have to appear again before Stark County Common Pleas Judge John Haas, who oversees re-entry court — as long as she stays out of trouble.

The 28-year-old has come a long way. Following graduation from Perry High School in 2003, she had planned to seek a career in the graphic arts field.

Instead she got addicted to alcohol and cocaine. She was convicted of felony breaking and entering and theft after a slew of other charges over the years.

Ballas hit rock bottom. She used heroin. Drugs became more important than her young daughter, dropping out of her child's life. She wound up homeless for more than 30 days — living in abandoned houses, porches and with strangers.

"It's your lifestyle," she said. "You lie, you cheat, you manipulate, you do whatever you have to do ... destroying friends and family lives just to get your next high — I hate to say it that way but that's the reality of it."

Eventually she got picked up on a warrant. Ballas considered it a blessing. "The day I got arrested I looked up to the sky and said, 'God, I just want (the addictions) to end.' "

Now she's sober and working at a local restaurant cooking omelets and hash browns and making sandwiches for the lunch crowd. Ballas lives on her own. The motivation is to someday regain custody of her now 6-year-old. Another goal is college.

After about three months in the re-entry program, which is marking its seventh anniversary this month, she's on track to graduate from it next summer. That would make her a success — staying out of prison, keeping her job, and contributing to society for one year. And then, hopefully, indefinitely.

"The re-entry court is just amazing," she said, also crediting the Stark Regional Community Correction Center for her recovery. "They are so encouraging."

RECIDIVISM RATES

Re-entry court is effective in keeping a vast majority of those who complete it out of prison, said Terri Bell, program director.

For the last three-year period, tracked from 2009 to 2012, the local re-entry program achieved a recidivism rate of 19 percent, according to figures compiled by program staff. The number includes 8 percent who returned to prison on new criminal charges and 11 percent who returned for violating probation or parole conditions.

From 2010 to 2012, the rate was 17 percent. From 2011 to 2012, the rate was 7 percent.

Since the program's inception, 54 percent of those participating have completed the requirements and 19 percent of those graduates have returned to prison, according to re-entry statistics.

"We're proud of it," Bell said. "We keep going back and looking and seeing how to improve it."

The statewide recidivism rate is 28.7 percent, according to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. The figure covers 2009-2012.

That was down from 31.2 percent statewide for the last reporting period and from 39.6 percent in 2003.

PROGRAM HISTORY

Re-entry court was launched in 2006. Stark County Common Pleas Judge Charles E. Brown, who is now retired, and the Rev. Walter Arrington had come up with the idea after discussing the concept with a minister from Washington, D.C.

Arrington and Brown met with ministers representing more than 30 churches in the community. A strategic plan was formed and the program took shape.

Those with a criminal record do not have to continue to pay a debt to society after release from prison, Brown said. "We will not be 100 percent successful," he said. "But we cannot shirk from the responsibility of (helping) those who want to succeed."

Three primary goals are accomplished: "It reduces crime, makes our community safer and saves taxpayers money."

NATIONAL STUDY

Success stories are frequent, Brown said. Among them is a woman who had chewed out Brown and told him the program was a waste of money; she wrote a letter to then-Gov. Ted Strickland expressing the same sentiment. The woman ended up becoming a Goodwill employee of the year and now works at a clothing store.

Records show that some participants and graduates have gone on to commit an assortment of crimes, including breaking and entering, burglary, endangering children and domestic violence. Haas said the program will always have offenders who are "pluses" and "minuses."

Many counties in Ohio do not have re-entry programs, Brown said.

The Stark County program is being studied as part of a research project undertaken by the National Institute of Justice to gauge the effectiveness of such programs across the country, Bell said. The study will cover 2011 through September 2014.

The local re-entry court is also applying for state certification through the Ohio Supreme Court.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Those who get released from prison early are enrolled in the local re-entry court, Haas said. Those who serve a full sentence are under the supervision of the adult parole authority (a state agency), and some of those offenders also participate, he said. Participants also may include those sentenced to probation.

The program is divided between high-risk and low-risk offenders based on the Ohio Risk Assessment System through the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction.

"Many of (those who go to prison) are good people who have done a bad thing," Haas said. "The act itself has to be dealt with; that doesn't mean the person themselves isn't salvageable."

Re-entry court gets funding from two sources — roughly \$125,000 from the Stark County Common Pleas Court special project fund through a portion of filing fees and \$125,000 from the Bureau of Justice Assistance Second Chance Act grant.

Re-entry court includes four full-time employees, excluding the involvement of the judge. Program services include employment skills training, group and individual mentors, welding classes at Stark State College, housing assistance, transportation assistance and assistance with payments for anger management and sex offender counseling.

A portion of the funding is used to pay the minimum wage of some program participants at a workplace for 90 days as an incentive for employers to hire somebody with a criminal record, Bell said.

Employers include restaurants, machine shops, local agencies, hotels and other businesses.

Participants are matched with job skills, Haas said. "Getting them employed and developing the discipline to stay employed, that's a primary focus of the re-entry program," he said.

Program records show that some participants get fired and others are hired and some quit or are let go for lack of work.

PROGRAM PILLARS

Re-entry court teaches self-discipline, accountability and honesty, Haas said. "They understand there's someone out there watching, holding them accountable," he said. "And I think that's important."

Encouragement — as well as a gift certificate for free ice cream when achieving some program goals — is another pillar, Haas said.

When they don't fulfill requirements — filling out job applications, showing up for re-entry court and being honest with court staff among them — Haas chastises offenders. In one case, he ordered the repayment of the ice cream coupon.

"They're like your kids in a way," the judge said. "You have to praise them and also at times administer discipline."

"It's extremely, extremely successful," Haas said, crediting Brown for pioneering the program.

"It's a no-brainer in terms of cost effectiveness, and it's the right thing to do."

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