

GERGEN & VANOUREK: Ex-felons rebuild lives

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In the Richmond community of Highland Park, there is a road that once was considered so dangerous that locals would drive far out of their way to avoid it. On one street corner alone, there were six murders in two years.

Today, Meadowbridge Road is bustling with activity of another kind: commerce and construction. An old fire station has been converted into a full-service restaurant, catering service and business incubator. Next door is a thrift store for "gently used" clothes, and across the street is the Harvest Store - a 7,500-square-foot used-furniture store. Dotted around the neighborhood are newly renovated homes occupied by proud families who helped to clean them up.

The source of this rejuvenation is as unlikely as the story itself. This is the work of ex-felons enrolled in Boaz & Ruth, a faith-based nonprofit training program started in 2002. Before enrolling in Boaz & Ruth, 90 percent of the enrollees lived below the poverty line, 100 percent were unemployed, 82 percent had a history of substance abuse, 38 percent were homeless, 86 percent had no driver's license, and 40 percent were estranged from their families.

That is a difficult starting place. No wonder two-thirds of ex-prisoners are arrested again within three years, according to the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project, and the communities where they end up remain depressed.

Boaz & Ruth flips this equation on its head. Located in a neighborhood with a high concentration of released prisoners, the group helps its graduates get back on track through the renewal of the communities in which they live. Its yearlong training program features intense weekly scheduling, including personal coaching, classes geared to life and work readiness, and employment in one of Boaz & Ruth's business ventures, including the Harvest Store, Fire House 15 Restaurant and Cathedral Construction, which is renovating local abandoned properties.

The results for participants are promising. Of last year's 65 participants, 46 obtained stable housing, 10 re-connected with estranged family members, eight were able to purchase a car, and seven enrolled in higher education. Of the 42 Boaz & Ruth graduates who completed the entire program, just four have been re-incarcerated.

As for the community ventures, the numbers are equally attractive. Over the course of last year, Boaz & Ruth's enterprises employed 278 people. Eleven buildings in the community have been bought and renovated by the group, and crime has dropped 37 percent in Highland Park. Moreover, Boaz & Ruth's community activities brought almost 2,400 people into the community - many for the first time.

In 2005, Boaz & Ruth became a partner, albeit an unconventional one, with AmeriCorps, a

national service program that promotes a year of community service for its participants. Typically, AmeriCorps engages recent college graduates in service assignments geared toward helping nonprofit partners. In exchange for a year of service, graduates get a modest living allowance and stipend for continuing education, typically a master's degree. By contrast, Boaz & Ruth has used its AmeriCorps funding to support ex-felons - providing them with job training and life skills. For AmeriCorps, this has been fitting a square peg in a round hole, but therein lies the opportunity.

As President Obama seeks to expand national service opportunities dramatically, the Boaz & Ruth model offers an opportunity for fresh thinking. Nicknamed "RestoreCorps" by founder Martha Rollins, the program could be targeted exclusively at felons re-entering society. The funding would provide life-skills training and provide the ex-offenders with hands-on employment opportunities focused on building entrepreneurial enterprises in poverty-stricken and crime-ridden neighborhoods. It also would provide funding for additional schooling.

This model could be expanded to serve other populations, such as substance abusers and juvenile offenders. One only needs to drive down Meadowbridge Road to see the possibilities. It's time to spread this idea to other communities in need.