

Summit aims to help parolees

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CHAMPAIGN — As a social worker at Central High School in Champaign for the past 14 years, Tiffany Gholson recognized the names of some of the young men arrested for gun violence in Champaign during the month of June.

"It hit home when the shootings were happening," said the mother of teenagers.

"Luckily, no one was killed," she said of the spree of about 10 shootings between June 7 and 23.

But the shootings troubled her enough that she wanted to do something to help. At a fundraiser later in the summer, she met Marcus King, a community outreach administrator for the Illinois Department of Corrections.

And thus was born the idea of bringing a "Summit of Hope" program to Champaign.

"It's about reintegrating parolees back into society and giving them the opportunity to become productive citizens and give them other options besides a corrections facility," said King of the event, scheduled for 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesday at Parkland College in Champaign.

The event brings together, in one place, representatives of social service, local and state agencies who have services that can help the ex-convicts.

King said the expo is for invited parolees only. Just under 400 invitations were sent out.



Photo by: Heather Coit/The News-Gazette

Rebecca Ginsburg, background right, director of the Education Justice Project, takes the mic as Imani Bazell, lower foreground right, leads a discussion about misconceptions and reality for ex-cons during a taping at WBCP in Champaign on Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2013. From left are Connie Kaiser, lower left, superintendent of Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center; Tiffany Gholson, Central High School social worker and local coordinator for Summit of Hope; Teresa Zebe, supervisor of Juvenile Probation; **Marcus King, community outreach coordinator for Illinois Department of Corrections**; Ginsburg and Bazell. The group also talked about the upcoming Summit of Hope community expo, which provides assistance to parolees.

King said organizers still need volunteers who are at least 18 and not on probation or parole who can warmly greet the parolees and help them with paperwork in case they might have difficulty understanding, reading or writing.

Among some of the vendors expected, Gholson said, are the Illinois secretary of state; a couple of churches; the Illinois Department of Employment Security; the Illinois Prisoner Review Board; the NAACP; Fathers and Families in Transition; Parenting with Love and Limits; Access Initiative; Citizens with Convictions; the Department of Veterans Affairs; and some employers willing to hire ex-convicts.

"A lot of these people come back in the community and have been away from their kids. We want to give them the resources to know how to help their families besides themselves," said Gholson.

King stressed that the event is not a job fair per se, but a place where the parolees can get connected with services and the service providers can also get to know each other.

Having those providers together, King said, "strengthens the community because there is more of a support system. Whether a community is big or not so big, when the vendors network ... they are better equipped to help the community."

"Twenty-five would have been good," King said of the vendors. "But to have 40 and growing says something great about that county."

The secretary of state, for example, can issue driver's licenses or state ID cards on the spot, Gholson said, and the Illinois Prisoner Review Board can give parolees information on how to expunge records that might hinder them from getting housing or employment.

King said he has been in his position with the Corrections Department since December and has helped plan 18 of these summits in various communities throughout the state for 2013. In all of 2012, there were only eight. They try to hold the expos in communities where they may not have had one previously and where there are many parolees. Champaign County has just under 500 parolees, King said.

Working on a shoestring budget, King said, he does whatever he can to hold the events at places that will host the vendors for free. Parkland College is not charging any facility rent, he said.

Mobilizing local organizers and planning multiple events at once can be trying, King said.

"It takes four to six months to plan one. That's why I'm so happy with Champaign. We put this together in two months and ran with it," he said.

Anyone wanting more information on the event can contact King through his email at marcus.king@doc.illinois.gov or on his cellphone at 217-855-1744.

Registration is still being accepted for agencies or employers who want to be present and for volunteers willing to help. To do that online, go to: bit.ly/CUSummit