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An ambitious new city plan to help ex-offenders find jobs, affordable housing and drug treatment probably wouldn't have meant much to Clifton Murrell -- not when he was at Rikers Island, serving a yearlong sentence on charges of possessing cocaine and weapons.

Murrell remembers getting a booklet outlining existing programs designed to help prisoners plan their future on the outside - how to line up work, stay sober, and so on. Murrell never signed up for help; planning for his future seemed laughable to him while he was incarcerated. "You're in survival mode," he said. Rikers Island is "not really a place of" -- he pauses, a slight smile on his face -- "rehabilitation."

But now Murrell is out, and along with a dozen men and women early on a Monday morning, he is seeking help in the offices of The Fortune Society, a non-profit that has been helping ex-offenders since 1967. Some in the office profess confidence that they will find the job or education they need to keep from returning to old ways; others, like Murrell, admit to nervousness about what their future holds with a checkered past behind them.

City officials must be a little nervous, too. They are banking on a new program, funded by a \$7.5 million federal grant and unprecedented interagency efforts, to help ex-offenders stay straight.

"It's something I really applaud. It's long overdue, badly needed and a real start in the right direction," said JoAnne Page, executive director of The Fortune Society. The new city efforts, however, are very much a work-in-progress, and the challenges are many in helping ex-offenders find success.

NEEDY POPULATION

Rikers Island, a little more than half a square mile of land sitting in the East River between the Bronx and Queens, has been the site of the city prison since 1935. Today, Rikers Island

After Rikers

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consists of ten separate jails, which together house about 13,900 prisoners.

Most inmates are in for only a few weeks as they await court dates; the maximum stay at Rikers is one year. (Longer sentences are served in state prisons.) The new city program seeks to help prisoners getting out after at least three months.

The Rikers' population isn't filled with violent criminals, but it poses a huge challenge to city social services. According to The New York Times, 80 percent of inmates have drug problems, 30 percent have no home, and 15 percent are mentally ill. The city's Department of Correction "runs some of the most expensive housing in the city," said Page. It reportedly costs about \$50,000 a year to house each prisoner, a cost widely publicized as justification for the expensive new city program.

Prisoners with AIDS and mental illness already get substantial city help, though it took a class action lawsuit to loosen city purse strings for mentally ill ex-offenders. A judge ruled against the city earlier this year in a lawsuit filed in 1999 alleging the city was negligent in helping mentally ill ex-offenders find treatment upon their release.

The city fought the lawsuit, known as the Brad H. lawsuit, and appealed a state trial court decision, but in January settled, agreeing to provide services.

"I think if the Brad H. lawsuit hadn't happened we'd be way farther behind," said Page.

Page and others, however, credit the new commissioner of the Department of Correction, Martin Horn, as a driving force behind the new program. Horn was appointed to the post in January by Mayor Michael Bloomberg after serving a one-year stint as Commissioner of the Department of Probation.

"I've known the commissioner of corrections for a long time," said Page. "I've got a lot of respect for him." Horn has organized daylong meetings with officials from various city departments, with the Department of Homeless Services expected to play a big role in whatever solutions the city comes up with. But the details of the program remain largely unresolved. Of the three main

areas of city efforts -- drug treatment, housing and jobs -- so far, only the jobs portion is up and running.

JOBS AND BEYOND

Existing employment services for ex-offenders have differing philosophies. For example, at the Fresh Start program, run by the Osborne Association, "the basic idea is to get them excited about something," said Leigh Owens, a case manager. That program offers mini-courses in computer journalism or culinary arts, which might seem overly ambitious but often result, according to Owens, in Microsoft certification or a food handler's license, all paid for by The Osborne Association.

That philosophy contrasts sharply, however, with the main goal of the new city jobs effort, which is basically a jobs creation program offering immediate work and immediate pay for ex-prisoners, including ferrying newly released offenders from Rikers Island directly to work sites scattered across the city.

The first day out might be a job lasting from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.. Work includes grounds-keeping and litter removal on state highways in the Bronx and Queens, as well as work in and around housing projects in Upper Manhattan and Brooklyn such as whitewashing and clean-up. The work is typically done in groups of about six, with one on-site supervisor. Workers earn federal minimum wage but get a check at the end of each day, usually about \$30.

The city program has two tracks, a two-week track and a six-week track, with ex-offenders with the least work history going on the six-week track. Ex-offenders will work four days a week, with one day of job counseling.

The idea is to try and simulate a real job situation, which means participants in the program might have long commute times. This way, former inmates can prove that they can show up for work on time every day, perhaps the most important trait employers look for when hiring new workers. The program includes an aggressive outreach program that seeks out employers willing to hire ex-offenders.

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The Center for Employment Opportunities, a non-profit that has been offering similar programs for about two decades, won a three-year contract with the city to provide the job services. The method works, according to the organization, as in the past more than 60 percent of its "graduates" have been placed in full-time jobs within three months of finishing the program.

So far, only about 300 ex-prisoners have gone through the new city program, which began in August. The jobs program aims to help 2,800 prisoners by June, 2004 and about 5,000 prisoners once the program is at full-capacity. Expansion will likely involve more outdoor worksites.

WILL IT WORK?

Jobs are important, but they are only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to what experts call "discharge planning." Page notes that there are "so many things working against good discharge planning." Nationally, two out of every three ex-offenders are rearrested within three years of release.

Housing is a huge issue in New York, Page stressed, adding that the new city program must overcome existing laws and regulations targeting those found guilty of crimes. People that have certain criminal records can't live in public housing.

"Some of it is law and some of it is administrative practice," said Page, explaining that federal restrictions are really primarily about sex offenders and people who manufacture drugs. New York City has tighter guidelines, for example excluding ex-offenders from public housing for drug offenses.

"The consequences are devastating," Page said.

Owens agreed that environment plays a big role in whether or not an ex-con can stay an ex-con.

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"One of the biggest problems is the surroundings, them going back into the same settings ...it kind of negates your progress sometimes," said Owens.

Of course, attitudes of ex-offenders must be changed, as too many see their criminal record as an insurmountable obstacle in finding steady work. Who will hire an ex-con? But Owens, like many on staff, did his own stint behind bars, serving a yearlong sentence at Rikers Island for felony gun possession, he said. Another ex-prisoner is Maria Perez, a counselor at The Fortune Society for almost seven years. She first came to The Fortune Society because she was mandated to attend substance abuse counseling after serving time on a drug charge.

"We are living proof that it works," said Perez.

There have been no comprehensive studies that see whether recidivism rates change as a result of careful planning for discharged inmates, according to Nicholas Freudenberg, a professor and director of the Program in Urban Public Health at Hunter College. Freudenberg has worked with prisoners in city jails for more than a decade and serves on advisory boards to the new city program.

He sees the program as a good start, but also said it will need to be judged by the resources that are put into it, and can only be judged over time.

"In watching city government for 25 years," he said, "the city can lose track of a problem, especially when it's a complex problem that requires collaboration over different city agencies."