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# Operation My Home Town Fights Crime by Meeting Basic Needs

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Mike Silva has been working full time for Dig Deep Farms in Alameda County for almost three years. The farm is a social enterprise founded by residents and law enforcement to provide healthy food to the community and to reduce recidivism by providing jobs for former inmates like Silva. Photo credit: Courtesy of Dig Deep Farms

**By Lynn Graebner**

Alameda County law enforcement officials are fighting crime in a novel way, by targeting high-risk, recently released jail inmates with job training, mental health counseling, healthy food and opportunities for recreation.

In 2010 22,000 former jail inmates returned to reside in Alameda County. Thirty-six percent of them, 8,000 people, landed within three miles of the unincorporated communities of Ashland and Cherryland, 15 miles south of Oakland near Hayward. That's despite the fact that the Eden Area, where those communities are located, accounts for only 8.5 percent of the county's population. And 50 to 70 percent of those released within this jurisdiction will return to jail.

Instead of waiting for them to re-offend, The Alameda County Sheriff's Office launched Operation My Home Town (OMHT) in 2011, a pro-active, preventive approach to fighting crime.

“This is just as much our work as chasing the bad guys and putting them in jail,” said Andrea Mueller, manager of the Youth and Family Services Bureau at the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office. “We’re all sick of warehousing people.”

The problems are daunting, 59 percent of Ashland and Cherryland residents have income levels in the extremely low to low ranges, roughly 20 percent live in poverty and 30 percent don’t have high school diplomas, reports the Ashland and Cherryland Community Health and Wellness Element, a draft report produced by the Alameda County Development Agency and the Department of Public Health. These areas also have the highest teen birth and mortality rates in the county.

Hispanic and Latino residents make up roughly 50 percent of the population. Another 40 percent is white, African American and Pacific Islander.

In June OMHT received a \$948,459 grant from the California Board of State and Community Corrections to help reduce recidivism among mentally ill offenders.

OMHT differs from other efforts to reduce recidivism in that the Sheriff’s Office is creating resources for the former inmates. It provides each participant with a behavioral health therapist case manager while in jail and up to a year post release. Where jobs and healthy food is scarce the Sheriff’s Office and Deputy Sheriff’s Activities League created a farm. Where affordable recreation didn’t exist the Activities League established a free soccer league which now serves 1,300 kids and has recruited 200 parents to help organize and coach. It has become a national model receiving a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Soccer Foundation and forging a bridge between law enforcement and citizens.

Most OMHT clients start inside Alameda County’s Santa Rita Jail in Dublin. Inmates are assessed for their risk of recidivism and their needs. Those at highest risk are placed in a reentry-based incarceration housing unit. They work with their case managers on individualized reentry plans and get linked to services for health care, education and job training.

“One of the innovations is this continuous care model. We’re doing it with behavioral health care professionals. I don’t think a lot of jurisdictions are doing that,” said Lieutenant Martin Neideffer, who oversees the Youth and Family Services Bureau at the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office. He and Mueller were the main architects of OMHT early on.

A 2013 first-year evaluation of the program, with preliminary

results, reported that of the 22 OMHT participants who had been out of jail for six months only 14 percent recidivated. A longitudinal study of the 300 OMHT participants to date is about to be released.

Going forward OMHT aims to get at least 75 percent of participants to complete the program, 70 percent to meet their educational goals and to provide treatment for 90 percent of those needing substance abuse or mental health services.

OMHT's lead case manager, Arthur Streeter, sees 20 to 50 clients a year. He comes to their jail cells and works with them on reentry plans through motivational interviewing. It takes time, consistency and showing up when he says he will.

"These people have huge trust issues," he said.

Streeter meets them at jail upon release and delivers them to their first step in reentry, be it a job interview or their new residence. He sometimes drives them to appointments, negotiates with probation officers, the District Attorney's Office and doctors on their behalf. He answers his phone when they call at night and he hangs in with them, sometimes through multiple relapses. Similar programs exist across the country.

"But not with the same flexibility and intensity, Streeter said.

One of the most successful roles he plays is reconnecting clients with their families. A former heroin addict, told him he didn't have any family. But Streeter got a release to talk with his mother.

"She has a wall of pictures of family members. My client had burned all these bridges by robbing from them," said Streeter. Now his client's mother is bringing him to church and drug treatment and he has visits with his children.

Diego Rangel, another of Streeter's clients, landed in Santa Rita Jail due to DUI convictions.

He described Streeter as "a great mentor and a friend." Rangel, is on probation now and looking for work. He hasn't had a drink since he got out of jail last September.

"This program made a big difference because I've tried it on my own," he said.

One of the hardest parts of reentry for those with a criminal record is getting a job. Many of them have been cycling through jail or prison for 10 to 15 years, Neideffer said. Currently no baseline recidivism rate has been established for Alameda County,

but Neideffer estimates it at 50 to 70 percent.

“There has to be some layered employment opportunities, somewhere to go to earn some money while they’re learning how to work,” he said.

Ashland and Cherryland are food deserts with high rates of diabetes and heart disease, Neideffer said. In Cherryland 67 percent of residents live within a quarter of a mile of a fast food vendor and only six percent live within half a mile of a grocery store or supermarket, reports the Health and Wellness Element.

So in 2010, to reduce recidivism and provide healthy food, residents partnered with the Sheriff’s Office and the nonprofit Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs’ Activities League Inc. to found a social enterprise, Dig Deep Farms.

Today Dig Deep employs eight people full time and up to 60 to 70 interns in the summer. It has 500 fruit trees and seasonal crops on eight acres in three locations.

Mike Silva has been working there for almost three years. After spending 15 years in and out of jail for crimes related to drug addiction, he now bags and delivers weekly produce boxes for customers of the farm’s CSA (community supported agriculture) business.

“It gives me peace of mind, working in the fields. I’m constantly busy.” He said it also brought him closer to his family. “I’m doing more positive things now.”

Anthony Ellis works at Dig Deep as an intern. He’s been to jail a couple of times and said being unemployed contributed significantly to his incarceration.

“A lot of my problems were with my wife. I figure if I can make things right with my wife, there won’t be a problem. And the thing that makes it right is me working.”

“A job that pays a living wage, that you can support your family with, that you can be proud of is sort of the grail in this whole process,” Neideffer said.

Starting a farm from scratch with the dual objectives of cultivating both food and job skills has not come easily. The farm brought in Deagon Williams, a Paris-trained chef and culinary business strategist, as director of development.

“We’re a social enterprise. We hire people who are socially challenged and maybe haven’t had a job in 15 years and hope they

will eventually move into management positions or acquire the skills to move on,” Deagon said.

To increase jobs and job training Dig Deep is building a 3,200-square-foot commercial kitchen slated for completion next summer. The plan is to produce products like jams, tomato sauce and salsa and to lease space to community food entrepreneurs. It has the capacity to support up to 50 jobs, Deagon said.

In addition to Dig Deep Farms, OMHT works with numerous community partners, including four primarily black churches which offer job clubs.

For years Glad Tidings Church in Hayward has been providing mentors for people coming out of jail. Currently the church has eight men from OMHT who come three times a week to work on job-readiness curriculum.

“It’s a self-motivated program and they show up, we’re not chasing them,” said Larry Moody, Executive Director of the church’s Community Development Division. When OMHT clients participate in these types of programs there’s documentation to show families that the clients are investing in recovery.

“So you’ve also poured some hope into the families,” who are often left out of the recovery plan, Moody said.

When asked if he thinks other cities can replicate OMHT Silva said it depends.

“A lot of police want to lock people up. The Alameda County Sheriff’s Department, they back us up 100 percent,” he said.

Moody said he’s also very pleased with the commitment from the Department.

“They’re the elephant in the room and for them to provide leadership in reducing recidivism, in figuring out how we slow that carousel down...I think they’ve got something.”

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