New Center in Richmond Aims to Help People Coming Home From Prison

The new Reentry Success Center is right in downtown Richmond. The idea is for it to be easily accessible to formerly incarcerated people. (Sukey Lewis/KQED)

By Sukey Lewis MARCH 10, 2016

Dameion King’s office in downtown Richmond looks like a cross between a Starbucks and a tech startup — with exposed brick walls, mobile workstations, laptop computers and brightly painted meeting rooms.

“Then if you go upstairs, this is my favorite part up here,” King said, as he headed up a narrow staircase to a loft area and meeting space. “I actually could live here. All I need is a rollout bed and an Internet connection. So this is the area where we plan to have restorative justice circles and AA and NA meetings.”

Fifteen years ago King was behind bars, serving a three-year sentence for firearm and drug possession. Now he’s a coach at the new Richmond Reentry Success Center. The center is designed to help people recently released from prison or jail get back on their feet.
According to King, the space itself is designed to make people who come looking for help feel more empowered.

“I know that when I came home, there was nothing like this,” he said.

After two years of planning, the Reentry Success Center opened its doors in October — a collaboration among Contra Costa County civic leaders, law enforcement officials and nonprofits. (Since 2011, when the state began reducing its inmate population as part of a larger prison realignment program, Contra Costa has invested about $10 million in community-based re-entry services and $400,000 in the center itself.)

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia said the center is key to the county’s plan to help keep people out of jail.

“If we can show this center works and these programs work, it’ll hopefully help build the case for investing more money in this type of work,” he said. “It makes quality of life better for people who are released from jail and return, and it makes our community safer. So it’s a win-win.”

Nicholas Alexander, the center’s director, said he hopes it can offer more effective support to formerly incarcerated people and their families.

“If we look back at re-entry work over the last decade, it’s really been unsuccessful,” he said. “I mean over half of people tend to go back into incarceration. So right now the bar is pretty low, unfortunately.”
Nicholas Alexander, Reentry Success Center director, helps coordinate service providers for the people who come looking for help. *(Sukey Lewis/KQED)*

He said part of why re-entry work has failed is that formerly incarcerated people can be denied employment and housing based on their criminal history. Alexander said the center’s holistic approach is designed to help its clients navigate those legal barriers.

At the center, Alexander said, people coming out of jail or prison have access to a wide variety of services all in one place, from legal help to employment and addiction counseling.

“As a whole we’re working more collaboratively, so less people are going to slip through the cracks,” Alexander said.

Kenneth McDowell is one of those people the center is trying to help. He spent five months behind bars on a felony assault charge. When he got out of jail about a year ago, McDowell had lost his housing and his job.

“You just want to close up and go into a box and hide, and cry pretty much, but life won’t let you do that,” he said. “You have to gather your thoughts and your feelings, and you have to ball them up. And you have to just take every step a little step at a time.”

McDowell wants to become a chef, but in the meantime he’s working as a janitor at the center.

So far, the center has helped about 100 people from across the county. As more people hear about the center and get the help they need, Supervisor Gioia said he hopes it will become a model for the rest of the state.