

Reentry Summit ignites community interest in challenges faced by ex-offenders

Finding a place in the community after incarceration isn't easy. The process of leaving prison or jail and reentering society is stressful for the offender, family and community. More people are leaving prisons and jails than at any other time in our country. How they fare once they reenter the community is important not only to them, but to the community as well. If the offender can find work, housing, and a chance for reformation, he or she is less likely to return to a life of crime. What's more, successful rehabilitation means less family violence and a greater possibility that children will not follow parents into delinquency.

To develop greater community awareness of the challenges confronting men and women who return from incarceration, KLRN-TV, in conjunction with *Making Connections -San Antonio (MC-SA)*, held a Reentry Community Summit on October 3, 2006 at the Frank Garrett Community Center in West San Antonio. Over 250 people came together to explore how the community can better assist people who are leaving prison and reentering society. William "Pete" Duncan, who was featured in the PBS documentary, "*Omar and Pete*," spoke of the obstacles he faced as an ex-offender who has successfully kicked drug abuse and become a contributor to society. Audience members told of their personal struggles with reentry.



The Summit was part of a nationwide effort supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) to spur communities to think about what they can do to address the issue.

Several San Antonians who were already committed to helping offenders because of their work with the homeless learned more about the issue when they attended the Samuel DeWitt Proctor conference in Jacksonville, Florida in
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Patrick McKinley: Making a difference on the West Side

Patrick McKinley is one person who helps many ex-offenders and parolees through the nonprofit he founded, *We Are Making a Difference*, which operates out of a worn cinder block building that once served as the first school for African Americans in the Edgewood School District.

McKinley and other volunteers operate a food pantry from there that distributes basic supplies on a "no questions asked" basis. McKinley witnessed many being turned away from food programs because of eligibility requirements, so he decided to offer food with no strings attached.

"I told God I ain't turning away nobody. All they got to do is say, 'I need help,'" McKinley says.

"Most offenders come to me because of an addiction problem," McKinley says. "I refer them to the Alcohol Rehabilitation Center and AA. Many are homeless. I have some connections with Popeye's and other businesses and try to help them get jobs. A lot know me from the past. They see I've changed. I've given my life to Christ. I used to be an addict. I talk to them. I know the street talk."

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February 2006. These individuals, Patrick McKinley, Jeanie Turner and Reverend Danny Zertuche were invited to the conference through MC-SA as guests of AECF's faith-based efforts which are headed by Carol Thompson. MC-SA is an AECF affiliate.

At the conference, they heard William "Pete" Duncan speak. Duncan was featured with his friend Leon "Omar" Mason in a PBS documentary that traced the two men's journey from prison through reentry. Pete successfully kicked addiction and became a national spokesman who urges society to take a different approach to its treatment of offenders.

After returning from the Proctor Conference, Yolanda Rios Rangel of MC-SA brought those who attended together with Lisa McGrath of KLRN-TV. They made plans to invite Pete Duncan to be guest speaker at a community meeting which featured his video and focused attention on restorative justice. Panelists included speakers from Victory Outreach International, San Anto Cultural Arts, Macedonia Baptist Church, Woman at the Well, Crosspoint, Inc. and UTSA.

The summit exceeded expectations, attracting 250 San Antonians who want more done to bring offenders back into mainstream society. Among those attending was Stephen Collins, warden of the Ruben M. Torres and Joe Ney Units of the Texas Criminal Justice System.

Collins, who operates a reentry program at the Joe Ney Unit, believes the Summit provided a good opportunity to share information and resources.

Collins says, "It was a good educational beginning to get people involved in reentry and to establish who's interested it now. It showed the need for reentry programs and had a powerful impact."

Another person who attended the Reentry Summit was Burt Thompson. Thompson is a national advocate for a continuum of reentry services that begin in prison and continue after the offender returns to the community. On the day following the summit, he met with approximately 135 San Antonio leaders to begin work on a community collaborative that could replicate the successful one he helped create in Houston.

Thompson comments on the unique function served by the KLRN/Making Connections Reentry Summit, saying, "The Summit accomplished something that is an important component. It was done in the evening and people spoke out who are ex-offenders, families of offenders, people who had been impacted by the criminal justice system. It raised the bar. The dynamics of that night was a wonderful opener. The challenge now is how do we raise the bar and empower these people to become part of the solution?"

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McKinley took new ideas from his recent attendance at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference and especially from what he saw at the KLRN-Making Connections Reentry Summit. "I'm still buzzing from the Reentry conference. We never expected so many people."

He has vowed to work with others he met through the Conference and the Summit to establish an even better way of bringing more community resources to bear on the issues of reentry and restorative justice.