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## Felons get help, second chances

By **Doug Moore**  
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH  
05/27/2008

**ST. LOUIS** • In the back room of Pharaoh's Donuts, Michael Smith is rebuilding his life.

Here, in the small storefront of a strip mall, Smith fries doughnuts, gives them a generous glazing and tries not to think about the mistakes he made that landed him in prison for 16 years.



Michael Smith, 47, carries a rack of doughnut dough ready for cooking at Pharaoh's Donuts in St. Louis this month. Smith was recently released from prison.

(Erik M. Lunsford/P-D)

"You pick yourself back up and keep rolling," Smith says. He's grateful for the \$7-an-hour job that doughnut shop owner Amon Aziz was willing to give him last month. Several job applications went unanswered, Smith said, because of his "Yes" response to one question: Have you ever been convicted of a felony?

Also working against Smith and other ex-offenders is their lack of job skills and, most recently, a weak economy.

That's why a community partnership was formed last year to help quickly move ex-offenders from prison to the work force — and keep them there. The new program is managed by the Area Resources for Community Human Services.

The city is home to more than 22,500 ex-offenders, said Wendell E. Kimbrough, ARCHS' chief executive officer. The program offers desperately needed job-training courses that, in turn, produce more opportunities for ex-offenders.

"They are coming back to the same challenges faced prior to incarceration, including poverty, high unemployment and crime," Kimbrough said.

ARCHS teamed with 18 partners, including **Advertisement** businesses, faith-based organizations and community groups. In addition to job training, the program helps in finding housing, drug and mental health counseling, job-readiness training, transportation — and employers willing to give felons a second chance.

The initiative marks the first time there has been a comprehensive system in St. Louis to successfully integrate ex-offenders, Kimbrough said. "What makes this partnership so different is that a lot of groups have come together and leverage each other's talents."

Smith took a six-week catering class through St. Louis Community College. Training also is offered

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Saint Louis, MO  
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#### MORE JOBS

in automotive repair, computers, manufacturing, construction, carpentry, customer service, nursing and culinary arts.

Studies have shown that unemployed ex-offenders are three times more likely to return to prison than those who land jobs. The ARCHS partnership was modeled after similar programs in Cleveland, Dallas, Seattle and Charlotte, N.C.

"We want them to get a job they are interested in, a well-paying position so they can get a stake in the American dream," said Doug Burris, chief U.S. probation officer for the eastern district of Missouri. ARCHS' ex-offender efforts are patterned after a program Burris' office started eight years ago. "The first question we ask is: 'If you could have any job, what would it be?' Ninety-nine point nine percent say positions that are attainable, such as welding, plumbing — jobs with decent wages."



A Justice Department study from last year shows the U.S. Probation Office program is making a difference. Over a three-year period, 14.9 percent of ex-offenders were re-arrested compared with 67.5 percent nationwide.

Some of the classes offered through the ARCHS program, such as the culinary arts course through St. Louis Community College, include college credit.

"This leads them down the path of job training but also makes them feel more comfortable with college," said Gail Dickson, director of the ARCHS ex-offender program known as Community Action Re-Entry Employment System. "Going from prison to college can be intimidating."

In the first nine months of the ex-offender program, 518 ex-offenders have been served, surpassing the goal of 488.

Most of ARCHS' funding comes from a \$1.9 million Labor Department grant, with community partners adding \$900,000 more. The grant, awarded last June, has no automatic renewal. It is the responsibility of ARCHS to sustain funding for the program. Organizers are hoping their initial success with funding will give them long-term momentum, said Leslie A. Johnson, vice president of partnerships for ARCHS.

Smith, 47, was released in January and remains on parole until 2012. He is reconnecting with his family and his girlfriend, but staying away from the streets where he got caught up in drugs and began stealing. Four robbery convictions led to his time behind bars.

"The streets got the better of me," said Smith, who, for now, is sleeping on a couch at his sister's house. He hopes he can get a better-paying job to help out his daughter, Michelle, who is pregnant and has a 2-year-old child.

Aziz said he first met Smith when he came to Aziz's newly opened Central West End doughnut shop.

"He said he was looking for a job," Aziz said. "It didn't matter to me he had priors. I'm a product of the city and know how it is. I have a brother who has been in and out of jail on numerous occasions."

Aziz said he had two conditions: "Show up and be responsible."

Five weeks into the job, Aziz is pleased with Smith's efforts. And Smith says it is nice to be given a chance. "Nobody else wanted to," he said, sliding a tray of warm glazed doughnuts into a display case.

"I'm starting from ground zero," Smith said, then paused. "I'd rather do that than be in prison."

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