

Jail & Prison ministry wins national honor

Catholic Charities USA recognizes 'social innovation'

By Dan Russo
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DES MOINES — Two groundbreaking Jail & Prison Ministry programs in the Dubuque Archdiocese, which help ex-offenders re-enter society and also address justice for crime victims, recently received national honors.

At a Partners in Excellence Conference in Des Moines April 8, Father Larry Snyder, Catholic Charities USA's chief executive officer, presented the Social Innovation Award to officials from Catholic Charities of the Dubuque Archdiocese, along with \$5,000.

"I'm just so honored to work for so many great volunteers," said Deacon Bill Hickson, coordinator of Jail & Prison Ministry for Catholic Charities.

About 200 volunteers from communities across the Dubuque Archdiocese participate in the Circles of Support and Accountability and Mentoring programs that are overseen by Deacon Hickson's office. In the circle program, groups of citizens meet on a regular basis with those who have just been released from prison, giving them advice, and emotional and spiritual support, while encouraging them to meet their responsibilities. Mentors meet one-on-one with ex-offenders, providing guidance in a very personal manner.

"Success often means turning from life-long addictions and criminal behavior that supports such lifestyles, to sobriety, self fulfillment, and contribution to society," reads the Jail & Prison Ministry Application for the award. "We have clients that have completed their GEDs and college degrees; who have received chips at Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, marking months and years of sobriety; and who have reunited with family members and regained custody of children. We have over 200 success stories to tell."

The Dubuque Archdiocesan Circles and Mentoring programs are based on a publication of U.S. Catholic bishops in the year 2000 in which they examined crime and criminal justice from a Catholic perspec-



Pictured (l-r) are Father Larry Snyder, CEO of Catholic Charities USA, Tracy Morrison, executive director of Archdiocese of Dubuque Catholic Charities, Steve Schmitz, program director of Catholic Charities Cedar Rapids branch office, Deacon Bill Hickson, coordinator of Jail & Prison Ministry for Catholic Charities of the Dubuque Archdiocese and Lori Widhalm, coordinator of disaster services and the Pathway Partners program for Catholic Charities of the Dubuque Archdiocese receive the Social Innovation Award April 8 in Des Moines for the Jail & Prison Ministry program. (Contributed photo)

tive. The document calls for "innovative programs of restorative justice." This means shifting the focus from simply punishing crimes to repairing the harm done by crime to the victims and society, while also addressing the needs of the offender to prevent future crime and make him or her a productive member of families and communities.

On a local level, deacons and other volunteers created the programs in cooperation with Mary Roche, the director of the Office of Victim and Restorative Justice for the Iowa Department of Corrections.

"It was designed by Deacon Tom Lang and other deacons," said Deacon Hickson.

Since 2007, the Circles of Support and Accountability and Mentor programs have gotten about 360 applications. Of those, 236 were assigned mentors and 53 were assigned circles of support and accountability. Eighty who lived outside the archdiocese were also referred to other agencies. Within the criminal justice system, rates of "recidivism" are the standard to evaluate any rehabilitation program's effectiveness. The U.S. Justice Department defines recidivism as acts that result in the re-arrest, reconviction or return to prison without a new sentence

during a three-year period after a prisoner is released. The Jail and Prison Ministry programs demonstrated a 12 percent reduction in recidivism rates for program participants.

In 2010, the Iowa Corrections Association recognized Archdiocesan Jail & Ministry programming with an Outstanding Citizen Award for having "one of the first, most successful and widest-serving programs of support for ex-offenders in the state."

Deacon Hickson said the office plans to use the money received to help people coming out of prison pay for security deposits, first month's rent and other housing needs.

"One of the biggest challenges for people once they get out of prison is to get established with safe housing," said Deacon Hickson. "We're going to use (the award) with our direct aid program."

The April 8 award is one of about a dozen that Catholic Charities USA will present in different regions across the nation, according to Deacon Hickson.

For more on the Jail & Prison Ministry in the Dubuque Archdiocese or about volunteering, visit CatholicCharitiesDubuque.org