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Project Return gives ex-inmates a place to begin

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Season to Give: Part of a continuing series

When Paul Dixon was released from the Williamson County jail this spring, he got a ride to a Nashville homeless shelter.

He didn't have any other place to go, he said. Stripped of all possessions, with no form of identification and no relatives, Dixon contacted Nashville's Project Return to help him get back on his feet.

Dixon was convicted of felony theft, he said, and lost his wife and entertainment business as a result. With the agency's help, he has been able to secure employment and a studio apartment. His hope is to rebuild his entertainment company and sing at weddings and birthday parties.

"If I didn't have any help, I'd be on the streets," said Dixon, 42.

"They gave me some money to pay for rent because I was in a halfway house. They found me places to get clothes, but they also went out and bought some shirts and shoes for work. They went above and beyond."

Project Return has been assisting people released from jail and prison with reintegration to society for 30 years. It doesn't function as a transition home because it doesn't offer any residential programs. The agency assists clients with obtaining identification cards and getting jobs and apartments.

"We're there to provide hope when they start over; many of our clients don't have any family support. We walk alongside our clients," said Nancy Routh-Johnson, the nonprofit's director of the employment program.

She said the nonprofit relies heavily on donations from corporations and individuals to keep its doors open.

"When you're in the kind of business we're in, hopefully people see the need for the service," she said.

"It costs a lot less to fund the project than send somebody back through the system."

Additional Facts

THE SERIES

The Tennessean's Season to Give will run each day through Dec. 25 and features people helped by local charitable groups.