City aims to break cycle for ex-cons

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Newark Mayor Cory Booker and a coalition of legal services groups yesterday began recruiting lawyers to volunteer for a pilot project that will offer free advice to the thousands of ex-cons living in the city.

Booker said he envisions the Newark Re-entry Legal Services Network as a first step in his attempt to reduce crime by helping felons overcome the myriad obstacles - lack of housing, insufficient schooling, broken families, joblessness - that keep them from rejoining society.

In particular, he said, ex-cons often complain social and legal barriers prevent them from getting legitimate employment. Instead, many return to illegal activity in order to survive.

"We've got to start figuring out a way in Newark to untangle their problems," Booker told a group of prospective volunteers at an orientation conference at Seton Hall Law School last night.

The wave of ex-cons flooding the streets of Newark and cities around the country has been fueled by a years of tough-on-crime sentencing laws, particularly regarding drug offenders, and crackdowns on parole violators, experts say. While the increase in prison sentences has been credited for drops in crime in the past decade, almost all felons return home eventually, experts say. And almost all of them fail to adjust to society.

"Their is a world not of opportunity but one of can't," Seton Hall Law School Dean Patrick E. Hobbs said.

Of the 1,500 or so ex-cons released into Newark each year, officials estimate that two-thirds are re-arrested within three years.

That has a direct impact on Newark's crime rate: most of the city's violent crime is driven by a relatively small number of career criminals who cycle in and out of prison, officials say. Some officials say New Jersey's failure to address the "re-entry" problem is to blame for a recent spike in gun violence in Newark and other cities.

Lawyers who join the pilot network, which will start a six-month trial run next month, will give legal advice on obtaining drivers licenses, making child support payments, finding jobs and expunging certain offenses from their records. They won't provide legal representation to the former prisoners, officials said, but may refer them to other organizations for such help.

Any former prisoner living in Newark will be eligible for help. They will be referred by workers at existing agencies where ex-cons seek help.

Several dozen lawyers from firms in Newark and around the state - many of which supported his election campaign - attended last night's orientation. Organizers want them to commit to working on two cases a year.

Local legal services groups, including the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, Essex Newark Legal Services, Volunteer Lawyers for Justice, along with Seton Hall and Rutgers law schools, are helping the Booker administration develop the network.

"Right now, the failure rate is incredibly high, and incredibly costly," said Nancy Fishman, a senior analyst at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.

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