

Ex-offender program gets boost

Coalition receives foundation grant

By Susan Gembrowski
STAFF WRITER

They're out of jail and moving back to San Diego neighborhoods where they once lived — back to old friends, old habits, new crimes.

A San Diego-based group already is trying to keep ex-offenders from returning to prison by helping them earn diplomas and find jobs, but it wants to expand its reach to ex-offenders and assist them with health care.

The United African American Ministerial Action Council, a coalition of 17 local churches, will use a \$292,380 grant to teach ex-offenders how to apply for health insurance and get referrals to doctors and clinics.

The grant came from The California Endowment, a \$3 billion private statewide health foundation, which former San Diego County health chief Dr. Robert Ross now heads. The foundation has awarded grants to other San Diego health programs, including those that benefit Asians, Somalis and Latinos.

Yesterday, Ross praised the church coalition for focusing on an underserved group that he said has a higher incidence of drug abuse, HIV/AIDS and mental illness than the general population.

"If you prevent one case of HIV/AIDS, this grant is cost-effective," Ross said.

The ex-offenders' health affects the community where they live, Ross said.

"The community is my concern," said Patricia Brown, 43, a volunteer with the action council



Former County Health Director Robert Ross spoke to the United African American Ministerial Action Council here yesterday. Ross, head of The California Endowment, presented a check for more than \$292,000 to help the group's work with ex-offenders. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune

who lives in Mount Hope. "It affects all our families in some fashion, and somebody's gotta do it."

Everyday life can present insurmountable problems for ex-offenders. Many are excluded from federally funded health care programs, because they spent time in prison. Others have had their health care benefits cut off while they were incarcerated.

"Without programs to help ex-offenders re-enter the community, they face poverty, diminished health status and restricted access to health care on their own," said the Rev. Timothy Winters, president of

the action council.

The council plans to help more than 100 ex-offenders and their families in the next two years with referrals and counseling for drug abuse and medical conditions such as tuberculosis and hepatitis.

The action council's efforts to help ex-offenders get access to health care is a first for California, Ross said.

The council also has helped ex-offenders earn high school diplomas.

Tina Borja, 25, is one. She won't say what offense she committed, just that she "made a bad choice."

The court assigned her to go

to school, under a 1999 Assembly bill that allows judges to require education as a condition of probation. The offense has to be less serious and non-violent, such as petty theft, forgery, welfare fraud, driving under the influence or drug possession.

Borja is enrolled in GED classes offered through the action council and plans to graduate this year from the high school equivalency program. About 50 nonviolent ex-offenders are enrolled in the classes.

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REV. TIMOTHY WINTERS, president of the action council