



By  Dianne Anderson

After a 25-year history of gangs, drugs and prison, today Rodney Coulter feels like a new man. He's finally come out of his proverbial coma. Day by day, he is changing his circumstances, responsible for his decisions. It took him decades to get to this place.

All he knew was that didn't want to die or be remembered for a lifetime of prison, for years of drug use and petty crime.

"I started thinking of when I die, in terms of legacy," he said.

Turning it around hasn't been easy. He grew up with much of his family and his community entrenched in a drug culture; his exposure to the hard life came early on.

He was devastated by the murder of his mother and 15-year-old sister, both killed in a drug-related robbery when he was 17 years old. From his youth, Coulter held tight to the anger and pain that would keep him cycling in and out of prison. It was chaotic.

Program Helps Formerly Incarcerated

Written by Precinct Reporter Group

In that hopeless place, he quit going to school. At one point, he tried to go back, but flunked out and dropped out again. Today, he is dedicated to helping younger people not go down that same road.

The reason why recidivism is so high is that newly released prisoners don't know where to go or what to do when they get out, he said. Through the Long Beach Reentry Program and its organizer, Fanya Baruti, he was able to get linked into the right services.

"Programs and people like Fanya give people like me an opportunity to give back to the community that we were once really destructive in," he said.

After six years behind bars for a drug-related offense, two years ago he returned to society with just the clothes on his back. He was paroled; he immediately quit smoking and got into treatment.

Coulter, 52, has now completed his GED, certificated in conflict resolution and alternatives to violence. He took parenting classes so he could be part of his 12- and 15-year-old grandchildren's lives. Recently, he made honor roll status at Long Beach City College.

"I'm not a person who burned a lot of people, or burned a lot of bridges. What I didn't actually do was build a lot of bridges," he said.

Today, he said he is in the process of doing just that; he volunteers in the community, and he attends church. He attributes his turnaround to the New Way of Life reentry program.

"People like Fanya, and other people who have been through what I've been through, have paved the way for me to believe in possibilities," he said.

Susan Burton, founder and executive director of A New Way of Life, said there is a huge need in Long Beach, which has the second highest number of formerly incarcerated people returning

Program Helps Formerly Incarcerated

Written by Precinct Reporter Group

home, following South Los Angeles.

So far, the response and request for services has been great since the program held its first Peace and Justice Summit last October, drawing hundreds of people for services.

“We were met by the community with such welcoming and enthusiasm, with questions on how do formerly incarcerated people move forward in the area,” she said. “Folks talked about different needs, like expungements.”

This year, at their new office in the Central Facilities, they will bring several programs, including free expungement clinics so inmates can clean up their records, and become employable. Focused on employment rights, the group is taking their Ban the Box campaign to city hall, calling for employers to remove the question of whether applicants have been convicted of a felony.

“We feel that we have a right to work, if an employer has a total ban against people with a criminal history, we have a right to address that ban,” she said.

Word is getting out. On May 19, Ms. Burton expects almost 200 in the community to attend their grand opening, with discussions around how to get more local social services to the table for the community.

Through the program, clients get connected to legal services, receive information on jobs, housing, food and health services.

Her big goal over the next few months will be evaluating assessments to find out the greatest areas of need. Most important, she said, is giving the community of formerly incarcerated people a way to access support systems.

“What are some of the needs of the everyday needs that we need to fill, that are met for people

Program Helps Formerly Incarcerated

Written by Precinct Reporter Group

that they are not forced to resort to any illegal activities just to eat,” she said.