

Expo helps ex-offenders re-enter society

MARION - Last week, an expo organized and run by the Illinois Department of Corrections took place in Marion.

The expo, Summit of Hope, is an opportunity for ex-offenders, parolees and probationers to get services and information which helps them with reentry into society.

Tom Shaer, Director of Communications, said that the ex-offender parolee attendance far exceeded their expectations last Tuesday in Marion.

He said 177 people attended out of the 193 invited.

The mission of the Summit of Hope is to guide and assist parolees and probationers with available services to better ensure reentry into the community and thus reduce recidivism. Recidivism means to relapse into criminal behavior.

"It is important to everyone in Illinois to help ex-offenders avoid a return in prison, 'recidivism.' IDOC has lowered recidivism by 8 percent (down to 47 percent from 55 percent), but we need to do better. Successful reentry via parole is the major component of this effort, and the Summit of Hope is key to ex-offenders getting the support they need," Shaer said.

The Summit of Hope is a proven program sanctioned by the Illinois Department of Corrections and Illinois Department of Public Health, independently organized in individual communities throughout the state.

Some areas the expo helps attendees with are getting a driver's license, renting an apartment, finding a job and furthering one's education.

Shaer said that approximately 30 state agencies and public services organizations along with a few private enterprises were involved with the expo.

Participating agencies include: Illinois Secretary of State, Departments of Human Services (DHS), Children and Family Services (DCFS), Health Care and Family Services (HFS), Public Health (IDPH), Employment Services (I.D.E.S.) and Housing Development Authority (IHDA).

"Our main partner, as always, was the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and the Jackson County Health Department was also a key organization." He said that the Women's Center in Carbondale was also involved, which serves female ex-offenders.

Men and women attending the Summit of Hope are working to become productive members of their communities, and the services available to them will often be the difference between success and failure. The objective of each event is to give "hope" to those who may have lost it.

Shaer said that they typically have anywhere from 100 to 600 people attend. He said that they expect over 2,000 at suburban Chicago Summit of Hope later this spring.

He said that parolee employment levels are increasing, but they want it higher.

"A successful parolee is good for public safety and that's one of the reasons Governor Quinn signed legislation providing economic benefits for businesses in Illinois which hire ex-offenders," Shaer said.