

The Columbus Dispatch

New Delaware residential program offers hope for addicts

Monday

Posted at 6:14 AM

Updated at 7:08 AM

By

The Columbus Dispatch

DELAWARE — The transition from prison to freedom can be jarring. One day, you're in a jumpsuit and plastic sandals. The next day, you're on the streets, free to make decisions — good or bad.

Delaware County offers a variety of programs to help those with drug or mental-health issues ease back into productive lives.

The most recent, Unity House, is the county's first housing project for those just released from prison or jail.

Last week, inmates from the Delaware County jail painted and landscaped outside 35 N. Washington St., soon to be shared by five women with drug or alcohol addictions. Those selected also will likely have felony records and be either on parole or probation.

The women, one of whom will be a house mother with leadership skills, will pay \$100 per month and be vetted and chosen by a committee.

It will be run by volunteers and have far less security than a typical halfway house, said Matthew Walls, president of the Jacob Edward Walls Foundation, which has similar homes in Franklin County.

"I want my houses to feel like homes. We want it to be personalized, to give them motivation on their journey," said Walls. Without such programs, he said, "they would be jobless, they would be homeless ... recidivism goes right back up. Their brain patterns are geared that way. They need a moment to stop."

County officials believe that a welcoming approach can reduce repeat crimes and opioid abuse.

“We’re talking about a drug that makes physical changes to the brain, and changing that cycle is extremely difficult,” said Chief Mike Schuiling, who leads the county’s EMS department. This year, there have been just 16 uses of Narcan, the overdose treatment, in suspected or known overdose cases. In some counties, that much is used in a weekend. “Having these places, even as modest as they are, is one more step in the right direction.”

Delaware County Commissioner Barb Lewis credits the coordination between a host of agencies, police and volunteers and “the true devotion to others in need. We truly care about what happens and want to help.”

First Presbyterian Church donated the house to Walls.

“Our church has a heart to serve and to be connected, so this was a no-brainer,” said Nikki Hogarth, the church’s director of family ministries.

The women will share the upstairs and have drug treatment, job counseling and other help. The lower level will be a resource center for the public to find permanent housing, drug treatment and counseling.

Amy Maudsley, 43, is ready to move in. A month sober and free of a cocaine habit, she has been staying at a similar home near Whitehall.

But a recent misdemeanor arrest for misusing credit cards in Delaware landed her a year of probation, requiring her to stay clean. Five years ago, she served a year in prison for a felony drug charge in Union County.

Being in a caring community, away from big-city temptations, will help, she said.

“I like the location because it’s accessible to jobs if I choose to work, the library, and Maryhaven outpatient, which I want to go to.”

Still, she said, there is nothing keeping her clean except “my own willpower, a lot of support here and just trying to do the right thing.”

The inmates who scraped and painted, pulled weeds and mulched left invigorated.

“If it’s God’s plan, it needs to be done,” said Ransom Kulasa, who will get out of jail Saturday after a drug-possession conviction.

The Lewis Center father of 3-, 6- and 12-year-olds said drugs “always start out harmless,” providing energy and focus on the job to provide for his family. “Then it’s work more hours to buy more drugs and buy more drugs to work more hours.”

The crime and overdose rates may be helped by the county’s high education and employment.

Delaware County Prosecutor Carol O’Brien has heard that residents often purchase their drugs in Columbus.

“Most addicts can’t wait to get back home to get high,” and are found unconscious there, she said, offering one theory for fewer overdoses in her county.

Kassie Neff, a program coordinator with the sheriff’s office, knows that having felons live so near a school, a church and homes may bring critics.

“I anticipate some fears and concerns,” she said. “But we don’t want it to be hidden.”

Randy Beach lives a block away with his family. And he hopes the program works.

“I think people deserve the right to get their lives back together, as long as police aren’t there all the time.”

Diane Linville, the county’s re-entry coordinator, thinks visibility in the community will help break the stigma of felons, “that they must be rapists and murderers. Usually they’re non-violent drug offenders who just can’t get clean.”

“Not all felons are bad people. They just make bad choices. This will give them a sense of belonging and giving back to their community, when they’ve taken so much from their community.”

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