

Pray for the welfare of prisoners

The group serves every faith

BY BILL HICKSON

For the Telegraph Herald

During the Year of Mercy, which concluded last weekend, I was invited to many parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Dubuque to speak about my role as coordinator for the jail and prison ministry program at Catholic Charities.

The Year of Mercy sparked a renewed interest in the corporal works of mercy. There seems to be particular interest in the field in which I work because, of all the works of mercy, visiting the imprisoned is the one that people find the fewest opportunities with which to get involved for the following reasons:

- For security, institutions place restrictions on the number of people who can enter. Visitation is limited to family, clergy and volunteers cleared and trained by the jail or prison.
- People often feel uncomfortable and perhaps threatened by the prospect of encountering those convicted of criminal behavior.
- It is a natural temptation to believe that those in prison deserve their punishment and the separation and isolation that comes with it.

Everyone can pray for prisoners and their welfare, but some want to become more involved by matching action with prayer.

The fact that 95 percent of those in prison will eventually be released to their communities opens an opportunity for the typical layperson to get involved in a *See* **HICKSON, PAGE 13A**



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meaningful way by lending a hand to the recently imprisoned.

Catholic Charities provides two programs for returning citizens: Mentoring and Circles of Support and Accountability. Mentoring is a one-to-one match where a volunteer is paired with a returning citizen who has asked for help. For six months to a year, they meet together once per week for about an hour and keep in touch by phone during the rest of the week.

In Circles, a group of about five volunteers meet with a single returning citizen every two weeks.

In both programs, the volunteers are trained and supported by the Catholic Charities team, and they

focus on goals set by the returning citizen in the vital areas of housing, employment, transportation, medical issues, family and social support, recreation and faith. They work together to find solutions to problems and utilize community resources to meet the goals.

Our programs have been in place for 10 years, and our volunteer network has grown to about 200 volunteers. We serve about 60 returning citizens at any given time throughout our 30-county area. We serve people of all faiths, and we accept volunteers from all faiths.

Not every person is successful, and some return to incarceration due to relapse or revocation of sentence. But, clients in our jail and prison ministry programs are 49 percent less likely to re-offend, compared to the state average. *Hickson is a coordinator of the jail and prison ministry at Catholic Charities, with the Archdiocese of Dubuque.*