

Stark has state job program for young crime offenders

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CANTON At the age of 19, Brandie Stalder is trying to build her own life - a common rite of passage for any teen.

But most teens aren't coming off a nearly three-year stint in the state's youth prison system.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services, which oversees juvenile crime offenders, released Stalder in March. She was sent to youth prison after being convicted of aggravated robbery and theft.

"I don't want to go back. I'm better than that," Stalder said. "I'm pushing myself to succeed this time."

For the past year, a state job re-entry initiative has aimed to ease the transition for juvenile offenders such as Stalder. Stark County gets \$167,000 to run one of the four programs. The others are in Columbus, Cleveland and Cincinnati.

REACHING HIGH-RISK YOUTH

The kids sent to the youth prison system can be held until they turn 21. The average age at release is 18, and 50 percent of them end up back in DYS or in adult prison within three years.

Housing, education and work are the three big issues youths struggle with when they get out.

"If you can connect these three dots and provide mentorship, you can reduce recidivism drastically," said Joyce Salapack, chief probation officer for Stark County Family Court.

The job program looks at high-risk youths who are at least 17, on a GED track or are high school graduates and can take post-secondary classes.

In the institution, the youths get a battery of tests to assess their academics, ability to be trained and likely job satisfaction, Salapack said. At the same time, the program looks at placement opportunities in the community. What can they do, and who wants to employ them?

If the youths don't have jobs, they keep busy with community service.

Stark County Family Judge David Stucki said the court endorses the re-entry program because it continues rehabilitation.

When youths return to the community without support, "Guess what? They end up in the same kind of trouble as when they came to our attention," Stucki said.

A FRESH START

At this point, 28 kids are in Stark County's program.

Nine are working, eight are still in institutions and seven are unemployed - either disabled, in full-time GED courses or just released.

Three kids are in the final phase. No one has been sent back into the state system.

After a brief stint in a group home, Stalder now lives with her stepfather and fiancé in an apartment in northwest Canton. She has a job at Taco Bell and is taking classes to get her GED.

"I always thought there was no way out," Stalder said. "When I was on the streets, it felt like prison. My mind was in prison. I couldn't think no way out."

Stalder didn't make it past the fifth grade. Her mother and biological father have both been to prison. She was in and out of court for truancy, unruliness and underage consumption before the aggravated robbery case sent her to DYS.

The job re-entry program has helped her focus on the sometimes-overwhelming task of building a life, she said.

"They'll be patient with me, help me take baby steps to get where I need to go," Stalder said.

SOME SNAGS

Stark County's program is the only one administered by a court and uses the Stark County Community Action Agency, Twelve, and Stark County TASC to provide case management and other services, said Bob Fernandez, Family Court special projects coordinator.

The court's ability to switch partners gives it more flexibility over other job re-entry programs operated by a single not-for-profit organization, he said.

There have been some bumps and communication problems between the re-entry programs and youth service institutions. Although legally they've never been convicted of a crime, some youths also have been fired after their names turn up in criminal history background checks, said Kevin Shepherd, parole services manager for DYS.

DYS has secured \$1.5 million for job re-entry for the next two years and is inviting other counties to join. Summit County is among those looking to join.

"Schools don't want them anymore, so what we need to do is get them jobs with a future where they can be successful," Shepherd said.

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