

What does it take to break the tragic cycle of incarceration from which so many inmates try to escape?

Approximately fifteen months ago, the heads of the Mid-Atlantic States Career and Education Center in Pennsville began an effort to reduce recidivism among inmates in the Gloucester County Correctional Facility with the Center's WorkPlus program. This program provides "soft skills" training and job placement. Since that time, Gloucester County inmates who have attended the twelve week program during their stay at the county's correctional facility have not returned to the jail, a drastic turnaround from the standard seventy percent recidivism rate the jail experienced in the past.

Glen Donelson, the Center's Executive Director, and Tom Brown, its Associate Executive Director and Ben Wood, Assistant Executive Director – Planning and Development started discussing this program several years ago with Salem County Sheriff, Chuck Miller where they began assessing the types of training inmates needed to prevent them from returning to jail after their release. It was concluded that "they need jobs and mentoring", Donelson said.

Donelson, Brown and Wood addressed that need with a program focused on "soft skills" – the importance of attendance, communication, teamwork, decision making and dependability. Every Wednesday morning for three months, they prepare inmates for the employment world by helping them develop resumes and conducting mock interviews. They don't sugar coat their training.

"We don't pussyfoot with them," Donelson said. "We're straightforward, open and honest". We tell them some people believe they shouldn't be given a second chance. "We put them on a guilt trip and ask them if they want their kids to take the same road they've taken".

Approximately twelve to fifteen inmates take advantage of the WorkPlus program each session while they are serving time. The program began in Salem eighteen months ago and expanded to Gloucester County three months later. Since its inception in Salem County, only four of one hundred released prisoners have returned to prison. Gloucester County's release record is one hundred percent.

When they complete the program and prior to their release, the program participants take part in a graduation ceremony with guest speakers from government and the business community. Gloucester County Freeholder Director Robert Damming and Freeholder Liaison Larry Wallace have served as graduation speakers. Chas Bogardus from Budd's Pools in Deptford has been a business speaker. County Administrator Chad Bruner is scheduled to preside at the next graduation ceremony.

The program has been featured on NJN News because of its success and the effort that is placed after the inmates re-enter society.

Inmates who are released are invited to attend the WorkPlus program which is held at the Paulsboro Boys and Girls Club to seek help for job placement. Both Donelson and Brown have numerous years of experience in prior jobs at DuPont and PSEG. They aggressively seek positions for the parolees. They even attempt to encourage employers to review their policies on rejecting job seekers with criminal records. "We pride ourselves on placing a lot of people into jobs" Brown said. "Is it easy? No. But we have turned employers around".

The Mid-Atlantic States Career and Education Center instructors have taken advantage of a grant that has afforded them the opportunity to place 450 individuals into jobs over the past twelve months. They help them obtain GEDs if needed and have even had success getting the criminal records of ten individuals expunged. Donelson pointed to a NJ Department of Labor survey that has determined eighty percent of the people they have placed are still working in their positions. "Sooner or later, the criminal background goes away and the job skills take over," Brown said.

Recidivism is a financial as well as a social issue. "It costs approximately fifty two thousand dollars to keep a person incarcerated for a year," Donelson said. "This doesn't include the public assistance the family needs while the spouse is in jail. This helps the County and State save money."

Donelson gave Ray Childs, administrator of the jail's work release program, the Gloucester County social service system, the court system and its Workforce Investment Board (WIB) "accolades". We work closely with Ray Childs. The county Department of Social Services reaches out to the inmates before they are released. Now the court system talks to them before they get released. We ask the inmates to reach out to us after they get released. Everybody tries to get them ready for their formal return to society."

Donelson and Brown trace issues to home problems and the vicious recidivism cycle. "One school district in Salem County identified twenty percent of pre-K to first grade students with a parent or parents incarcerated," Donelson said. "On any given day, that could increase to thirty four percent. That's why you see a large number of youngsters placed in special education even though they shouldn't be there. And that's a cost that's not factored in.

"Just putting together a resume doesn't cut it," Donelson said. "They have to overcome the barriers they face or nothing is going to change."

Joe Pohanish – Reaching His Goals

March 24, 2011 was a very special night for Joe Pohanish. That was the night that Joe won the Dave Ravel Memorial Award at The Arc Gloucester's 54th Annual Dinner. The Dave Ravel Memorial Award honors an individual who has accomplished a personal goal and achieved success in the face of difficulties through hard work and perseverance. There were many awards given out that night but anyone who was there would agree that no one was more proud and happy than Joe. He gave a touching acceptance speech which concluded with Joe holding his award over his head while saying "I will always remember this night."

It was fitting that Joe received this award. His journey has been long and complicated and he's not done yet. Joe lives in a group home operated by The Arc



Gloucester. He came to The Arc Gloucester from the New Lisbon Developmental Center. The transition from institutional to residential living was not easy but Joe persevered. In addition to his new home and new housemates Joe got his first job at The Arc Gloucester's



Woodbury Adult Day Program. He did well in this new setting and a year later he moved to The Arc's Crew Labor program where he could make more money and work more independently.

At Crew Labor Joe does lawn maintenance as well as office cleaning. Joe constantly strives to be successful at his job. As he said when he was interviewed for this article, "I love to come to work". But as much as he likes his job at Crew Labor, he has bigger goals to pursue. Joe hopes to someday work at the nearby Wal-Mart as a stock person. He believes that he will work there and his confidence is contagious. Until then Joe will continue working hard and making friends at Crew Labor.

When he is not working Joe likes to help around the house. He is a good bowler, having been selected for the Special Olympics bowling team this year. He swims and works out at the YMCA in Woodbury and he really likes listening to his Taylor Swift CDs. Joe is like anyone else. He wants an opportunity to work and to enjoy his leisure time with family and friends. He has found a home with The Arc Gloucester. He is busy every day enjoying life and creating opportunities for himself through hard work, perseverance and a positive attitude.