

County Council helps former inmates find The Way Home

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Staff Reporter

Sussex County Council heard this week from representatives of The Way Home of Georgetown, an organization that assists men and women who are leaving prison and have nowhere else to turn.

"We grew out of a prison-based [Bible study](#) and are connected to many churches," explained Barbara Del Maestro, the director of The Way Home of Georgetown and also one of two full-time and one part-time case workers working for the organization. "We started in 1994 as a volunteer organization and in 1998 were a formal non-profit."

After their first year of operation, in 1998, under the auspices of Children and Families First, they became affiliated with the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware. In 2006, they became an independent, non-denominational non-profit with 501(C) status.

Although a private non-profit, they receive some funding from the State, area churches, the Southeastern Sussex Ministerium, the group Lewes, Rehoboth Area Churches (LRAC) and private donations.

The Way Home assists soon-to-be-released men and women while they are still incarcerated, asking them what their needs are. Many, Del Maestro said, have nowhere to go after their release and no way to get there if they do have somewhere to go. The Way Home assists with them getting their driver's licenses, finding a place to stay, transportation to job interviews and with clothing and shelter.

While they operate a [transitional housing](#) facility in Millsboro that can house four men, most of their work is in referring the clients to where they can find housing and jobs, and getting them equipped to go on interviews and set up their new life.

According to the organization's Web site, case management services for The Way Home Program cost about \$5,000 per year per participant. That's compared to the cost of \$30,000 per year to house one inmate in prison.

"We are saving the state millions of [dollars](#)," said Del Maestro, "that would have been spent on incarceration," noting that recidivism rates for their clients are 50 percent less than if The Way Home didn't exist.

"In 2006, the University of Delaware (UD) released the results of a five-year study that compared the recidivism rates of ex-offenders who participated in The Way Home with those who did not and found that The Way Home participants were less likely to return to prison, especially during the first year of release. In 2004, the recidivism rate for Way Home participants (10 percent) was approximately half that of Department of Correction's clients (21 percent)."

Billy Johnson, who recently was released after spending five years in prison, spoke to the council, saying he now has a small lumber [business](#) and doesn't know where he would be without the assistance he got from The Way Home.

"I had family, but I didn't know where they were," he said. "I didn't have anything. I had a plan but didn't have anyone to help me carry it out. They helped me with getting my license, clothes and transportation to my job. As I stand here, the clothes I wear are from The Way Home. Now, I have a vehicle, I go to meetings and I go to church. I don't know where I'd be without them. I don't know if you know about it, but it's a beautiful thing."

Councilman Sam Wilson asked if Bible studies couldn't be a mandatory part of the program to reduce recidivism, referencing similar programs he thought had higher success rates by being totally Bible-based. "You are asking for charity... and, as a giver, why not require them to go to church?"

Del Maestro said the group respects different faiths and beliefs and that they help by driving clients or guiding them to a place they wish to worship. Lee Dogoloff — who consults with The Way Home as clinical social worker — added that they would probably get in trouble with the IRS if they did require church attendance, but he said they did recognize that spirituality is still a large part of what they do.

"Spirituality is a part of the recovery process," he said, "and it is a faith-based organization."

"We do everything to assure that this person has the best shot of making it," he said. He added that they had recently celebrated the birthday of a client who was turning 49 and had never before received a birthday cake. "It is a place of miracles."

Dogoloff said many of the men and women have histories that are "the toughest of the tough."

Councilman George Cole asked if programs like this couldn't be looked at in more depth for grants, or as recipients of any extra money the County had.

Referencing last year's small tax rebates to county taxpayers, he said, "I think I got \$8 back last year." He said he felt that money could be better spent.

After Del Maestro's presentation, Wilson, Councilwoman Joan Deaver and Councilman Vance Phillips each gave \$1,000 out of their councilmanic accounts to The Way Home.