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At center, women released from prison find resources to stay out

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The clock is ticking on LaSomdra Randle.

The 31-year-old mother of three, who has been out of prison for a month, has only a few weeks left to stabilize her life - history proves - and reduce the odds that she'll reoffend and land behind bars again.

And time, so far, hasn't been kind.

The job Randle landed shortly after being released from prison, she lost because she didn't have reliable transportation.

And each time she has tried to regain custody of her children - Shaniqua, 13; Shakiyla, 12; and Dametra, 5 - she has been denied, because she doesn't have a stable home environment.

"There is nothing out there to help us," said Randle, whose dire straits led to The Convergence Resource Center.

Each step a former inmate takes after being released from prison is crucial, said Debbie Lassiter, whose agency acts as a safety net for women before their "street mentality kicks in and they land back behind bars."

Although a host of programs exists for male inmates, the bulk of the prison population, very few cater to women, whose incarceration numbers are increasing, Lassiter said. "The programs that are out there are usually full, and they aren't taking any more people."

The center grew out of the need, said Lassiter, 44, who has spent more than half of her life in prison ministry, going behind bars to teach Bible study to women inmates, as well as to conduct Sunday morning and evening worship services.

She said the idea for the center first came from the inmates, who had watched fellow inmates leave prison only to return.

"The women started coming up to us saying, 'I'm getting out, and I'm scared to death.' Women were turning down the opportunity for early release because they were afraid to fail in the new life they had started," Lassiter said. "Our minds couldn't fathom that."

It was that trepidation, she said, that led to the opening of the center, which had 45 cases on day one.

Each client is assessed and placed on an avoid recidivism track and assigned a facilitator.

"All clients of this facility are considered a work of art, a blank canvas set before each facilitator to instruct and assist in the development of life skills, helping them to maintain their freedom," Lassiter said.

Because the center operates on a small, tight budget, women in the program "must work harder at succeeding than we do. I've exhausted every bit of money I've had to keep the center

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Faces of Hope



Photo/Peter Zuzga

LaSomdra Randle, who was recently released from prison, talks with Debbie Lassiter at the center.

Convergence Resource Center

■ Mission: To provide services to women who have been formerly incarcerated by administering resources with the goal of deterring re-incarceration.

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About This Feature

Thousands of people in the Milwaukee area need a hand to help them over the rough spots in their lives. All have compelling stories to share. Each week, we will tell their stories in "Faces of Hope." The stories will focus on people who are trying to overcome some of life's most difficult challenges and on the resources that are

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open."

The center helps women gain job skills such as computer training; provides clothing for job interviews; and helps participants find jobs as well as secure shelter, furniture and household items by connecting with people in the community "who believe in giving second chances," Lassiter said.

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It is then a race against time. The longer they can stay out of jail, she said, the better chance they have of never returning. For instance, she said, if they can stay out of jail for three days, they have a 75% chance of never going back to prison. If they remain out for three months, it's an 85% chance, and three years, 95%.

Randle, who served eight months in prison after violating probation for forgery, has crossed one of the thresholds.

"You made a bad choice, but you are not a bad person," Lassiter tells her. "We can get past this."

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