

ComALERT program offers ex-cons chances to succeed

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Be Our Guest: Charles Hynes, Kings County District Attorney

On April 9, President Bush signed into law the Second Chance Act of 2007 - bipartisan legislation that authorizes an array of grant programs designed to help individuals reentering the community following release from prison. This legislation garnered widespread support in Congress from both sides of the aisle. Many faith-based groups and criminal justice practitioners were among the act's staunchest advocates. "The work of redemption reflects our values," said the President. "It also reflects our national interests."

These are sentiments that I share, both as a private person and as the chief law enforcement officer in Brooklyn. Once offenders have served their sentences of incarceration and paid their debt to society, they deserve a fighting chance to become productive members of the community. That's not just fair, but, from a public safety point of view, it's also the only position that makes any sense.

Roughly 700,000 people were released nationwide from state and federal prisons last year. New York City alone absorbed more than 10,000 individuals returning home after release from New York state prisons. Studies have shown that, unfortunately, unless these individuals find employment and receive counseling and other social services, they are likely to reoffend and to end up reincarcerated. Their recidivism exacts a tremendous toll - both in terms of the immediate harm caused by the criminal activity and in terms of the direct and indirect costs of criminal recidivism, such as the criminal justice system costs of investigation and prosecution, incarceration costs and social costs. This threat to the public welfare demands a coordinated response from law enforcement agencies and community-based social service providers working together.

Professor Bruce Western of Harvard University recently completed a state-funded evaluation of ComALERT (Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together), the Kings County District Attorney's reentry program for Brooklyn parolees. The program's clients receive individualized counseling, including drug treatment, from a partnering agency, Counseling Services of EDNY, and they are also linked to a slew of other social services by ComALERT's community resources coordinator. ComALERT closely collaborates with the Doe Fund, which provides a majority of the program's clients with transitional employment, as well as transitional housing.

This prosecution-run reentry program, with its emphasis on employment and substance abuse treatment, has proven remarkably successful. Western's research revealed that parolees in a matched control group (who did not have the benefit of ComALERT) were more than twice as likely to have been rearrested within one year of their release from prison as were ComALERT graduates. Indeed, a national study indicated that two years after release from prison about 59% of ex-offenders had been rearrested. By contrast, only 29% of ComALERT graduates had been rearrested two years after release from prison.

Most of ComALERT's clients are referred to the program by the New York State Division of Parole; however, ComALERT also accepts self-referrals from state parolees living in Brooklyn. The ComALERT Center is conveniently located in the Municipal Building in downtown Brooklyn, and the program now has the capacity to treat 1,200 participants per year. ComALERT's collaborative model ensures that clients rapidly receive the individualized services that they need.

I and many of my law enforcement colleagues strongly supported the Second Chance Act, because we recognize that formerly incarcerated individuals who are unemployed and drug-addicted pose a greater threat to public safety than do those who have successfully reintegrated back into the community. With funding provided through the Second Chance Act, district attorney's offices throughout the state and country will now have the opportunity to replicate ComALERT's effective re-entry program model.

Charles Hynes is District Attorney of Kings County