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## The Way Home Does More With Less

By: Jessica R. Clark



**Right to Left: Two of The Way Home Board Members, Bob Davis and Jeff Jackson, volunteer Monday nights to socialize, mentor, and offer encouragement to The Way Home participants, Mike Mawhinney and Melvin Jones, who live with other Way Home participants in a Millsboro transitional home.**

**"We have never and we do not intend to turn anyone away in spite of recent budget cuts." Those words, spoken by Barbara Del Mastro, speaks volumes of the dedication of The Way Home's Director who also serves as one of two program case managers.**

**An interfaith organization and a nonprofit, The Way Home is celebrating 18 years of steadily supporting ex-offenders transitioning from prison, re-entering society, and re-uniting with their families. "We receive requests from prisons throughout Delaware and we also serve others who enter our office door in Georgetown," explains Ms. Del Mastro. "We serve, on average, 100 permanent clients each month and support 100 to 150 contacts monthly. In addition, Way Home volunteers facilitate several programs for incarcerated inmates in the Work Release programs of the Sussex Correctional Institution in Georgetown and workshops in the community."**

**The program's mission is to meet former prisoners at the prison gates and provide connections with the community, meet their transitional needs, and foster relationships that prevent return to prison. "Many times we speak on behalf of incarcerated men and women at parole hearings," comments Tony Neal, The Way Home's Lead Case Manager.**

**Ms. Del Mastro and Mr. Neal, full-time case managers since the program's inception, and a part-time office manager will be stretched thin. "We've been operating on a shoe string for**

several years, but the future looks very grim," Ms. Del Mastro continues. Twenty percent funding cuts impact those salaries and operating expenses. "We will continue to respond to everyone's needs as best we can."

"The program is built around their needs," Ms. Del Mastro explains. "Many of the released men and women have a sixth-grade education, have substance abuse problems, are in poor health or at high risk for disease, or have emotional or mental illnesses."

Comprehensive case management includes meeting men and women at the prison gates and providing initial needs such as clothing, food, housing, and many other basic necessities of life. Ongoing support is provided for transportation to find jobs, social services, banking services, driver's licenses or other identification, educational needs, counseling, medical care; and completion of probationary requirements to meet their goals and responsibilities. Support is also provided for those relocating to other areas.

Participants hear about The Way Home by word of mouth, program outreach, from prison programs sponsored by The Way Home or referral from prison staff. Case managers meet with prospective participants before their release and begin making plans for their transition to the community.

## **Benefits to State and Local Communities**

Aside from the cost of crime to the community, Delaware taxpayers are paying an annual cost of \$36,000 to house one inmate in prison. Alternatively, The Way Home's cost for case management services for one person is approximately \$5,500.00 -- approximately one-sixth of the cost of incarceration.

"Our primary goals have been and will always be to increase public safety and reduce recidivism," Ms. Del Mastro explains. "By assisting and providing the basic necessities of life and other basic services, we believe the men and women transitioning into society can look forward to a happy and healthy life. There are several programs statewide that may do one or two facets of what we do. But The Way Home is the only program that serves this population with everything from transportation, to finding a job, a place to live, and medical services."

Each year in Delaware, approximately 20,000 inmates are released from prison into the community. Of those 20,000 released, it is estimated that 1,200 have been incarcerated for at least one year.

According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 35 percent of those released have work-impairing disabilities including mental illness. Over 50 percent of those released would return to prison due to new offenses within three years. Many released die at a rate of 12 times that of other individuals. The leading causes of death are drug overdose, cardiovascular disease, homicide, and suicide.

State and local communities benefit when ex-offenders re-enter society with a strong network supporting them: Increased tax revenue from paid employment, reduced welfare costs as participants pay child support, increased community safety, reduced substance use, and reunited families.

In September 2012, the School of Public Policy and Administration of the University of Delaware issued an assessment of The Way Home Program covering the period 1999 through 2008. The study compared Way Home clients and Delaware Department of Corrections detainees. The Way Home had lower proportion of their clients who recidivated in the first year of their release than the ex-offenders of the Department of Corrections.

Table 9

<p>Average One Year Recidivism, Released 1999 - 2007</p>
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Type of Release	Way Home	DOC
New Arrests	16%	23%
Violations (parole, probation)	12%	8%
Total	28%	32%

Source: Evaluation of The Way Home Program, Issued September 2012, by the Health Services Policy Research Group, Center for Community Research and Services, School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, University of Delaware, page 15.

The University's summary and conclusions over all years of the study also stated:

- The Way Home Program performed more efficiently than the Department of Corrections on all dimensions of recidivism.
- For any point in time after release, The Way Home clients had higher probability of not returning to incarceration. A higher proportion of Way Home clients were less likely to recidivate for the entire time frame after release.

"The first year after release is crucial," states Neal, "Many want to return to their familiar neighborhoods, and although we encourage re-uniting with their families, many times it is not the wisest decision. Returning to their neighborhood sometimes means returning to the behaviors that got them incarcerated in the first place. So, we encourage them in their decision making process and many times starting over in a new place gives them a new perspective on life."

### Volunteers are the Backbone of The Way Home Program

A forty-hour work week is not the norm for The Way Home's two case managers, Ms. Del Mastro and Mr. Neal. Many times, prisoners are released with no money, carrying their possessions in a plastic bag, with unsuitable clothing, no transportation, and nowhere to stay. Other times, participants need to be at work at 6:00 a.m. or leave work at 10:00 p.m., have no vehicle, and public transportation is unavailable, particularly on holidays.

"In light of the budget cuts, volunteers are becoming increasingly important to carry on this mission," Ms. Del Mastro explains. "Many assist with transporting participants, help with crafting resumes, establishing a bank account, and educating participants with

everyday things most people find quite ordinary. Almost since the inception of The Way Home program, several Way Home board members visit with participants in a Millsboro transitional home every Monday night."

Board member, Jeff Jackson, one of the volunteers, affectionately known as the Monday Night Guys, comments about his role at the transitional home, "It takes a while for the newly-released participants to feel comfortable and for us to establish trust. Sometimes we just chat about football and other things men talk about. We might bring a pizza and offer advice about searching for jobs, interviewing, or buying vehicles, when asked. Sometimes we provide transportation to parole meetings or to work."

Ms. DelMastro continues, "We do the work we do because we care deeply about people. The Way Home is a compassionate program. In many cases, we maintain contact with the men and women as they continue to build their lives."

## **Support Groups**

Recognizing the importance of the first year after incarceration as being the key in preventing return to prison, several ongoing support groups run by volunteers were started primarily in the last two years:

### **Women's Group at Sussex Correctional Center**

Since July 2013, Carol Laspino-Franks, clinical psychologist and a volunteer facilitator in the Thresholds program, a decision-making course held in the Sussex Correctional Center, has facilitated a weekly support group for about 10 incarcerated women. Many of the women are in the Crest Program for drug abuse issues and some are from work release.

Ms. Laspino-Franks recognized early on that a sizeable number had diagnosable mental problems or were victims of severe psychological, sexual and/or physical abuse or parental neglect, and some suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Some discussion topics include self-destructive choices, some evolving from immersion in the drug culture, and their consequences. "Many women are concerned about how to get their children back, where to live because many have nowhere to go, or what jobs they could expect to find after their release," Ms. Laspino-Franks states. "The women are grateful for the therapy sessions. They say it is not like any other program they have participated in. They feel safe to say anything because what they share is not shared outside the group." More than 300 women have attended the group sessions since the group's inception. "I hope to give them an emotional base they can build upon when they leave. I hope that something I say or others say may make a difference but you can never know if you have 'planted a healthy seed'. If they had not been mistreated and neglected as children and had not become addicted, they might have done great things at this stage in their lives. I drive home the message they are worthwhile, valuable, and worth more than being beaten up or beaten down by others."

### **Men's and Women's Support Groups**

- Ms. Del Mastro and Mr. Neal began as instructors in the Thresholds Program at the Sussex Correctional Institution. Thresholds, a national nonprofit organization, was

established in 1974 by a former inmate of a New Orleans prison. While he was incarcerated, he observed that inmates need better decision making skills in order to take control of their lives, to set goals, and make wise decisions upon returning to their communities. Four 10-weeks cycles of instruction are offered each year for inmates.

- **The Way Home is grateful for Clifton Harmon, a Delaware Tech student and a Way Home intern, who facilitates a discussion group every Tuesday night in the Sussex Violation of Probation Center in Georgetown. Sessions are based on a two-volume guide and workbook titled "I am Responsible" by Brett Lunger and Steve Wookey. The books, purchased by the Work Release Program, is used to facilitate discussions about such topics as anger, hatefulness, indifference, holding grudges, and how to address or deal with those and other feelings; how to behave in challenging situations or situations that require decisions based on conscience and learning from the experience; planning for making choices for the remaining days on earth; relationships and friendships, joy, zeal, gifts and how to use them.**
- **Facilitated by a Way Home board member, Ira Kalbrosky, and other volunteers, a men's support group is held every other Tuesday at Work Release from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. Discussions center around coming to terms with inappropriate behaviors, changing attitudes and choosing positive behavioral changes in anticipation of a better future.**
- **The Georgetown Presbyterian Church on North Bedford Street hosts a Way Home Women's Support Group every first and third Monday nights from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. The group is open to women in the Sussex Correctional Institution's Work Release and Crest programs and to the community. This group, facilitated by Ms. Del Mastro, is also a safe place for the women to express their worries and anxieties, to network, and to gather information about support services they will need upon their release. The women support and encourage each other as their concerns rise to the surface.**
- **Conflict Resolution weekend workshops are held periodically throughout the year at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Georgetown from 9:00 a.m. to 6:15 p.m. Attendees are men and women from SCI's Work Release Program, Way Home participants living in the community, and community volunteers.**
- **Participants in Transforming Trauma Workshops, led by Charito Calvachi Mateyko, a restorative justice practitioner, learn about themselves, how to cope and balance emotions and feelings, and discuss their future plans, hopes, and dreams. Modules are designed to teach participants how to reduce stress, set priorities, and focus on what they can do to accomplish future action rather than immediate gratification.**
- **For more than 20 years, The Way Home's Lead Case Manager, Tony Neal, encourages The Way Home and Work Release participants and family members to**

**attend a support group titled Everlasting Hope on Wednesday nights at the Booker Street Church of God in Georgetown. Also a program of encouragement and mentoring, the spiritually-based evening includes Neal sharing his testimony of addiction and recovery and other testimonies. "We always try to 'pick them up' rather than 'put them down'. Many are carrying old pains, feelings, and emotions. I stress that failure is not final and if you want something you never had, you have to do something you never did," Neal states.**

**The Reverend Max Wolf, President of The Way Home's board and rector of All Saints' in Rehoboth and St. George's in Harbeson Episcopal Churches, states emphatically, "There are many reasons why people end up behind bars. Socio-economic status comes into play. It may be because, simply, they are poor and many times cannot hire a lawyer. Many lack education and motivation to get ahead, cannot find employment, and turn to selling drugs. Dysfunctional family environments and drug and alcohol use also increase the chances of incarceration. Another reason is 'running with the wrong crowd' and heading down the wrong path."**

**"We at The Way Home are definitely 'down' about a 20% cut in funding. But, we're not 'out'. We have important work to do. We will need to rely more on volunteers. We could use a volunteer fundraiser chair, a volunteer coordinator, and a grant writer.**

**We all make mistakes. That doesn't mean we shouldn't have dignity and human rights...We are all God's children..We at The Way Home believe in second chances. The Way Home ministry is not only for participants but to connect our society to the needs of others."**

**The Way Home, Inc. first started as a prison Bible Study in 1996 with a small volunteer group from St. Martha's Episcopal church in Bethany Beach under the umbrella of the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware.**

**After recognizing the needs of incarcerated men and women facing release from prison, in October 1998, The Way Home was inspired to become organized as an interfaith community ministry. One of the first volunteers, Barbara Del Mastro, who began as a case manager, was hired as the program's director. Tony Neal came on board as a volunteer and later became the Lead Case Manager, Eventually the program became an independent nonprofit with many churches, community, businesses, volunteers, mentors, and a board of directors offering support.**

**For more information about The Way Home program, how to volunteer, or to submit a tax-deductible donation, visit [www.twhprogram.org](http://www.twhprogram.org), [www.facebook.com/thewayhomeprogram/](https://www.facebook.com/thewayhomeprogram/), or call the office at (302) 856-9870.**