Troubled youths need your help to fill in missing gaps
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REPOSITORY STAFF WRITER

MASSILLON Lisa Randazzo and her husband, Mike, own a 115-acre horse farm, where they care for abused or neglected draft horses.

But it might not be the stables where this couple makes the biggest impact.

It might be prison — juvenile prison.

“God called us here,” said Lisa Randazzo, who runs an equestrian program at the Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility in Massillon. She volunteers.

Randazzo teaches youth offenders about the anatomy of horses, how to care for them and allows the youths to ride some horses at the prison.

“People have forgotten about these kids,” she said Monday. “God hasn’t.”

Department of Youth Services is looking for more people such as Randazzo to help make a difference in youth offenders’ troubled lives.

State officials are on a mission to promote more volunteerism in juvenile prisons, helping the youths transition back home successfully.

Can you help them?

“Since there are no life sentences in DYS, all of our kids will be returning back to the community at some point,” said Thomas Stickrath, director of DYS.

“We need community volunteers to fill in some of the missing gaps in the youths’ lives; we see this as a crucial part of a youth’s successful re-entry back home.”

DYS officials held a community leadership forum at the state juvenile prison at 2775 Indian River Rd. SW, across from Wal-Mart in Massillon Marketplace.

Part of the campaign includes faith-based legislation that could make re-entry into society manageable for all youth and adult offenders.

REMOVING RESTRICTIONS

State Rep. John White, R-Kettering, is a sponsor of two bills — House Bill 113 and House Bill 130 — that focus on the re-entry process.

HB 113 permits nonprofit, faith-based, business, professional, civic, educational and community groups access into prisons to provide re-entry services.

A report by the Correctional Faith-Based Initiatives Task Force led to the legislation. No specific religious message can be endorsed.

In HB 130, re-entry issues outside the confines of prison walls are addressed.

Among the proposed solutions are:

-- Creating re-entry courts, which would oversee post-prison supervision. Stark County runs a pilot program for pre-entry purposes.

-- Allowing an inmate identification card to serve as a primary or secondary form of identification to get a state ID card.

-- Removing restrictions on licensing boards where there is no relationship between past criminal history and job opportunities.
White said there are 430 jobs currently off-limits to convicted felons, so “these folks can’t find jobs.” He said HB 130 would open up more jobs.

**GIVING THEM LOVE**

DYS officials said few job opportunities, no mentors and substance abuse can often lead youth offenders back to a life of crime. Mentorship helps.

“We need you badly,” White told volunteers.

Joyce Salapack, chief probation officer for Stark County Family Court, said this movement for more volunteerism will be positive on youths.

“When these families are in crisis, the first person they call isn’t their parole or probation officer. It’s a neighbor, a friend or a pastor,” she said.

Randazzo added: “The biggest thing that these boys are missing that makes them different from us is we were loved; they weren’t.”

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REPOSITORY RAY STEWART

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED** Stark County Family Court Judge David Stucki (left) and Coshocton County Family Court C. Fenning Pierce (right) listen to Department of Youth Services officials discuss juvenile re-entry into society after prison time and a need for volunteer work in juvenile prisons to mentor youths. A forum was held Monday at the Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility in Massillon.