

Program for ex-offenders celebrates third anniversary

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Randall Thomas of Marietta, 33, has been working as a pallet jack operator at Tip Top Poultry in Marietta for nearly two months. He completed the Harmony House program for ex-offenders after serving a 1-year prison sentence for felony credit card fraud. **basic skills and a job," Green said.**

MARIETTA - Harmony House in Marietta, which serves as a short-term residential assessment center for people who are released from jail, celebrated its third anniversary last month.

The program - run by Turner Chapel AME Church's nonprofit organization - was started in 2006 to stop the revolving-door cycle experienced by many ex-offenders who find themselves homeless and jobless once they're released from Cobb County Jail, said Harmony House Director Gregg Green. Each Tuesday and Thursday, there are sessions on various topics such as decision-making, problem solving, goal setting, relationship help, anger management, health and fitness, dress and attire, and communication skills for residents. Services are free.

Residential program participants are allowed to live at Harmony House for up to 60 days. They're expected to find gainful employment within two weeks.

"Our responsibility to them is to have them in a position to transition into their own place with some

The program's staff makes weekly trips to the Cobb jail to interview potential participants. Harmony House doesn't accept sex offenders, violent crime offenders or those with mental issues.

It has served more than 337 participants since it opened. On average, it has served 112 ex-offenders per year, with about 30 of those in its residential program - in a five-bed house off Birney Street - and about 80 in job and housing referral services who aren't residing at the house.

According to its performance summary, Harmony House has helped about 90 percent of its residential program graduates find employment and stable housing within 90 days of program completion.

The program receives nearly half its funding from a U.S. Justice Department grant. Other funding comes from United Way, a U.S. Housing and Urban Development grant, and private contributions. Its staff consists of a full-time case manager who finds participants, a full-time resident manager and a weekend resident assistant. Green and his wife, Darlene Green, manage the program as volunteers.

Gregg Green, 58, knows firsthand how difficult it is for someone with a criminal record to continue life after jail. The Cleveland native, in January, will celebrate his 22nd anniversary of being clean from a life of crime and drug abuse. He said he had mentors to help him along the way.

"Because of my own experiences and the change that I know can happen, that's what drives me to do what I do here," he said. "But, the change has to happen on the inside of an individual."

For Randall Thomas, 33, that realization to change came the moment the doors at the Cobb jail closed behind him, after he was sentenced to one year in jail for credit card fraud.

He now has a job at the Marietta-based Tip Top Poultry plant, where he's set to get promoted after a month-and-a-half on the job. His supervisor, Hattie Hernandez, said "he came in willing and ready."

Thomas is scheduled to leave Harmony House on Wednesday, and move into his own place in Marietta.

"They've been real helpful transitioning out," Thomas said of Harmony House. "Everyone is real nice."

Maj. Susan Faulkner of the Cobb Sheriff's Office has sat on the advisory board of Harmony House since its inception. Though a few participants slip back into jail, she said the program has overall "been a benefit."

"I don't know if you'll find 100 percent success anywhere," Faulkner said. "But some reunite with their family, find jobs and continue to work."

Green said he envisions having Harmony Houses across the country someday.

"Rehabilitation is not found in jail," he said. "Rehabilitation is found in aftercare situations. So our focus is just trying to be examples to other people in other cities and states."

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