

Church supports program for adult and youth offenders

By SUSAN MILISA
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CAMDEN — The Restorative Justice project is getting assistance from Camden volunteers.

Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast operates in Waldo and Knox counties, and provides adult and juvenile offenders with alternatives to court and jail, or school suspension and expulsion, while holding them responsible for their offenses.

The project provides assistance to offenders released from jail, in order to reduce their likelihood of future offenses and jail time. The project, which is entering its fourth year of operation in Waldo County, is relatively new to Knox County.

Joan Bullock of Camden first heard about Restorative Justice of the Midcoast at First Congregational Church. Dick Snyder, who is chair of the board for the Midcoast Restorative Justice, gave a talk about the program and how it is expanding into Knox County at the request of law enforcement officials.

Volunteers were needed to mentor adult offenders, with the hope of helping them stay away from the criminal justice system in the future.

Bullock has a history of helping others to help themselves. She got her start in the 1960s as a community organizer in the civil rights movement, trying to build low-income housing. Next, she settled into a career in social services planning for 15 years. She started her own agency that provided managerial assistance to non-profit organizations, including how to find money, attract board members, and handle government contracts. After that, she moved to Vermont and ran a bed and breakfast. A common theme throughout is her enjoyment in working with people.

To prepare to be a mentor, Bullock attended three training sessions and took a tour of the Knox County Jail. The training sessions provide an overview of the Restorative Justice philosophy and its applications to the three different programs offered. Then, she was paired up as a team mentor with Charles Diviney, who is a key member of the program.

Diviney serves the Restorative Justice program in a full-time Americorp-funded position, assisting the program's executive director, Margaret Micolichuk. One of



Charles Diviney of the Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast, and Joan Bullock of Camden, are working to help people released from jail return to the community, and stay out of the criminal justice system, SUSAN MILISA MUSTAPICH

his responsibilities is recruiting and training mentors for the program. Serving as a mentor is another of his roles.

Diviney has a background as dean of students at several colleges, including St. Bonaventure University in New York, and Unity College in Maine. He has a degree in counseling, a master's degree in philosophy, and a deep interest in alternative means of resolving conflict and alternatives to incarceration.

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- Joan Bullock

MENTORING

Diviney and Bullock have been mentoring a man via the Community Reentry Program for four months. This program provides assistance to help keep offenders released from jail from coming back. Among other criteria, the man they are mentoring has indicated that he has hopes and plans for his future, and wants to stay out of jail.

In order for the man to enter the program, jail officials had to determine that the program was appropriate for him. He was evaluated by two psychotherapists who volunteer with the program, and he had to sign paperwork agreeing to the terms of the program.

The mentoring program does not change the terms of the man's probation, according to Diviney. "He's doing this because he wants to do it," he said. While this man "has made mistakes and he knows it," Diviney said, he has a job, and is engaged to "his significant other, who he is devoted to and plans to marry."

Diviney identifies this as a strength, because people coming out of jail often don't have positive connections to family or loved ones.

The needs of the offenders in the program can be significant, according to Diviney, and may include housing, transportation, employment and treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues. Mentors meet with the offenders nearing the end of a jail term prior to the release date, and then meet weekly for a six-month period following the release.

"Our focus is to help them as much as we can, but not to do the work for them," Bullock said. "We want them to help themselves."

Diviney believes that for many released offenders, punishment does not deter additional crimes. The mentoring program helps keep them from going back to jail by making them feel more welcome and connected to the community when they are released.

The program also provides support for mentors, including monthly meetings, case studies, professional development opportunities, and review of their meeting notes by volunteer psychotherapists.

RECRUITING

Diviney said the Restorative Justice program is recruiting mentors all the time, and is planning to expand the offerings in Knox County, with two programs that bring Restorative Justice practices into schools and the juvenile justice system.

These programs, Restorative School Practice and Community Resolution Teams, have been successful in Waldo County, he said. The school program brings the offender together with the person harmed and other community members, to share their experiences, and create an agreement that rebuilds the relationship between the offender, victim and community.

When used in schools, this program significantly reduces the number of students receiving detentions, according to program literature.

The Community Resolution Teams work with law enforcement and juvenile probation officials to provide juveniles an alternative to arrest, court, probation or residential detention. Since 2005, this program has conducted 45 conferences in Waldo County that offer victims an opportunity to share their experiences with offenders and others,

and give offenders an opportunity to become accountable for their behavior.

This program claims a 95 percent success rate, resulting in \$6,000 paid in restitution and 600-plus hours of community service.

First Congregational Church is continuing its support of Restorative Justice of the Mid-coast, providing space for a mentor training program this month. In Waldo County between 70 and 80 people have served as active mentors, according to Diviney. So far, there are eight volunteer mentors in the Knox County program, which is continuing to grow. Diviney said there will be another mentor training program held in the future, probably in the spring.

For more information about the Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast or mentor opportunities, call 338-2742, email info@rjpmidcoast.org or read www.rjpmidcoast.org.



Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast

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