

Re-entry Partnership leads to freedom, confidence

The requirement to participate in a March 15 commencement of a Catholic Charities program was to stay out of prison for two years.

But for the 23 graduates of the Baltimore-based Maryland Re-entry Partnership, the ceremony celebrated a new outlook on life.

"If you told me three years ago I wouldn't be back in prison right now, I wouldn't have believed you," said John Lightner, 45, of Woodlawn, a graduate who has been in and out of prison since he was 18. "But now, I can't imagine ever going back."

He credited the program with helping him rebuild his life after he was released from prison in 2004, providing him with the confidence to embark on a career as a plumber.

"When I first got out of prison, I thought I was probably going to be back out on the street selling drugs," Mr. Lightner said. "I didn't really know how to exist in society, and drug dealing was something I knew how to do to earn good money."

On March 11 he was released from probation – a first for him since becoming an adult.

Released to a drug rehabilitation facility in March 2004 after spending seven years in prison on a distribution of narcotics conviction, Mr. Lightner overheard people talking about Maryland Re-entry – a mentoring program that joins ex-offenders with case managers and case advocates in an effort to reduce recidivism.

The six-year-old program boasts a recidivism rate of only 19 percent among its 140 men currently enrolled, compared with a national rate of about 50 percent and a state rate of approximately 49 percent, said Rada Moss, executive director of Maryland Re-entry.

In most cases, the mentoring begins before the inmate is released from prison and participants are given financial help with housing, counseled on how to seek

employment and educational programs, directed to abuse therapy and receive advice on gaining and retaining a stable living environment.

The program was officially brought under the Catholic Charities umbrella a little more than a year ago, and it operates on a \$500,000 annual budget – from federal and Baltimore City grants, as well as subsidies from private foundations – and employs four case managers, three advocates and two administrative staff members.

“We consider our program a success in Baltimore City, and we can probably take an additional 40 into our program, but that would take us to capacity,” Ms. Moss said. “I think our program can be modeled in other parts of the state, but we would need additional support to accomplish that.”

As the graduation ceremony got under way at Forum Caterers in Pikesville, Nicola Maddox of East Baltimore gushed about the difference she has seen in her brother since he enrolled in Maryland Re-entry shortly before his release from prison last December.

Attending the function as a show of support for the graduates, Sonny Mosby, 44, also of East Baltimore, has been incarcerated off and on since he was 16, but with the help of the program, he has enrolled in electrician school, been provided with money for tools and given the determination to end his cycle of imprisonment.

When Mr. Mosby said he plans to be in the graduating class of 2009, his sister interjected that he better be more confident in his conviction.

“If he isn’t, he isn’t going to have any ankles,” Ms. Maddox said with a hearty laugh. “For the first time since we were kids, I feel like I have my big brother back.”