

## ***Virtual classroom helps juvenile offenders***

Greg Sowinski - May 13, 2007

LIMA — Deone Rieman tells her students that, in order to get a job, they need a resume, must dress right and have a way to work.

She's trying to help make these teenagers more marketable as they prepared to enter the job world. But her students aren't just preparing for the job world, they are also preparing for life beyond the walls of prison.

Rieman is one of two instructors with Community Connections in Lima to offer job training skills through a virtual classroom. Rieman's lessons are broadcast to as many as seven youth prisons in Ohio.

She stands in front of a camera talking to students who sit in a classroom where they also appear on camera for Rieman to see. They can ask questions using a microphone.

Mark Paulus, vice president and chief operating officer for Community Connections, said the program is working where it counts by giving offenders skills to make it on the outside so they don't find themselves back in prison.

"The goal is going home to stay. That's what it's all about. Anybody can go home, it's the stay at home that seems to be the real challenge," Paulus said.

But even more important than the individual's needs or success is the safety of the community. An offender who stays away from crime does not create a new victim, Paulus said.

The Department of Youth Services contacted Community Connections last year inquiring about programming to try to keep offenders out of the system once they are released, said Andrea Kruse, a spokeswoman for the department.

DYS runs a state prison system for juvenile offenders sentenced on felony crimes in Ohio.

Thirty percent of ex-offenders return to prison, whether as a juvenile or an adult, within one year of their release; 50 percent return within three years, Kruse said.

Most of the offenders locked up in DYS are 16 to 20 years old. All are getting out someday since DYS only can hold a juvenile until his 21st birthday, Paulus said.

Once out, they have to find jobs and housing. Lessons taught in lockup give them the tools they need but might not otherwise get. Lessons such as how to manage money and how to avoid running a credit card up to its limit are just a few examples, Paulus said.

Instructors teach up to 20 teenagers in each classroom via videoconferencing, including boys and girls — housed in separate prisons — at the same time. Paulus said that provides an added lesson.

"Females bring a different perspective to it and it's good to have each side hear that," he said.

Although Community Connections has been offering its virtual classroom program to adult inmates for a while, the program for juvenile offenders began in January, Paulus said.

DYS inmates have 12 sessions that each last about 90 minutes. About 150 inmates have participated since January, Paulus said.

Another instructor with the program, Lorraine Ciminillo, teaches a lesson about hope. She shows a country music video by Jeff Bates called "One Second Chance" about an addiction to drugs that landed him behind bars. Bates held out hope he would get out, get a job and be able to see his son again.

Bates did get out and today is a country music singer.

"He didn't lose hope," Ciminillo said.

Offenders also have the chance to work on lessons they take from the classroom. For example, after class, an inmate can work on his resume in the computer lab, Paulus said.

No one passes or fails although there is a pretest and a post-test to evaluate student progress, Paulus said.

Inmates also can make suggestions to improve the program, and lessons can be changed to meet needs, Paulus said.

Community Connections also helps juvenile offenders once they are released, something that was unheard of before. Once an inmate leaves a prison, he or she cannot call a teacher at the prison for help, Paulus said.

Community Connections has a toll-free number inmates can call to ask a question, such as when they apply for a job, he said.

"We're with them on the inside and we're with them on the outside," he said. "It's the program that never ends."

That is key and ex-offenders develop a rapport with a person, which develops trust. Ex-offenders do not listen to someone they don't know or believe does not care about them, Paulus said.

"They don't care what you know until they know you care," he said.

The program also links with employers who are willing to give ex-offenders a second chance. Ex-offenders can post their resumes and job skills online so an employer can examine them, Paulus said.

"It's like Monster.com for ex-offenders," he said.

The program benefits the employer as much as the ex-offender, he said.

"When we talk to employers, we encourage them that this is an opportunity to get an employee they can train and start from scratch," he said.