

Without a net

PAROLEES LEAVE PRISON WITH \$200 — AND LITTLE ELSE

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On a cool September day, Scott Moore left the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in Otay Mesa, where he had been a prisoner for four months, and headed home to Escondido.

He had no job, no food, and no place to sleep. Only \$200, and a warning to report

to a parole agent within 24 hours.

REVOLVING DOORS

California's parole system in crisis

He found a pair of tattered, once-white tennis shoes in a trash bin in

Oceanside. An admitted alcoholic, Moore drank his dinner and then spent his first free night curled up behind a building on the coast.

"It was lonely, not having anywhere to go," he said.

Coming home, Moore discovered, can be a frightening experience.

It was an experience that

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PART III: REVOLVING DOORS



WALDO NILO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Scott Moore is recently out of prison and on parole. Photo was taken at the North County Interfaith Council office in Escondido.

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is familiar to the nearly 2,000 parolees living in North County, most of whom are poorly educated, addicted to drugs and alcohol, in poor health and illiterate.

Many of them return to neighborhoods steeped in poverty, crime, high unemployment and little hope. Getting a job is often an insurmountable hurdle. Who wants to hire a felon?

All these folks returned to their communities with the same meager possessions as Moore. And with about the same chances for success: Roughly 70 percent of California's parolees return to prison inside of three years.

It happens, parolees say, because it is easier to go back to the drugs, to the fists, to boosting stereotypes, to old neighborhoods with familiar troublemakers.

It happens, experts say, because while in prison, the state doesn't treat or educate its inmates.

It happens, both sides agree, because parolees are unable to change or uninterested in changing their behavior.

Once on the outside, there is little monitoring. Most inmates see their parole agent twice a month. Each meeting lasts about 15 minutes.

Jeremy Travis, a leading scholar on parole and president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York, told a gathering of U.S. mayors earlier this year that the goal should be to "improve the life chances of people who leave the prisons and jails of our country."

Re-entry, he said, should be a community goal.

"To look the other way is no longer acceptable," he said.

But where to look remains a dilemma.

Odds against success

The state simply does not have the resources, financial or otherwise, to meet inmate and parolee needs, concluded a December 2007 report on California prisons and parole by a team of experts assembled by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's office.

Consider this statistic from the state's report: 134,000 prisoners left California prisons in 2006. Only 10 percent had gotten job training while incarcerated.

Another telling number: Only about 2 percent of parolees took part in the state's literacy programs — even though two of every five prisoners are functionally illiterate.

"It is like sitting on pins and needles. But Palomar College blew me away with how supportive they are. When I tell them I just came out of prison, they don't bat an eye."

— VIETTA RAY
Longtime drug addict and parolee

The lack of training contributes to the parolee unemployment rate — as high as eight of 10 jobless parolees — one year after prison release, the report concluded.

Odds are low that Moore and his brethren will successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Odds are good they will go back to what they know, snorting methamphetamine, writing bad checks, congregating with gang members, carrying knives or hiding from parole agents.

The troubling news on the horizon is that thousands more Moores could leave prison early if a panel of three federal judges meeting this week in Sacramento decides that the only way to alleviate overcrowding in the state's prisons is to release some prisoners from custody.

Frustrated and upset

Moore has been out of jail for two months and still cannot find work. He lives in transitional housing for addicts, and his sole source of income is doing chores for his roommates.

The 43-year-old wants a job. But he has no marketable skills, no diploma, no car.

He attended Escondido High School, but did not graduate. His education came from the street, and the county jail, where he said he spent seven of his last 10 years.

After his last arrest for attempting to steal a bottle of vodka, a roasted chicken and a precooked meatloaf from a grocery store, the state said enough. He went from lockup in the county jail to prison.

While he works through his addiction recovery, Moore has few clothes. Among them are the black pants and T-shirt he picked up at a thrift store with the money the state gave him.

He can't afford to buy deodorant or shampoo.

"I'm frustrated a little bit," Moore said. "I really want to get a job. I don't feel comfortable in the clothes I have, and that upsets me."

Moore used his first meeting with his parole agent to ask for help. To his relief, his agent picked up the phone and smoothed the way for Moore to get a bed in a sober living program in Escondido.

And that is the way it is supposed to work, say those who work with parolees.

"I would say it is better than it has been in a long time," said Anita Paredes, who runs Community Connection Resource Center in San Diego. "There are a lot of programs. San Diego County is program-rich."

But programming is not going to help those who don't want to change, said Jack Micklos, chairman of the San Diego Re-Entry Roundtable and director of Second Chances, a resource group.

"We can provide them things, but if they are thinking like a criminal, if they think it's them against society, they aren't going to be very productive," Micklos said. "They have to start developing some self-confidence, have to be given an option to change, and need support for that change."

"You have to get them to realize they are tired; there is no more game left in them."

Not trying. Doing.

There's no game left in Vietta Ray, a longtime drug addict who in March — on Easter Sunday — said goodbye to prison for the second time.

She boarded a bus from the San Joaquin Valley prison and headed home to Oceanside. She watched as, only hours after their release, 10 of the 12 women who were released decided to get off the Greyhound bus, jump parole and go party.

She declined the invitation.

The next day, she checked in with her Oceanside parole agent and asked for help. He told her to attend a meeting designed to introduce parolees to assistance programs.

That meeting, which is conducted in North County every two weeks, happened to fall on her fourth day out of prison. The \$200 she got when leaving prison had paid for her bus ticket, and a motel room for two nights. Her family picked up two more nights.

One of the providers at the meeting offered her a spot in a sober-living home. She used her month there to find a bed in a long-term rehab facility.

Last summer, Ray enrolled in college. Scarier, she said,

than the penitentiary.

"It is like sitting on pins and needles," Ray said. "But Palomar College blew me away with how supportive they are. When I tell them I just came out of prison, they don't bat an eye."

Ray agreed that programs mean nothing unless the parolee wants the help.

"It had to come from my willingness as well, but they (parole agents) cracked the door," she said. "It was up to me to push the door open. They don't want to waste their time with somebody who is not ready."

Paredes said attitude is the key.

"If they don't have the attitude for a clean life," she said, "they will just be back in the system."

Moore knows it, too.

"If I wasn't ready, I wouldn't be taking advantage of any of this stuff," Moore said. "I'd probably be out drinking. I've been in program before, but I wasn't ready. I did it half-assed. But prison is a big thing. I don't want to go back there."

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