

Easing the Transition from Incarceration to Employment with Connections to Success



By: Amie Bossi

According to the Department of Corrections, there are about 30,000 offenders incarcerated in 21 correctional facilities in Missouri and 97% will be released back into the community. What resources and supports do they have to assist their transition?

At Connections to Success (CtS), we work to fulfill our mission of empowering determined individuals with a plan and resources to achieve economic self-reliance. We have specialized in working with men and women being released from incarceration since 2003.

"When I started Dress for Success Midwest ten years ago and began providing women with suits for their job interviews, I also saw the need to provide job readiness support," says Kathy Lambert, Co-Director. "In continually working with the women being served through the program, I quickly realized that many of them have been affected by the criminal justice system. Most of the women had a family member or friend in prison at some point in their lives. They knew the struggles that went along with being released. After speaking with our program participants at length, I knew that re-entry was a path that the organization should embark on. I truly believed we could make a difference! When a person has hope plus a plan it equals success."

CtS assists individuals returning to the community from incarceration transition back into society through its Pathways to Success program. The Pathways program focuses on employment and mentoring. Every

month, Personal and Professional Development classes are offered at the office in Pagedale. This intensive, two-week class addresses the issues that may arise when seeking employment. The students learn about communication styles, resume writing, job fairs and most importantly, how to answer the question, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Mock interviews are conducted in an effort to perfect their response and prepare for the interview.

A key aspect of the class is completing a life plan. Each student maps out goals in every aspect of their lives from employment and transportation to spirituality and socialness. Their goals are broken down into manageable steps. Upon graduation, students are matched with a mentor through the CtS program Faith and Family Mentoring.

"The mentoring aspect is what truly makes our program work," says Brad Lambert, Co-Director. "Many of our participants lack the support and encouragement needed to face the challenges of re-entry. Our mentors provide that missing piece. We are blessed to have such strong relationships with our partner churches through the mentoring program."

In addition to the classes post-release, CtS has gone inside many institutions to teach the class before



invited to bring its mobile unit, Wheels of Hope, to the prison and provide clothing for the mock job fair that is held at the completion of the class. In late April, 28 men were provided slacks, shirts and ties for the job fair. In late summer 2007, 50 women were suited for the mock job fair on the women's side of the facility.

"Watching the women try on the clothes and see themselves in the mirror was heart-warming. Many of them cried when they saw how professional they looked. I'm so pleased that they will have a suit to wear on their job interviews once released," said Cari Nelson, a CtS volunteer who suited ladies at the prison.



CtS also partners with St. Charles County Probation and Parole to offer classes at their office. Over 75% of the graduates from the April class have landed employment.

"We believe everyone has the right to be self-sufficient and earn a living. Individuals face numerous challenges achieving self-sufficiency upon release from prison. With the right tools, resources and support, they can reach that goal. CtS is proud to provide that support," says Kathy.

CtS' next event is sponsored by Doncaster. The Doncaster store at 8001 Clayton Road will host a sample sale at 40% off regular prices from June 16 through 20. Fifteen percent of the sale will benefit CtS. For more information, contact Karen Morrow, District Leader and Wardrobe Consultant at (314)863-5753.

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 (314)333-4490