

CARE Coalition shows how post incarceration happens

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Elkton Police Chief Carolyn Rogers wore a black robe and eagerly used a gavel to judge people before her as part of the CARE Coalition prison re-entry simulation. This inmate was found innocent and celebrated.

JANE BELLMYER/CECIL WHIG

ELKTON — Recidivism was the word of the day at the CARE Coalition simulation of post-incarceration life in Cecil County.

“The current Cecil County recidivism rate is 36%,” said Angelo Giafes with the Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention and Policy. “We’re looking at getting that down to 15%”



Recidivism is the rate that shows how many incarcerated people end up back in prison.

Kathy Glace, Executive Director of Cecil County Community Mediation, said the local recidivism rate is 36% compared to 77% nationally.

Co-hosted by GOCPP and Cecil County Community Mediation, the CARE Coalition (Cecil Assisting Re-Entry) was a simulation of a person just released from incarceration. The goal was to show a wide swath of community members the challenges in re-entering society.

Held at the Elkton Community Center, the room was set up with tables representing various agencies that a former inmate would have to deal with such as social services, food pantries, medical assistance, transportation and the pawn shop.

One “inmate” pawned his guitar for \$50. Sr. Officer Shannon Comley with Elkton Police Department worked that booth last year. This year, she operated the transportation and rent booth.

“I have to sell them transportation,” she said of the coupons she sold in books of five for \$5. “They have to get these to get anywhere else.”

Dawn Rodenbaugh with Neighborhood Youth Panel, was assigned the inmate identity of “Wenona,” and admitted to finding the re-entry process very frustrating.

"It's been a heck of a morning," Rodenbaugh said, "I don't have any money and it's going to cost me money to get my driver's license. I just sold my extra transportation tickets to get money. I hope it's enough."

Heather McCauley, a.k.a. "Francesca," went through the program last year too and this year she brought her acquired knowledge.

"You have to make friends and you have to find experts," McCauley said. "And you have to barter and make friends with the different organizations."

The line was longest where people had to go to get the identification cards. However, it wasn't long before the jail, the halfway house and the homeless shelter also filled up.

Giafes said this simulated community of former inmates acted in the same fashion as does the real world of post-incarcerated citizens.

"We've got people stealing, we've got people taking money that's been set down; just like it's supposed to happen," he said.

In passing, one participant announced: "I stole that lady's ID."

"See what I mean?" Giafes responded. "It was as chaotic as I had hoped."

Comley said the event cements the opinion she's had as a law enforcement officer about this particular population.

"I found you can't arrest your way out of a problem," she said, "If we can help people out of this situation and get back on their feet we're doing more for our community."

Glance said afterward there would be a debriefing to see which people did get back on their feet and which ended up back in the criminal justice system.

"54% of our survey respondents ended up back in jail," Glance said. "They learned it was hard to stay out of jail."

It was also a reality check, Glance said. One of the participants commented at the start of the event that her upbringing would keep her on the straight and narrow.

"She said she wouldn't do these things," Glance said of the need to survive regardless of the consequences. The participants went through a simulated four weeks of post-incarceration.

"Four weeks in she was so desperate that she totally compromised her values system," Glance said. "She sold drugs, got caught and went to jail."

She and Giafes are hoping this program makes the general public more aware of the challenges and perhaps find solutions.

"We'll also invite them to join the CARE Coalition."