

## Ex-offenders get help with Sanford re-entry program

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Board member and client Barry McCormick and board chairwoman Deirdre Stephenson cut a blue ribbon, celebrating the official opening of Experience 180's Total Package re-entry program.

One year ago, Barry McCormick walked out of prison with nothing but the clothes on his back. He didn't have any connections, he didn't have any money and he didn't have anywhere to go.

"I couldn't even get public housing," McCormick said Wednesday. "That's the lowest income of housing you can get and I couldn't even get that. Once I was released, everybody was turning me down because, 'Oh, you haven't been out long enough.'"

The 66-year-old man ended up at the Outreach Mission homeless shelter, but that wasn't a long-term solution, he said.

"What was I supposed to do, live in the shelter? Live the shelter life?" McCormick said. "I had to make changes."

The first step was a change of clothes, which came courtesy of Cool Springs Baptist Church. Then, McCormick connected with Crystal McIver and her new Total Package re-entry program, an initiative to help former convicts get back on their feet. McIver started the program more than a year ago, but this week was the first time she was able to welcome non-clients to the facility in-person.

Located off Fayetteville Street in Jonesboro, McIver's nonprofit, Experience 180, shares space with the Love, Faith & Fellowship Deliverance Center. Every Tuesday, McIver and coordinator Patricia Hawes welcome clients at the door, gathering information about who they are and what they need.

Then, from 10 a.m.-noon, McIver spends time life-coaching her clients, teaching them about how to get motivated, boost self-esteem, practice positive self-talk and ace job interviews, among other things.

"It (the class) made me believe in myself," said Eloise, another Total Package client. "Everybody love each other, they talk to each other, they try to help each other."

Total Package is about more than just getting people jobs, said board chairwoman Deirdre Stephenson. Stephenson, an attorney and president of the Lee County Bar Association, had some experience with re-entry projects before meeting McIver, but she had never heard of anything like McIver was describing, she said.

"She (McIver) talked about mental health. She talked about people having addictions. She talked about housing, she talked about interview skills, she talked about computer skills. She talked about education. A total package," Stephenson said.

"That was different than any type of re-entry project or clinic I'd ever been to. Usually it's just a bunch of lawyers volunteering their time to tell people, 'We can't help you because you have too many convictions,' or 'We can get all these dismissed charges off (your record) because in 2018, the law changed.' This was different."

With McIver's unique approach, she and other volunteers hope to change people's lives.

"Hopefully it'll grow and be successful," said Lee County Sheriff Tracy Carter, who is in full support of the program. "If we as a society try to reach out and help, especially if they're wanting help, give them those resources to be successful, that's gonna be good for everybody."

McCormick, 66, was incarcerated for more than 35 years before he got "sick and tired" of living on the wrong side of the law, he said. Now three-years sober and recovering from drug addiction, McCormick was exhausted from constantly chasing a high.

"(I was) sick and tired of living the life I was living and always giving my money to somebody else for a feeling that didn't last no time," McCormick said. "I have changed drastically because of this program. There are ins and outs of life that I thought about but never actually put in to work. But once I came here, she (Crystal McIver) would explain things so plainly that I had no other choice. I went from bad to good."

Now, McCormick has a stable home, he can pay his bills on time and he has a new outlook on life.

"It just, it feels good not to be on the left-hand side of the law," he said. "Because that's the life that I lived years ago and now I see change, and I like that change."