

Ex-offender heads new correctional outreach in Ohio

A new initiative marks the Army's first venture into Ohio prisons.

By Jared McKiernan

The Northeast Ohio Salvation Army (NEOSA) is preparing to launch The 49-9 Project—the Army's first in-prison initiative in Ohio, geared toward detained, incarcerated and recently released men in Lorain County.

Mark Fahringer, coordinator of the Oberlin Service Unit and an ex-offender, will work alongside inmates in the Grafton Correctional Institution and Camp (GCI) in Grafton, Ohio, and potentially expand services into the Lorain County Jail.



"I had a number of people come to me and talk to me about how there was very little being done in [corrections] in Lorain County," Fahringer said. "The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections has a list of every organization that does work inside prisons. Nowhere in the state of Ohio is The Salvation Army listed as a program provider, which means we're the first."

Aside from his own stint in the correctional system, Fahringer has other motives for giving back through prison ministry. One of his family members was once held hostage and shot three times by her ex-boyfriend, who had been released from prison shortly before their relationship began.

"That really pushed me," he said. "I don't want anyone else to have to go through that if I can make a difference."

Based on Isaiah 49:9, which speaks of bringing prisoners to freedom and those in darkness into light, The 49-9 Project has three main objectives: reduce recidivism, stabilize lives of ex-offenders and spread redemptive messages to the currently incarcerated.

"Our whole idea was to create a Christian-based reentry program that would seek to meet the needs of those returning to society by treating them as fellow human beings rather than stigmatizing them and treating them as a number on a stat sheet," said Thomas Thurn, service extension director for NEOSA.

The 49-9 Project will facilitate The Salvation Army's Bible Correspondence Courses for inmates, provide them with Bibles and conduct Interactive Spiritual Circles inside local institutions, which will offer inmates an opportunity to speak openly about their spirituality. Once released, inmates will be linked to Christian worship and pastoral care opportunities at local corps.

"Going into prisons helps us have some impact on people's lives," said Tom Chmura, regional field representative for Lorain County. "The question becomes, 'Are we really helping them become self-sufficient?'"

According to Fahringer, The 49-9 Project is currently awaiting approval for a grant from the Thomas Williams Fund for Program Enrichment. If all goes as planned, The 49-9 Project should be up and running in the next several weeks. Fahringer ultimately wants to make reintegration back into society as seamless as possible for men in Lorain County, whether through continued mentoring or even helping inmates get properly groomed.

"We have a local barber that's willing to do haircuts to help people look decent once they're released [so they can] go to interviews," Fahringer said. "Those are the kinds of things that aren't in directories, but we want to let guys know they are available before they are released."