

Richmond: New re-entry center unveiled for former inmates

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Director Nicholas Alexander speaks during the grand opening of the Reentry... (JANE TYSKA)

1RICHMOND -- When Edward Williams entered the prison system in 1984, the Internet was an unknown, and he'd never touched a computer.

Once his murder sentence was over three decades later and he arrived back home, Williams felt like he had been dropped on a new planet. Everyone jabbered on cellphones and talked about apps. Most of his relatives, and many friends, were dead, and he now had to think about how he would earn money instead of having tasks assigned to him.

"Everybody wants you to come home, jump into the race and take off, but that ain't going to happen," said Williams, now 74. "They don't understand that prison has its own rules and regulations than the outside, and when you have been gone so long, you have to relearn everything."

On Tuesday, Williams shared his story at a ribbon-cutting ceremony of the Re-entry Success Center. Located in a former jewelry store in downtown Richmond, the center will help the formerly incarcerated find jobs and housing, access health services and get help with substance abuse and other issues, all under one roof. It formally opens Nov. 2 and will work primarily with people on parole and probation.

"In the past, someone in re-entry would have to go from place to place to get services," said Nicholas Alexander, the center's director. "What we've done is create a hub."

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Inside the center, clients will be able to access computers, enroll in GED or college courses, get job-training or placement assistance and meet with a counselor to come up with a re-

entry plan. More important, they will have access to a support network that is often missing when people first get out of prison, according to advocates.

"Re-entry is more than just about lowering the cost of ballooning prison costs," Alexander said. "It's about lowering the costs and the impacts to families and children. And it's about growing the workforce and the local economy."

The re-entry center is being funded by a yearly grant of \$433,000 from the state, allocated by Assembly Bill 109, better known as "prison realignment." The legislation was passed 2011 as a way to reduce recidivism in California prisons and transfer nonviolent offenders to local jails to serve out the remainder of their sentences.

Another \$93,000 per year is being spent by Rubicon Programs, a local organization that offers job training, counseling and other services and that will run the day-to-day operations of the center.

Currently, more than 3,000 people are either on parole or probation in Contra Costa County, according to Alexander, meaning that the demand for the center's work is high.

Advocates for the formerly incarcerated praised the center for being light, airy and not "institutional."

"This is the place we would want to come," said Edwina Perez- Santiago, the founder of Reach Fellowship International, a Richmond organization that offers pre-release and post-release services for women coming out of the prison system. "This is a place where all of our needs will be met. It feels like community."

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia praised the center for being a model in re-entry services and said that it had been put together with the input of many former inmates who were able to use their experience to tailor the center's approach.

"Hundreds of organizations came together and understood that we need to invest money not just in county departments or law enforcement, but we need to invest in community-based organizations that are providing real-life services to people re-entering our community," Gioia said.

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