

Yellow Ribbon Conference

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YELLOW RIBBON CONFERENCE

Helping them stay on the right path

Prison service, community partners help ex-offenders re-integrate into society

LEONG WEE KEAT
weekeat@mediacorp.com.sg

TWO months before inmates are released from prison, counsellors are welcomed into the facility to talk to them.

The aim: Provide advice on areas such as employment, education, entrepreneurship, keep ex-offenders on the right track, and manage their cases for six months.

Efforts of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders, or Care Network, seem to be paying off. Recidivism rates among offenders have been halved: About two in 10 returned to crime within two years of their release in 2005, compared to four in 10 re-offending in 1998.

Each year, about 11,000 ex-offenders are released from prisons and drug rehabilitation centres.

Opening the fourth Yellow Ribbon Conference yesterday, Law Minister and Second Minister for Home Affairs K Shanmugam said a collaborative and supportive community is needed to make a positive impact on the lives of the ex-offenders and their families. If the problem of re-integration is not tackled properly, ex-convicts may revert to their old ways, he said.

Very often, said Mr Shanmugam, the family has mixed feelings about the return of the ex-offender after his imprisonment — happy to have him back home but worried that he may return to a life of crime.

"This is the juncture where the ex-offender and his family need support the most ... The power really lies in the community

which the offenders return to," Mr Shanmugam said.

Last month, two Family Resource Centres located within prisons extended counselling services and casework management to inmates' families that have more serious issues, with link-ups to community agencies for follow-up action if required.

Since the start of the year, the Industrial and Services Co-operative Society has provided inmates and ex-offenders guidance on employment, education and enrichment.

The social enterprise has seen an increase of 800 members this year, bringing its total membership to about 9,000.

Meanwhile, the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises, a statutory board under the Ministry of Home Affairs, is working with other agencies to run a work preparation programme for 2,500 inmates.

Their cases will be managed for up to six months after their release to help them cope with their new jobs and re-integrate into society.

The Singapore After-Care Association (Saca) provides financial assistance of \$50 each to inmates upon their release to help them cover the immediate expenses of transportation, food and accommodation while they find work.

For all the programmes put in place, family plays a key role in the rehabilitation process, said Dr Carol Shapiro, an American social worker specialising in the re-integration of ex-offenders and a guest speaker at yesterday's conference.

"The best of government and non-government measures are designed to be short-term," she said.

"Family loves you, even if you screw it up," she added.