



## Program helps prisoners re-enter society

By Bill Harless, [bharless@nashvillecitypaper.com](mailto:bharless@nashvillecitypaper.com)

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A \$1 million federal grant is helping inmates in Tennessee prisons learn job skills and coping mechanisms that will help them get back on their feet after they've served their time.

A successful graduate of the program was released from a West Tennessee prison at midnight, the day before Thanksgiving, after finishing a 27-year prison sentence. He had \$260, and headed to Nashville, where his sister lives.

By Wednesday of the following week, he was working as a cook at a newly opened Nashville restaurant.

The man was fortunate to have special attention to help him prepare for his new life outside the walls, according to David Delbridge, executive director of Project Return, a Nashville nonprofit that helps "ex-offenders" find jobs.

Most former prisoners are not so lucky, Delbridge said.

"You have no job skills when you go in — you have no job skills when you come out. Or you may have jobs skills when you go in, but you've stayed in for so long that you don't have any when you come out," Delbridge said.

The recently released prisoner had heard about Project Return while he was in prison and contacted the nonprofit when he arrived in Nashville. The organization located a halfway house where he could stay.

A worker for the halfway house, while driving to meet the former prisoner, received a call from the owner of the restaurant seeking a cook. The former prisoner, coincidentally, had been a cook.

Project Return has provided "reentry" programs for ex-offenders since it was founded in 1979, but in the prison system itself, there has been very little preparation for people who come out of prison, according to Delbridge.

A new program of the federal government, however, the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), provided grants to 49 states in 2003 for the creation of reentry programs.

The Tennessee program, for which the Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) received approximately \$1 million, is called "Tennessee Bridges." It is a three-year program managed by Project Return.

Prisoners in the program are taught cogitative thinking skills and anger management, according to Nancy Johnson, an employment specialist with Project Return. The prisoners also receive alcohol and drug treatment, if necessary, and they are taught time-management and work skills.

A participant will eventually enter a "work-release program" in which he or she takes a daytime job. Interviews are held between the prisoner and potential employers.

Of the 142 prisoners who have finished their participation in Tennessee Bridges, 96 graduated and were paroled, according to Bill Gupton, TDOC director of substance abuse.

To encourage employers to hire ex-offenders, the federal government will provide free bonding for an ex-offender, to protect against financial loss Delbridge said.

The government will also provide tax credits to businesses that hire and retain ex-offenders, according to Johnson.

Ninety-seven percent of prisoners are eventually released, "so we need to be proactive as community members ... in trying to make sure that they have a viable way to make a living ..." Johnson said.

The Project Return Web site is [www.projectreturninc.org](http://www.projectreturninc.org).

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