



KPBS SAN DIEGO (2006-09-20) California's prisons are so overcrowded that inmates are released every day to make room for new ones. Statewide, seven out of 10 of these parolees wind up back behind bars. One San Diego nonprofit is helping to beat those odds by reaching out to the ex-cons - putting them to work and trying to keep them out of jail. KPBS Radio's Andrew Phelps has the story.

The nonprofit is called Second Chance, and it all starts with first impressions. About 40 people line up in a big classroom to shake Scott Silverman's hand.

Christopher: Hello, Scott, my name's Christopher.

Silverman: Where's your smile?

This is Handshake 101.

Silverman: By the way, if you only have one tooth, I want to see it. Even when you're saying, 'Hi, I'm an ex-felon.' It sounds better, doesn't it? Alright, so work on your smile. When you walked up to me, your eyeballs were on my hand, cause you wanted to make sure your hand got mine, which means I couldn't look you in the eye, which means we couldn't make eye contact.

The kind of eye contact Silverman is looking for doesn't come naturally to the students here. Many of them just got out of jail. Ex-con Marvin Simmons understands that.

Simmons: Prison is, you know you mind your own business. I don't care what the next man is doing. I don't need to care; it's not my business. You tend to build up a wall so when you come out it's not like you really know how to interact with people. You just don't.

Second Chance is about changing that. The Prisoner Re-Entry Employment Program, or PREP, picks up prisoners the day they get out and provides three weeks of job training. In some cases, PREP provides drug-free and rent-free housing for up to two years. Silverman says the program is free, but not easy.

Silverman: Some people just want a ride. Some people just want to get their opportunity to get a free ride from jail to their home. And you know, we're not Cloud 9. And even they charge for their service. So we make it real clear that if you want a ride from us, it better be because you're serious about going back to work.

The ex-cons learn how to explain their shady past to prospective employers. They practice interviewing one another. Anyone who doesn't participate gets a bow beating, and there are many drop-outs. Marvin Simmons almost got the boot on day one for arguing with an instructor.

Simmons: I call it a tough love. They're gonna say everything you don't want to hear; they're

going to do everything you don't want them to do. But in the end, it has worked out. And believe it or not, I didn't think three weeks was going to do much, but it did.

A new study conducted through Cal State San Marcos Foundation says it does work out for most PREP grads. Ninety percent of them went on to get jobs. And researcher Chuck Flacks says PREP graduates were far more successful at staying out of jail.

Flacks: It's almost a flip-flop. You know, if you didn't come to PREP, about 70 percent of people would go back to jail or prison, be re-arrested. If you did graduate from PREP, 70 percent of the people stayed out.

Flack says the PREP participants also reported lower levels of depression and a more positive outlook. They reported spending more time with their children.

Flacks: The keys here, the things that we really saw, were getting people out of their normal patterns.

Just last month, Marvin Simmons was serving his fourth sentence behind bars in nine years. His criminal record starts with a bank robbery at age 18. His first three trips to jail didn't stop him from committing more crimes. But now he's decided to make a change.

Simmons: In prison, a lot of the guards and counselors and what not, they tell you that, you know, black men and Latino men are . . . they're never there for their kids. It's always the grandparents or the mother that's raising their kids. And that bothered me. That bothered me. I don't want anyone else raising my son.

Californians have a lot riding on whether Simmons and ex-cons like him succeed at staying out of jail. The state has the highest rate of repeat offenders in the nation. Some experts say California's justice system is little more than a game of catch-and-release. Governor Schwarzenegger has called for building costly new prisons to absorb the overcrowding. But some experts like Igor Koutsenok say the way to fix the prison problem is by fixing the prisoners.

Koutsenok: Fix, uh no. Fix, fix ---- it's not a good word.

Koutsenok is a psychiatrist at UC San Diego. He made a career of studying the criminal mind. He says habitual crime is a lot like drug addiction, and both worlds usually overlap.

Koutsenok: It's more than just doing crime. It's more than just robbing you, or robbing banks, or killing people, or stealing. These are behavioral tools --very dysfunctional. Very, sometimes, anti-social and very risky. But these are tools to satisfy the person's needs.

And jail time doesn't alter those lifelong behavioral tools, Koutsenok says. Second Chance tries to give ex-cons an alternative tool kit. At about \$4,000 a person, Second Chance costs one-tenth of the price to keep an inmate locked up for a year.

Marvin Simmons completed the PREP program four weeks ago. Last week he landed a job as a pipe-fitter. Simmons has aspirations of working in information technology, but he has to get used to wearing a necktie.

Simmons: That was a new thing for me. I never knew how to tie a tie, but now I do. And I actually like dressing up now. Feels good. Like they say, I guess when you look good, you feel good.

Simmons is one of many graduates who advocates for Second Chance. Graduates make up 40 percent of the program's employees. The 100th class graduates next month. For KPBS, I'm Andrew Phelps.

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