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Corrections summit helps ex-offenders re-enter society

By Stephen Elliott, selliott@qconline.com

ROCK ISLAND -- Their needs vary, from finding jobs to getting a driver's license.

On Tuesday, about 400 formerly incarcerated men and women, many on parole or probation, came to First Church of the Nazarene, 2921 38th St., Rock Island, for the Illinois Department of Corrections Summit of Hope expo.

IDOC community outreach administrator Marcus King of Springfield said the expo offers information on basic needs for re-entry into society, from getting a driver's license or state identification to applying for a job and finding housing.

Mr. King said the one-stop expo featured 47 vendors, and those seeking services came from the Rock Island County area. Other expos have been held throughout the state, he said.

Arthur Gillen, clinical manager of the outpatient service program at the Robert Young Center in Rock Island, worked for the IDOC for 37 years, including 11 as a warden.

"The minute somebody finds out you're a felon, they don't want anything to do with you," he said. "When they (ex-offenders) don't have anything, that's why they end up back in jail or the prison system."

Lanny "Cowboy" Williams, of Rock Island, knows the difficulty of finding a job after incarceration. He said he spent time in an Arizona prison for selling drugs. He now works for the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Movement in the Quad-Cities, helping the homeless and those with addictions.

Heavily tattooed with brownish-red hair and stubble on a hardened face, Mr. Williams said he can help some people, others he can't.



[More photos from this shoot](#)

Photo: Stephen Elliott

Joseph Akins, right, of Rock Island, talks to Adam Lechnir, coordinator with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission and Katy Reynolds, a community worker with the assistance commission. Mr. Akins attended the Summit of Hope, an expo organized and run by the Illinois Department of Corrections on Tuesday for ex-offenders, parolees and probationers to get services and information.

"I done 14 years in prison," he said. "I was with the wrong motorcycle outfits and stuff like that. I had 14 pounds of methamphetamine, two kilos of heroin, and \$250,000 in cash in my house. I had houses. I had boats. I had everything drug money could buy."

Mr. Williams paused, then added, "of course, they take everything from you. I had it all man."

For those coming out of prison, he said the hardest thing is getting readjusted to society. He worked as an industrial painter after prison and gives advice to those who ask.

"I got fortunate," he said. "For the convict, it's hard. You know what I'm sayin'? It's hard to get a job because you're a convict."

Joseph Akins, of Rock Island, estimates he spent four of his 29 years incarcerated. He wants to get an associate's degree, maybe a bachelor's degree.

"I'm looking for job placement and more schooling," he said. "People don't really want to hire felons too much. I keep trying to do odd jobs that pay cash."

Adam Lechnir, coordinator with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, said more than 100 visitors signed up for possible financial aid. "We'll be contacting them in a couple of weeks to sit down and figure out the next step.

"We help them find the right college. From there, we help them pay for it. We're a state agency. We try to come in with some federal and state programs."

Timothy Richardson, of Rock Island, is a paper carrier with several routes and four children. He's on probation and said education is vital to making any inroads.

"We need things like this," Mr. Richardson said. "If we ain't educated, we want the opportunity to be educated. Once you're out of jail, the first thing on your mind is not going back."

Jamie McWade, of Liberty Counseling in Bettendorf, said about 15 people picked up information on drug and alcohol counseling.

"Support is the biggest issue if people are going to make a positive change," Ms. McWade said.