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Ex-cons dumped in downtown Dallas stay free with help from nonprofit

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As many as 700 people are released from state prisons each month and bused into downtown Dallas, often with little money and no housing or job prospects.

Without help reintegrating into free society, they could commit crimes again. That's something Dallas-based nonprofit Unlocking Doors hopes to prevent.

"They simply go and commit another crime just because they can't handle the rules out here," said Christina Melton Crain, president and chief executive officer of Unlocking Doors.

The group pairs ex-offenders with housing, job, mental health and rehabilitation services. It just moved into a new headquarters on Greenville Avenue near Interstate 635, growing from 1,500 square feet to 7,000 square feet.

Among those attending a grand-opening ceremony Friday to support the nonprofit's work were state representatives, Dallas City Council members, Dallas County commissioners, Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson and U.S. Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Dallas.

Sessions said his high school best friend spent two decades in jail "because he made a mistake. He's not a criminal."

He pointed to the high rates of Texas inmates who have dyslexia.

"They failed in school, which drove them in a direction ... and they made mistakes," Sessions said.

When it comes to choosing between praying for someone or offering a hand, he chooses to help.

"Sometimes I give people money on the street, not knowing whether it's to get a fix or to buy a sandwich," Sessions said.

That's the approach of Unlocking Doors: Offer help in the hopes that people use the group's resources to stay out of jail.

The re-entry nonprofit, which advertises in the Texas prison system's newsletter, works with each person individually. Some will need just a month to get back on their feet. Others will need years.

The nonprofit recently started using software to collect data to match people with services and to track recidivism rates. The goal is to keep people out of the criminal justice system to reduce taxpayer costs.

Each inmate costs the state about \$20,000 a year. It costs Unlocking Doors less than \$1,000 a year to give re-entry services to one client.

About 95 percent of the people in the Texas prison and jail system get out. Some end up homeless. Some battle drug addiction. Some end up committing crimes again.

Often the biggest challenge is finding a place to live, especially in the booming Dallas housing market, where rents are rising and landlords might turn away those with criminal records.

"It doesn't matter if you have a job. It doesn't matter if you're getting substance abuse treatment. If you don't have a place to stay every evening, your chances significantly spiral to go back to the way you were," Crain said. "At least in prison, you had a cot."