



Throwing out a lifeline to former inmates

Thyrie Bland • tbland@pnj.com • December 27, 2010

For Michael Robinson, life on the outside seemed too much to bear. Perhaps returning to prison was the easier option.

He was working as a barber, but he needed more clients to make ends meet. He wanted a second job, but a man with his background doesn't get many job opportunities.

He was angry.

Robinson, 45, served 18½ years in federal prison on drug charges. After his release, he was placed on five years of supervised release, a post-prison program that requires him to report to a probation officer and stay out of trouble or potentially face going back behind bars.

"I really had given up, and I was like, 'Go ahead and put me back,'" he said. "I was really feeling that."

Then Robinson was tossed a lifeline by the court system that he had so despised.

He is one of 10 participants in the Robert A. Dennis Re-entry Court, designed to help people on supervised release keep their lives on track and successfully re-enter society. The program, named after a long-serving local public defender who died of cancer, began in March.

U.S. District Judge Casey Rodgers is the driving force behind the program.

"As a judge, I feel a responsibility in terms of rehabilitation after these people have completed their sentence to do what we can to assist them in moving forward in a positive way," she said.

Rodgers' team includes a prosecutor, a public defender, probation officers, a mental health counselor and others, all working to help the offender stay drug-free, crime-free, employed and out of prison.

The team has helped participants find jobs, get to job interviews, move and more. Participants also have received funds through the Second Chance Act,

a program that helps former offenders.

"For the first time in some of these people's lives, someone is really standing behind them and helping them," said John Bingham, a mental health counselor who is part of the team. "This is a new approach for these folks."

Robinson, who went to prison in 1990 and was released in 2008, said he initially was leery of the program after finding out that a judge and a prosecutor were involved.

But he's gaining a new perspective.

"The biggest thing with me is I got out of prison still bitter about the past," he said. "I felt like they threw me away over one charge. I lived in prison for 18½ years with that."

Now, he's come around to wanting and accepting help.

"That's a big plus in the program," he said. "You have a federal judge that's coming down to say, 'Trust me, and I'm going to help you.' When you've seen a judge in the past, it wasn't to help."

Positive direction

The program is built around monthly meetings at the federal courthouse on North Palafox Street.

The sessions, which last about three hours, are in a meeting area for jurors rather than a courtroom. The

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participants and Rodgers' team sit in a circle in cushioned chairs. Rodgers is dressed in casual business attire rather than her judge's robe as she leads the meetings.

The sessions are part group therapy, part holding each other accountable.

At the November meeting, one participant talked about moving into a house. Another talked about finding a new job. A third opened up that he was struggling to pay bills and stay in school but had found some financial help

Rob Jimenez, 28, a glass blower who spent 48 months in prison on a drug charge and is serving four years of supervised release, earned praise as a hard worker and talented artist at the meeting. But there also were concerns that his glass pipes were ending up in head shops — businesses that carry items commonly used to smoke drugs.

Rodgers said it is not illegal to make the pipes, but it's something a re-entry participant should not be doing.

In December's meeting, the situation was discussed again and Jimenez was given two choices: Stop making the pipes and stay in the program or keep making the pipes and no longer participate in the program.

Jimenez decided to stay in the program.

A husband and father, he said he initially was concerned about providing for his family if he stopped making pipes. But he decided he could use his artistic talents in other ways.

"I like the group, and I like being a part of it," he said. "I would like to think that in the future I will be able to make a difference talking to other people or to kids. I just don't want people to end up where I was."

Bumpy road

Rodgers said she is pleased with how the program has been going so far.

Of the 10 participants, eight have jobs; none has failed a drug test.

But there still have been bumps along the way.

One participant was sent back to federal prison for selling drugs.

Another had to go back to prison because he consumed alcohol while living at a halfway house.

Rodgers sentenced a third person to 30 days in the county jail and six months at a halfway house after his participation in a rap video came to light.

The language in the video was objectionable and the video was suggestive of gang activity, she said.

"It was inconsistent with the conduct that we expected of someone on federal supervision and, more notably, in our re-entry program," Rodgers said.

The participant was allowed to stay in the program, but he lost the time he had put into the program and had to restart it.

He also had to meet one-on-one with the judge every two weeks for three months.

Rodgers said he has continued in the program without any other issues.

"We recognize they are going to have setbacks, but we want to be there to address it and deal with it before it escalates to a major revocation and a problem," she said.

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Rob Jimenez, left, 28, of Pensacola sits with District Judge Casey Rodgers during a session that's part of the Robert A. Dennis Re-entry Court program. The program is designed to help former inmates rejoin society.(Special to the News Journal)

-- At the time of sentencing, federal offenders frequently are sentenced to prison to be followed by supervised release.

Supervised release has existed since 1987, when it replaced federal parole as a means for imposing supervision on people released from prison.

The U.S. Probation Office supervises former inmates on supervised release, requiring them to abide by the law, to avoid using drugs and to meet other conditions. Violators can be returned to prison.

-- Participation in the re-entry program is voluntary. Participants are recommended by probation officers. U. S. District Judge Casey Rodgers and her team decide whether a candidate will be accepted.

-- The program accepts people on federal supervised released who have served time on drug charges and have had substance abuse issues.

Offenders with violent criminal histories aren't accepted.

-- Participants stay in the program for a year and are encouraged to stay drug-free, crime-free and employed.

-- Those who finish the program get one year knocked off the supervised release sentence.

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