

# Program supports inmates reentry into mainstream

By EMILY SCHENDEL

Reentry into society following incarceration can be challenging to say the least, however one Westby resident and her team have been working tirelessly to make that process easier in any way they can.

Sue Kastensen encountered the idea of hiring someone who was incarcerated in 1999, while operating her lip balm and skin care business, Sun Dog-now owned by Dr. Bronners.

"The idea came to me after an employee asked me to hire someone who was on their way out of prison," said Kastensen. "They were still incarcerated at the time so talking to them helped me understand the challenges of someone who is incarcerated, and this was the time before Google or other search engine resources so it opened me up to challenges employers face with learning about their options with hiring incarcerated individuals."

For the next 10 years, the idea floated around and work was done until eventually in 2009 Kastensen was able to found Fair Shake as a non-profit organization dedicated to offering resources to incarcerated individuals.

"I was seeing this huge problem, it took seeing it from one person, to see that it's a nation wide thing, and it just bubbled to the top for me," said Kastensen. "I spent time saying 'Someone's got to do something!' but then I realized it had to be us."

## 'Reentry hardware store'

Fair Shake is what Kastensen describes as 'free reentry hardware store' offering tools and materials for individuals to build their own reentry projects. The resource accesses available from Fair Shake are vast. They include lists of food pantries and soup kitchens, as well as tutorials on building computer skills.

"A good percentage (of these individuals) have never worked prior to incarceration, coming home and getting a job can be a huge challenge," Kastensen noted. "So, we want to offer all of the tools for that and more, people can come and take what they need when they're good and ready, not when someone is telling them they need it."

The website is simple and cohesive for individuals to navigate, but also has been transformed into software that is currently available in about 30 percent of federal prisons in resource rooms or libraries for individuals to use at their will. Many reentry coordinators also provide information from the website to individuals, as well as further developing programs and information that work individually for their population.

"We are seeing this opportunity to be a information hub," Kastensen observed, as she hears stories of inmates and reentry coordinators sharing resources from the site, but also developing their own around the model.

Another opportunity for access to Fair Shake is having the website become part of the limited Internet access that will be available to incarcerated people.

"It's really huge that we can participate in this," Kastensen said of the change. "Wisconsin is doing something really progressive, getting other states interested in what we're doing and incarcerated people will be able to access Fair Shake in real time, so as soon as we put an update on there they will be able to access it."

The skills taught through the tutorials also help individuals once they are released from incarceration. Fair Shake

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ability.

a free email and of-  
the Cloud, which is  
data storage facility,  
enables individuals  
relevant documents,  
eir resumes and also  
at a personal website  
boost their employ-

"We offer this office in the  
Cloud and a free website they  
can build so they can do it on  
their own, and show employ-  
ers and others that they're  
committed to their success-  
ful transition," Kastensen  
explained. "We want them

to be able to use the tools of  
today."

One facet of the project  
that Kastensen finds extreme-  
ly important is what she rec-  
ognizes as dealing with the  
intangibles.

"The resource package

we send out to individuals  
includes about 30 percent  
work-related materials, 20  
percent that is Fair Shake and  
the bulk is opportunities and  
hurdles. Dealing with han-  
dling frustration and manag-  
ing anger and other emotions  
that come with reentry," Kas-

tensen said.

The website also offers  
sources for employers.

"We try to offer things  
will help an employer in  
that leap to do something  
they wouldn't normally  
Kastensen said.

any different people can  
fit from a positive reen-  
or incarcerated individu-  
On the website, these  
viduals are referred to as  
holders.

Though tremendous re-  
sibility is on the shoul-  
of those transitioning  
prison to society, their  
ess is made possible only  
n the entire community is  
lved," the website states.  
merly incarcerated indi-  
als need employment, a  
e to live and a communi-  
at is willing to give them  
ond chance. Fair Shake  
identified six major  
holder groups, and as-  
sessed specific information  
ach group, to show how  
of us can help former  
ners achieve success.  
nd value in our invest-  
in corrections, we must  
folks the opportunity to  
n society when their sen-  
is over."

mily members and  
ds are one of the share-  
er groups addressed on  
Shake. On their website  
Shake notes, "You have  
of the toughest and most  
rtant roles to play in re-  
! The effort of support-  
family member or friend  
ey make the transition  
prison to society can be  
consuming, emotional-  
allenging and extremely  
ult. If your loved one or  
d is currently incarcerat-  
lease check out the links  
tools we have found to  
ort you."

ie of the resource pages  
s various links to pro-  
s families may find  
ficial such as the Girl  
ts' 'Beyond Bars for  
and Moms Involved in  
Scouts' and information  
the U.S. Department of  
h and Human Services.  
e effort and hard work  
nues every day with  
nsen and her team at  
Shake doing what they  
or a population that can