

Out of jail, then what?

by Margo Ashmore

He could be your cousin, or mine. In the wrong place at the wrong time, to hear my aunt tell it, out with friends, he didn't know that what he was doing was driving a getaway car, but that's how it turned out. They could have tried to fight it. But he decided to just do the time. He's out now, still a young man, but auntie continues to raise his child, her grandchild.

Every bit of research shows that stable housing and employment equate to the best chance that a former felon will not re-offend, said Sarah Walker of 180 Degrees, one of the organizations leading the Second Chance Day at the State Capitol Jan. 26.

"The system wasn't meant to punish forever," and hopelessness about their prospects for the basics of living breed the temptation and opportunity to reoffend.

That's why hundreds of advocates filled the State Capitol rotunda and the observation tiers above it for the rally; people who have served jail time, people who provide social services, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), employment and faith based organizations.

Four hundred signed in, though Walker estimates there were closer to 600-700 involved. "We do have people up at the Capitol regularly," she said, "but what is particularly impactful is they understand that it is a place for their voice."

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State Senator Linda Higgins, who serves North and Downtown Minneapolis, said she spoke at the rally and met with folks throughout the day. That's how a "day at the hill" goes—advocates meet one-on-one with legislators to persuade them to introduce and support legislation.

She said the most likely measure to be introduced would take "ban the box" legislation passed a couple of years ago for government jobs and extend it to all job applications. That means no employer could ask on the written application (usually done with a check-box) if a person had ever been convicted of a felony. "At least then they can get in and make their case

for being hired without their application being summarily dismissed."

"Some people told me this is the first time they've been to the Capitol, and I said don't be a stranger," Higgins said. They tell the same stories, about not being able to get a job, or housing. It's difficult to get and stay on the straight and narrow without that. Some start their own business, or patch several things together, or go into the nonprofit world, which is a little bit more welcoming."

This sounds familiar. It's in the stories told at Criminals-Gangs Anonymous meetings, where former inmates seek peer support in coping with stresses and temptations. They talk about their jobs, schooling, and family relationships.

"Jobs and housing are basic human needs," Higgins said. She said progress has been made, but there are still others who think it should be made harder for a person to re-integrate into society (as a deterrent to crime).

State Representative Bobby Champion, who serves the 58B portion of North Minneapolis, said he has sponsored bills in the past relating to second chance concerns, and he plans to re-introduce them and support others' efforts.

Walker said Second Chance advocates have been painted as endangering public safety.

She said that's not her goal. Members of the Minnesota Community Corrections Association (MCCA), mostly probation officers, participate in the Second Chance Coalition that Walker founded with 180 Degrees and Goodwill Easter Seals, joined by building trades, labor and teachers' unions and social service people. "We've been successful making this a non-partisan issue, bridging urban to rural, and doing education throughout the year. Every sector has to deal with this," Walker said.

MCCA has provided the evidence that giving a second chance works, Walker said. "It costs \$35,000 a year per person" to keep a person in prison, do the math on how much is saved and what that individual contributes when they have a job and pay for their housing. The examples are in the context of an individual coming out of prison into a comprehensive program of resources, not just to a job and a



place to live.

Anna McLafferty, with **NAMI**, said, for example, that “My Home, Inc. in St. Paul provides one-stop, culturally specific dual diagnosis treatment and transitional reentry housing for African American men and women on supervised release, work release and probation. A 2008-09 study by the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Corrections found that only 12.75 percent of participants committed new crimes.”

“I think the best example of how effective reentry services can be is in Stearns County, MN,” McLafferty said in an email. “The Stearns County jail has a Release Advance Planning (RAP) team that includes social workers, mental health staff, a jail nurse, the jail programmer, a probation officer, and any other people who can help meet a given inmate’s needs. The team meets with inmates at least 30 days before release and works with each participating inmate to arrange housing, employment or income support, health coverage, health care appointments, mental health and substance use treatment, and anything else that might be a challenge as the person reenters the community.

“For people who have gone through the RAP program, recidivism has dropped 79 percent (comparing the number of jail bookings two years before and two years after the program). Some participants have come back to the jail voluntarily to share their successes with the team, such as a new job, a new baby, or the longest period of sobriety in a very long time.”

There’s other legislation proposed: Senator John Harrington, the former St. Paul Police Chief said, “I am in the process of drafting a bill that would restore voting rights to individuals who are on probation.”

The Second Chance Coalition would like to see a bill to erase any juvenile records that don’t result in a felony conviction. Currently, at age 16 or 17, charges against juveniles, even if they are reduced or dismissed, stay on their permanent records.

Readers can follow bills in the legislature, and find contact information for the Senate and House members, on all sorts of topics, online at www.senate.leg.state.mn.us and www.house.leg.state.mn.us.