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Alfreda Robinson-Dawkins, a re-entry specialist, helps Teresa Clayton, 50, left, and Samantha Malfi, 29, right, role play in a lesson about stereotyping at Bon Secours Community Works.

## Re-entry program aims to help people adjust to life after prison

Bon Secours provides life skills, counseling, job placement assistance

BY ANDREA K. MCDANIELS  
The Baltimore Sun

For years, Samantha Malfi had been in and out of jail for various offenses, including assault and theft, related to her drug addiction. Time and time again she tried to do better, only to sabotage herself and remain stuck in the same cycle.

Things began to change earlier this year when she got out of jail and into rehab, and joined a community-based program focused on helping people like her who have served long or multiple sentences adjust to life on the outside.

Malfi has been off drugs for nearly a year. She's working on building her self-esteem and not letting her past define her, and even allowing herself to believe she can return to being a hairstylist and reclaim other parts of her old life before addiction took hold.

She credits Bon Secours Community Works with helping her get back on her feet. The program, affiliated with Bon Secours Hospital, addresses the social issues, such as poverty, lack of housing and unemployment, that are as important to a person's well-being as physical health.

For 12 weeks, Malfi and a group of women in a similar situation met once a week to learn the skills to succeed in life and not land back in prison.

"I really needed this support," Malfi said. "It's given me more confidence."

Talib Horne, Community Works' executive director, decided to focus on ex-offenders after statistics showed the neighborhoods around the hospital had some of the largest numbers of people coming home from prison.

Baltimore receives 59 percent of all state prison releases, or 9,000 annually, Horne said. Of those, 30 percent return to just six communities, including the West Baltimore neighborhoods served by Bon Secours.

"When we started looking at the data, we saw that we were surrounded by this and we needed to do something about it," he said.

People leaving prison after long or multiple sentences are thrown back into a drastically changed society with little or no social or financial support.

The program, which includes both men's and women's groups, helps ex-offenders navigate reintegration into society. It is modeled after a program created by an Ohio nonprofit called TYRO, a Latin word that means novice, and used by community groups in many states. It teaches ex-offenders life skills and coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges and stigma that



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Robert Boyd, right, attends the Bon Secours meeting. He earned a GED and a bachelor's degree in criminal justice while in prison and hopes to build a new life as a free man.

often follow them through life after they're released. Participants also are taught to think positively about themselves despite their past; they're referred to as "returning citizens," rather than ex-offenders.

The group leaders are ex-offenders themselves who understand the struggles faced by those leaving the prison system after many years.

Research has shown that a combination of family and peer support can help former prisoners transition better once they are released. Many of them move in with family when they get out and may put on a positive face to mask any anxiety they may be feeling, said Christy Visher, a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware who studies the re-entry of former prisoners.

"The family is not going to be that person or group they will confide in as they face their fears," Visher said. "People who have been through that experience will be the ones that they will share that with. They are trying to present a really positive, I-am-going-to-make-it, I-am-going-to-be-OK image to the family, because they feel like they let the family down."

Family members often don't know how to help returning prisoners negotiate re-entry. Former prisoners are most vulnerable in the first six months as they deal with finding a job and housing, and adjusting to life without regimented schedules and restrictive rules, Visher said. They also must cope with people's mistrust of

them. They also may face criticism from the victims of their crimes and their victim's families. While some can be forgiving and believe in second chances, the prisoners' release sometimes open old wounds.

Advocates say just as much support is needed for the victims.

"Many times having early release causes victims to be traumatized," said Russell Butler, executive director of the Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center. "They relive the loss of their loved ones. There needs to be more support for them as well."

At a recent Bon Secours support group session, Alfreda Robinson-Dawkins, a re-entry specialist, asked Malfi and other women to describe their high and low moments of the week as she does at the start of each session. One woman described her low as feeling out of shape and unable to stop smoking. Another said her high was not letting an annoying boss goad her into losing her temper.

The discussion then turned to how people might judge the women because they are ex-offenders.

"Ever feel like people don't give you an opportunity because of your past?" asked Robinson-Dawkins, who spent 10 years in federal prison in the 1990s on conspiracy charges related to her son's drug dealing.

A woman dressed in a black T-shirt nodded her head feverishly.

"Yes," she said. "I was turned down so

much because of the nature of my charges; because I have shoplifted. People don't want you working in their establishment."

Robinson-Dawkins encouraged the women not to let labels define them. Don't let your past dominate the conversation in job interviews, she told them. Turn the focus to the skills you bring to the job.

"We know we can live beyond those labels," Robinson-Dawkins said.

A couple of hours after the women met, a group of men met, including Robert Boyd, who was 16 in 1982 when he and some other teenagers broke into a Gwynn Oak house and were confronted by the 81-year-old owner, whom one of the teenagers shot and killed.

While he wasn't the shooter, according to his attorney, he was convicted of first-degree murder and spent 34 years in prison before his release in April. The sleepy downtown Baltimore the now 51-year-old remembered had become a vibrant tourist hub. Walking down the street as a free man seemed foreign.

"I didn't feel as if I belonged here," Boyd said.

Sitting around a table recently with other men who had once been in his shoes, Boyd felt free to let go. Regret and remorse poured out of him. He said he was sorry about what happened.

The family of the victim could not be located for comment.

Boyd was introduced to the Bon Secours program by another ex-offender already in the program who lived in the same halfway house. Boyd earned a GED and a bachelor's degree in criminal justice while in prison and hopes to build a new life as a free man, but first he wants to learn how to navigate his freedom without being held back by his past.

After Community Works' 12-week program, participants get a year of follow-up through a Bon Secours career development program. They get help with small logistical issues that can become big barriers to their success. They are provided mental health and substance abuse counseling and job placement assistance.

Community Works also offers certification and occupational training for careers in construction and urban landscaping. There are also services for housing assistance, credit repair, child care, tax preparation and criminal record expungement assistance.

"A man coming out of jail after 33 or 44 years can't make it without a support system," said Anees Abdul-Rahim, re-entry coordinator at Bon Secours. "They need concentrated attention to get back on the right path."

[amcdaniels@baltsun.com](mailto:amcdaniels@baltsun.com)  
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