

Summit provides hope for those seeking a fresh start in life



Marvita Spence meets with Sam Smith, the Old King's Orchard Community Center's program director of the Family Advocacy Center, while signing up for community projects during the Summit of Hope at the Old King's Orchard Community Center on Wednesday morning. (Herald & Review photo by Jim Bowling)

March 20, 2014 By Theresa Churchill, H&R Senior Writer

DECATUR – Marvita Spence emerged from Decatur's third Summit of Hope with a lot more than a couple of goody bags and a brand-new Secretary of State ID card.

In the 90 minutes she'd spent inside Old King's Orchard Community Center on Wednesday morning, the 22-year-old parolee also had undergone an attitude adjustment.

"I didn't want to be here, but I'm sorta, kinda glad I came," she admitted.

That's because Spence was able to get some things started that she didn't even know she needed to rebuild her life after serving two years at Logan Correctional Center in Lincoln.

They included beginning the process of establishing paternity and obtaining child support for her 2-year-old son and getting information about how to earn a GED so she could enroll at Richland Community College.

Spence was among 500 to 600 people either on parole or probation assisted during the daylong event sponsored by the Illinois Department of Corrections and the Illinois Department of Public Health's Center for Minority Services.

Three dozen vendors were on hand to offer help in getting food, shelter, health care, employment and utility bill assistance.

The needs are sometimes quite great.

When Raenesh Green, housing specialist with Fifth Street Renaissance in Springfield, offered Spence a free Easter tablecloth, for example, the woman replied, "I don't even own a table."

"Our one-stop shops reduce recidivism and help make our communities safer," said Marcus King, community outreach administrator for the state Department of Corrections. "These events are in high demand."

Indeed, King said the department expects to stage twice as many Summits of Hope this year compared to the dozen offered in 2011, the last year Decatur had one.

Previous summits were held at Richland and at gtChurch, and Alida Graham, president of the Old King's Orchard board, said her group was delighted to host Wednesday's summit. "It's such a positive event," she said.

Dozens of volunteers were on hand to survey each summit participant and help each find the services he or she needed.

Spence was escorted by Judy Cox, a re-entry specialist for Females in Transition working at Logan Correctional Center and also her case manager.

"I'm so happy I got you," Spence said as the two women filled out the initial survey. "I feel super comfortable now."