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## > Help on the outside

"Being incarcerated, you don't have a lot of doors open to you — which doesn't give you a lot of opportunities to survive," Ray said recently at his home. "Just being released, you're eventually starting all over and don't have a lot of resources to turn to."

Ray found help through the county's Jail Re-Entry Assistance Program, known as RAP. The new program works to discourage ex-convicts from reoffending by helping them find services in the community for housing, substance-abuse treatment, health care, child-support assistance, employment and more. The program starts a month before offenders leave jail and continues for up to 90 days after release.

"Our goal is to hopefully have them never come back to the jail and not commit any new offenses," said Tim Cleveland, the county's deputy director of community corrections.

The program has helped 47 former inmates since its start in June. Many needed health care, chemical dependency treatment, and job and housing assistance. In this first year, 13 who completed the program have served a total of two days in jail since their release.

Preventing inmates from re-offending also means less expense for taxpayers, said Matt Smith, county director of financial services.

How much less is the question. County staff recently began collaborating with the Bush Foundation to track the return on taxpayer investment.

The foundation is using a private consultant to help the county measure the areas in which it could net savings by keeping inmates from re-offending — including the jail, the court system, law enforcement and county departments. The county expects to have findings from the eight-week project in late spring.

"We're happy to have it be a guinea pig," Smith said. "We



Purvis Ray checks the schedule as he waits at Apple Valley's transit station to transfer to another bus to get to his job Wednesday. Dakota County's Re-Entry Assistance Program helped Ray to survive once he was released from jail.

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want to try to measure how much bang for the buck we're going to get, exactly where those bucks will be, and when."

### VARIETY OF PROGRAMS

Prisons and jails nationwide offer a variety of re-entry programs.

In Minnesota, a handful of initiatives are available at state prisons and a few at county jails. In addition, many sites partner with nonprofits and faith-based groups that offer the programs, providing volunteers and funding at no cost to the public.

But rarely do counties run the programs, officials said.

Dakota County modeled its re-entry program after similar ones in Steele and Stearns counties, said Kelly Harder, Dakota County's director of community services.

Previously, Dakota County corrections would help inmates case by case.

Now staffers from about a dozen county departments meet regularly as part of a RAP team, through which they collaborate and focus on the needs of inmates to create individualized plans for their release. The group could help offenders find housing or health care so they can continue to obtain their prescriptions once released.

They also follow up with inmates when they're in the community. The initiative is paid for by redirecting funds from a staffing vacancy to pay for the program's coordinator, Dayna Kerner, who also is a case manager, Harder said.

Inmates need to apply for the extra help. To qualify, offenders must have at least 30 days left of their sentence. They meet with Kerner to identify their needs, and then she discusses the case with the RAP team.

"We'll identify those needs, and then we'll start targeting them and address them," said Ron Wells, supervisor of the adult division in the county's community corrections. "All the priorities come to the table. It's really like a one-stop shop in a way."

### IN A BETTER POSITION

Ray was released from jail in late August. Since then, he has held a job at a Bloomington bakery, packaging and shipping buns and other food. He completed a substance-

abuse aftercare treatment program, and he lives with his children and their mother. Ray was surprised that Kerner kept calling — even after he left jail.

He'd been released from jail before, Ray said, but this time his release is different. Now, he said, he's in a better position to stay out of jail because of the program's help.

"A lot of people return to jail because of not having resources, not having someone give them direction until they're able to get on their feet," Ray said. "It's a great help for a person to continue to be positive and have the belief that life can change for them."

Mary Maas said she wishes more counties would offer such help.

Maas works at the Minnesota-based nonprofit Amicus. She directs its Reconnect walk-in program, which helps offenders re-enter society by assisting in job searches, providing housing leads and offering a voicemail account and reduced-rate bus passes.

Many offenders she helps come from Ramsey and Hennepin counties.

"I wish the other counties had funding for that," she said of Dakota County's program. "I wish we had more funding for people coming out of prison. Some of them are being dropped at the homeless shelter."

Housing is a big obstacle for convicted felons, many say.

Several cities make it legal for landlords to turn away applicants with criminal records. But re-entry programs work with landlords who are willing to give offenders a chance, Maas said.

"There are so many barriers (for offenders), they hardly can start over," she said.

### GOOD RESULTS SEEN

The state's prison system already is designed to discourage inmates from re-offending, said John Schadt, spokesman for the Minnesota Department of Corrections. While serving their sentence, offenders are given opportunities to gain useful skills.

Also, state prison sentences were changed in the mid-1980s to promote prisoner re-entry, Schadt said. If eligible, offenders serve two-thirds of their sentence in prison and the remaining third in the community, where field agents can monitor them.

Many are given requirements during their supervised release, such as staying off alcohol and illegal drugs, remaining law-abiding and finding permanent housing.

Of those released from prison, 74 percent don't return, Schadt said.

Several other re-entry programs are available to ex-convicts.

The InnerChange Freedom Initiative, run by the nonprofit Prison Fellowship Ministries,

is a 30-month faith-based program that matches offenders with mentors from the community. The program focuses on battling substance abuse, developing skills and other areas.

According to a study released last month by the corrections department, the program decreased re-offending by between 26 percent and 40 percent. The report tracked 732 offenders, some in the program and others in a comparison group, from 2003 to 2009.

An evaluation is under way for the Minnesota Comprehensive Offender Re-entry Plan, a pilot program completed in 2011. The state partnered with five counties, including Hennepin and Ramsey, to increase access to services for offenders released from prison. The program reduced the number of former inmates re-offending by between 37 percent and 57 percent, depending on different types of repeat offenders, said Grant Duwe, research director at the state corrections department.

"In the current economic climate, it's a little more difficult to find or maintain funding," Duwe said, but, "I think there's a recognition that re-entry programming is important."

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