

# HOPE program works to improve lives of ex-convicts

By Dann Denny 331-4350 | [ddenny@heraldt.com](mailto:ddenny@heraldt.com) | Posted: Sunday, July 7, 2013 12:12 am

Funded with a two-year, \$1.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, Centerstone launched the HOPE program in October 2012. The program is designed to help Bloomington ex-convicts deal with mental health or addiction problems and find employment.

HOPE uses vocational specialists, job coaches and peer support to help formerly incarcerated adults develop life skills, put together resumes and prepare for job interviews, among other things.

“We’ve provided nearly 25 percent of the people in our program with eye exams and eyeglasses,” said Alana Luttrull, HOPE’s job developer and a certified recovery specialist. “One guy had failed his GED test four times and thought he was stupid. But once we got him some eyeglasses and he could read the questions, he passed with no problem.”

Luttrull said the program also helped participants avoid eviction by paying all or part of their rent for a month.

James Hall, a HOPE peer recovery specialist who was released from prison 18 months ago, said his incarceration helps clients relate to him.

“I’ve been in the same position they are in,” he said. “I do a lot of mentoring, and take clients into the community to fill out job applications, get groceries, do job interviews, or see a doctor or probation officer. I also teach them life skills they’ll need to re-establish themselves in society.”

## Securing employment

For ex-offenders, finding employment is a challenge because they have to tell their prospective employers about felonies on their records. But of the 140 ex-offenders now in the program, 55 have found jobs in the community — doing such things as driving fork lifts; doing landscaping; or working in fast food restaurants or assembly lines.

“These people are now giving back to the community — paying taxes, paying rent, and buying gas and groceries,” Luttrull said.

She said the HOPE program believes in the ABCs of employment — Any job, Better job, and Career.

“We try to help our participants develop dream and drive,” she said. “You need to have a dream — something to shoot for — but you also need the drive and ambition necessary to see it come true.”

Luttrull meets regularly with Bloomington employers, telling them about the HOPE program and

participants who might be a good fit for their business.

“Some company managers have corporate policies that prevent them from giving employment to people with criminal backgrounds,” she said. “But there are employers in town who feel that when someone has been in legal trouble they are hungry to prove themselves and grateful for an opportunity to work.”

### Low relapse rate

Of the 145 ex-offenders who have entered the HOPE program since it began nine months ago, only five have relapsed and left the program — either returning to their old way of life or going back to jail or prison after committing a new crime or violating parole. That’s a recidivism rate of 3.4 percent.

Luttrull said that compares favorably with the 60 percent recidivism rate among ex-offenders leaving Indiana prisons, and the 44 percent national recidivism rate.

Jennifer Fillmore, HOPE’s program manager, said the Monroe County recidivism rate was 47 percent in 2010, according to the Indiana Department of Correction, adding that the IDOC released 225 former prisoners to Bloomington in 2011 and another 156 in 2012.

“Assuming the recidivism rate remains the same, approximately 180 of the 381 offenders will be re-incarcerated unless they receive significant intervention and re-entry assistance,” Fillmore said. “We know that for many, cycling in and out of prison has become the norm.”

### Follow-up

Though the Department of Labor requires participants to remain in the program at least a year and meet with HOPE personnel at least at the 3, 6, 9 and 12-month marks for support, Luttrull said clients meet with HOPE staff far more frequently.

Participants meet one-on-one each week with their HOPE specialist. They attend a weekly unemployment class until they are employed, and meet with their HOPE specialist at least monthly after finding work.

### More funding

When funding for the HOPE program runs out in July 2014, Centerstone will apply for other grants that would enable it to operate an offender re-entry program similar to the HOPE program.

“The new program would allow us to help only those people who’ve come out of prison, not jail,” Luttrull said. “But it would enable us to expand our services to six counties rather than just the city of Bloomington.”