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Delancey Street model could help cure workforce ills

Freddie Baca and Michael DeLane are bright, clean-cut, articulate men any business school would be proud to produce. In fact, Baca holds a bachelor's from San Francisco State University, plus business license in real estate and construction. DeLane is a lieutenant in San Francisco Fire Department and holds a bachelor's degree from Golden Gate University.

You would never know that, once upon a time, a teenaged Baca—the son of now deceased heroin addicts—used heroin and faced eight years in prison for a string of robberies and that DeLane regularly smoked crack cocaine, a habit so bad his mother kept him locked out of her house.



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Baca and DeLane turned their lives around through the Delancey Street Foundation, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization

that takes what DeLane calls “the bottom 2 percent” of society—the junkies, the convicts, the homeless— and helps them build new, productive lives.

The two were in town promoting the Delancey Street Foundation during a Feb. 13 meeting at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Station in North Charleston where clergy, law enforcement officials, magistrates and other community leaders gather to lay the groundwork for forming a Greater Charleston Prisoner Re-Entry Advisory Committee to reduce the rate at which ex-convicts return to prison.

Last year in the Lowcountry, 1,162 inmates were released from prison. Statistics show that of those released, 71% will return to prison within three to five years.

That's a colossal waste of taxpayers' money—about \$30,000 per returning offender, according to Ashley Pennington of the Noisette Foundation, which teamed with AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), the Solicitors Office and North Charleston Weed and Seed to host the Feb. 13 meeting.

Worse than a waste of money, it's a shameful waste of human potential.

Enter Delancey Street, a self-help, education and residential center that has become the nation's rehabilitation model. Since it was founded in 1971, Delancey Street has helped more than 14,000 people give up drugs, quit crime and change their lives.

Three buildings on the old Navy base will be converted into the nation's sixth Delancey Street center and South Carolina's first. Renovation could begin in a few weeks, with the work being done by Delancey Street alumni and current participants from upstate New York and Los Angeles centers, Baca said.

That's good news for our community in general and for local employees in particular.

Lowcountry manufacturers complain that our workforce lacks a strong work ethic. They say it's hard to find qualified employees, if only because half of them would flunk a drug test. They point out that, in addition to being weak in basic reading, writing and math skills, workers lack “soft” skills—that is, they don't work and play well with others.

Baca says that in Los Angeles he receives frequent calls from employers seeking Delancey Street grads to fill positions. Why?

Because Delancey Street grads are hungry for a job. they want to prove and improve themselves. They've been in the gutter and don't want to return. They appreciate any life-enhancing opportunity given them.

And they're drug-free. They don't even drink.

Delancey Street graduates have gone on to become lawyers, doctors, contractors, salespeople mechanics—you name it, they've achieved it.

Not all offenders are accepted into the Delancey Street program. Delancey Street graduates interview potential participants to see if they have the proper attitude. After acceptance, enrollees must stay at least two years and achieve a GED high school equivalency diploma. Most participants stay three or four years.

Delancey Street centers are run by residents—“managers” who have served an average of four prison terms. The program's motto is “Each one teach one.” And the life lessons stick because they are taught by peers, not folks from the outside.

Newcomers live in dorm-like rooms with eight or nine roommates and do a variety of daily maintenance chores. Participants move up the ladder, oversee new arrivals and eventually get their own room.

Enrollees work in Delancey Street's training businesses—a print shop, a moving and trucking operation, and a restaurant. About 2,000 participants are enrolled in the program nationwide.

Not one government penny funds Delancey Street. Private grants, corporate contributions and fund-raising drives finance the program.

Delancey Street President and CEO Mimi Silbert, who co-founded the organization, is a trustee of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit devoted to reducing poverty and inequality, and promoting opportunity and justice.

If Delancey Street succeeds here—and I see no reason why it shouldn't —why not set up similar models for the more than 40% of our kids who drop out of high school?

A Delancey Street-type center would be a good place to get them focused on their lives. Sounds like something local employers might want to support.