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Home seems like a dream for prison ministry clients, volunteers

Reality Check/Frank Carini

Desperate for a better life, the troubled young man believed prison was his salvation. Inside a steel and concrete cage, his thinking went, he'd at least have three meals a day and a place to call home.

He had been tossed out of an area homeless shelter - he has a difficult time dealing with authority - and living on the streets of Newport was punishing. Although he had never spent a day in prison, an extended stay at the Adult Correctional Institutions in Cranston seemed liked the best option - so the 21-year-old deliberately violated his parole.

His lifestyle decision broke the heart of Cheryl Robinson, but the president of Turning Around Ministries understands his flawed reasoning.

"He really believed he had nowhere else to go," Robinson said. "He has no family. He truly believed living on the streets was harder than being in prison. Not having a place to live is challenging."

Volunteers at the Newport-based nonprofit agency can relate.

Working out of a tiny, donated office in the basement of the Community Baptist Church on Dr. Marcus F. Wheatland Boulevard, the faith-based community outreach program is searching for a new home. More specifically, an actual house, where the people they help could find shelter as they attempt to avoid the unsettled environment and outside influences that encouraged their destructive behavior.

Turning Around Ministries was born last summer to help Newport County ex-convicts being released from ACI make a successful transition back into society. It's not an easy mission.

Despite asking for help, some ex-convicts are hard to reach - they simply want a winter jacket or a RIPTA bus ticket. Before long, they're back grappling with the criminal justice system.

Others who are more willing to be helped find employment and housing opportunities scarce. Too few people want to give former druggies, thieves and vandals a chance. They ignore this segment of society, hoping it and its problems magically will go away.

Thankfully, Turning Around Ministries' 10 volunteers understand that turning your back on people does not do them or the community any good. Caring volunteers such as Mavis White and Cheryl Newsome are trying to make a difference among a disregarded population few want to be involved with.

Unfortunately, too few volunteers and a trickling cash flow limit the group's outreach. But those obstacles haven't diminished the group's passion or sabotaged its plans.

Most of the organization's modest budget for this year - \$116,700 - will go toward paying expenses such as hotel rooms, medicine, clothes and food for the 24 and counting clients being helped. These bills leave little money for investing.

Since last July, the group has saved \$1,000 - hardly enough to buy or even rent a house on Aquidneck Island. Praise and worship services, chicken dinners and walk-a-thons are not financial bonanzas.

But the group's more immediate concern is finding volunteer grant writers, planners and Web page designers, and scraping up some money for volunteer training, resource materials and office supplies.

In the meantime, Robinson, White, Newsome and the rest of Turning Around Ministries' volunteers will continue to spend the bulk of their free time helping those not used to people caring about them.

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