

Reclamation through trust: A program for ex-offenders

by [Richard E. Sering](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

Attorney General Janet Reno traveled to Cleveland four years ago to observe ex-offenders at work in an innovative reentry program. She visited with members of Care Team, ex-convicts who are carefully selected to work for elderly residents in the community. Then she asked some of the residents how they felt about having criminals doing their shopping and check-cashing, and performing other services. One of the residents responded eagerly: “Ms. Reno, they’re not criminals! They’re our sons. We love them and they love us.”

The Care Teams are part of the Community Re-Entry program (CR), administered in Cleveland by Lutheran Metro Ministry on behalf of six denominational offices—Episcopal, United Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, ELCA Lutheran and Missouri Synod Lutheran. For 18 years, director Charles See has carefully trained and supervised hundreds of ex-offenders, many of them with felony convictions. Those selected don the distinctive red jacket worn by Care Team members, and serve the vulnerable elderly residents of the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA).

Twenty-five to 35 ex-felons assist at-risk persons who are frail or afraid to frequent nearby markets and stores alone for fear of being attacked. In 18 years, no elderly person in the care of a “red jacket” has ever been harmed, while three have been rescued from potentially fatal apartment fires.

Over a half million dollars per year is paid in salaries, health benefits and pensions to the “red jackets,” who may begin as volunteers or part-time workers, then move into full-time work. They are then encouraged to move into market employment, often in social services, government services or with CMHA. Some make a career of serving on the Care Teams.

More than a thousand ex-offenders pass through CR’s doors each year—too many to keep track of through the years. But at least 93 percent of program participants stay out of prison each year. CR received the Anisfield-Wolf Award for its Young African-American Reclamation Project, which served 54 young men just out of prison and saw only three regress into the recidivism statistics. Most of the successful participants had been Care Team workers.

Lutheran Metro Ministry was built on biblical concepts, including a concern for righteousness and justice and for “fulfilling the demands of right relationships in community.” Both those who serve and those served are encouraged to live in right relationship.

Years ago an elderly woman accused Care Team member Lee Carter of stealing \$100 off her dining room table. “It was right there,” she said, “and he was the only one in here with me. He had to have taken it.” The evidence appeared to be irrefutable. Charles See arranged for the program to give the woman \$100. Three months later the woman unfolded the tablecloth and found the money. She demonstrated living in right relationship by calling Lee Carter and apologizing.

Another concept central to this work is shalom, or peace. The ministry aims to express God’s care for God’s people. When Cleveland city planner Norman Krumholz asked former CMHA director George James to try the “crazy” Care Team idea, James said, “What? Solve our violence against the elderly problem by putting crooks in the apartments?” But he tried it.

Eleven years ago, Michael R. White saw the success of the program and made a campaign promise to double the size of the Care Teams with block grant funds, a promise he fulfilled when he became mayor.

When the service was first announced, the residents of Lakeview Estates were frightened and hesitated to telephone the “red jackets.” Finally, when one elderly woman was too ill to go for her groceries, she called the social services department and asked for one of “those Care Team guys” to be sent to her apartment. When he arrived, the woman, who was white, looked through her peephole, saw a black man, and called the social worker to come up with him. She gave her money to the social worker, who gave it to Care Team member Fletcher Colvin. Colvin bought her the groceries and brought her back the change.

The next week the woman let Colvin come inside. She held out the money, but when he reached for it, she drew it back in fright. Finally she asked, “Do I have to give you this money?” “Well, ma’am,” Colvin responded, “If you want me to get your groceries, I guess you’re going to have to.” She did, he brought her the groceries, and they began a wonderful relationship that lasted until she died. The day she entrusted Colvin with her bank deposit—\$300 in cash—he stopped by the CR office with tears in his eyes. “No one has trusted me like this since I was 13 years old,” he said.

The third concept embraced by Lutheran Metro Ministry is the recognition of the kingdom of God among us. “In the kingdom of God, nobodies are somebodies and somebodies are called upon to become nobodies in order to be somebodies in the kingdom of God.”

My son and I were in a line at the funeral for former mayor Carl Stokes. Behind us was a man in a red Care Team jacket, talking with a former inmate of an Ohio prison. “I’m a Care Team member,” said the first man. “I volunteered with the ‘red jackets’ and Director See told me to keep my nose clean and I did for a year. Then I got a part-time position and now I am full-time. I have a salary, a health plan and even a paid vacation!”

“That’s terrific!” said the other man. “How can I get into that?” Someone who had seen himself as “nobody” now saw himself as “somebody” who was contributing to the good of the community and passing on the possibility to another.

The influence of Care Teams has expanded to serve young people too. After a teen gang donned face masks and destroyed the lunch room at a local high school, a special unit of the Care Team was formed to deal with youth violence in the school. Cleveland Public School statistics showed a 54 percent decline in suspensions for violent activities while the team was operative at that high school. Educational Advocates are ex-offenders who work to bring chronically truant youth back to school. The project helped East Tech High School move from last place to first in attendance.

Community Re-Entry works, and it works, its supporters would argue, because it is built on a base of biblical theology, theology that Hans Küng has described this way: “Jesus scandalizes the devout by identifying himself with all the poor, the miserable, the ‘poor devils,’ with the heretics and schismatics, the immoral, the politically compromised, the social outcasts and those neglected by society. . . . He even ventured . . . to proclaim God’s forgiveness—completely gratis—instead of legal penalties and also to grant it in a wholly personal way—on the street, in the midst of life—in order by this very encouragement to make possible repentance and forgiveness toward our fellow men.”