



E bulletin, September 19, 2008

***One Man's Unease Leads Him to Ask:  
How Can the Community Help Ex-offenders Get Treatment for their  
Mental Illness?***

Employment Pathways Facilitator Otis Henderson knows that when he's helping ex-offenders look for work, issues like housing or education often come up in the process. While added issues make service delivery more challenging, Henderson says something else is cropping up lately that's making the process even more complex.

**Special feature: *Listen to this story, too!***

We're including a special audio feature with this ebulletin. In addition to reading the story, you can listen to an expanded version of it at the link provided below. Please let us know what you think of this feature and if you're interested in hearing more stories from the Des Moines Making Connections neighborhoods by contacting Kristin Senty, 288-3389, [ksenty@makingconnectionsdm.org](mailto:ksenty@makingconnectionsdm.org), or Ellen Wonderlin, 282-3945, [ewonderlin@makingconnectionsdm.org](mailto:ewonderlin@makingconnectionsdm.org).

Listen Otis Henderson's story at <http://www.makingconnectionsdm.org/library/Audio/MCE-BulletinPodCast.wma>

The issue is untreated mental illness. Says Henderson, who spends part of his time working out of the Neighborhood Health Initiative (NHI) office at 16<sup>th</sup> & Jefferson, **“I'm seeing more and more people who get out of prison and seem to have some type of undiagnosed or untreated mental health issue.”**

The problem first got his attention last year with one particular client of Henderson's. “This gentleman came into NHI one day and said he wasn't feeling well – that he was having too many different conversations with too many different people in his head,” he says.

“I think it scared all of us a little in the office, but the problem for us was that we didn't really know how to help him.”

Several days passed and Henderson turned on the TV news. The same client was the subject of the lead story – dead after an altercation with police.

While the experience is an extreme example of the problem, Henderson says he sees more men and women at NHI who come out of prison with some kind of mental health issue and no clear path for treatment. **“I’m a resource person, but I’m in a position where I don’t know what to offer,”** he says. **“In the end I feel like I’m failing these clients because there is no clear pipeline for diagnosis and treatment in prison to some kind of managed care when an ex-offender is released.”**

**Care about this issue?**

Contact Otis Henderson at (515) 309-4799, [otis.henderson@yahoo.com](mailto:otis.henderson@yahoo.com), if you...

- Know of direct links, or pipelines, that exist in the community to help ex-offenders get treatment for mental illness? Let’s lift them up!
- Want to work with others who share this concern to map out a solution.

Henderson’s observations are an accurate reflection of the problem. In a 2003 study through RAND Public and Safety Justice, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder among offenders occur about 1–5 times more often than in the general population. The study also found that there was little information as to whether or not these disorders were present prior to prison – and just as little information about their diagnosis or treatment in prison.

The study concluded, **“There is a need for improved screening, prevention, and treatment programs for state prison inmates; better tracking systems; and improved discharge and transitional planning for ex-offenders with special health care needs.”**

Henderson says he’s eager to uncover and draw attention to pipelines that exist in the community to help ex-offenders get treatment for mental illness. He would also like to connect with other service providers who share his concerns to map out better solutions. He’s also interested in drawing attention to the issue and would like anyone in the community who’s concerned to contact him. Henderson can be reached through NHI at (515) 309-4799, [otis.henderson@yahoo.com](mailto:otis.henderson@yahoo.com).

**“I’d like to be sure that there’s always a way that we can help. Next time I see someone like my former client who was really struggling, I’d like a clearer idea of what our options are before it’s too late.”**

*Information came from “Health Profile of the State Prison Population and Returning Offenders: Public Health Challenges,” Journal of Correctional Health Care, Fall 2003. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis.*

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