News
Ministry
Social Justice



Dominican Sr. Maureen O'Connell is pictured in this March 2, 2020, photo. She is the director of the Secretariat of Social Concerns for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston and oversees its social service agencies. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

Jo Ann Zuñiga

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Houston — June 10, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The founder of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston's program Angela House addressed a national webinar recently about what is needed most to help formerly incarcerated women successfully transition back to their community and families.

First is to understand "these are really just human beings and not evil-doers," said Dominican Sr. Maureen O'Connell, a social worker by training who also spent 13 years as a Chicago police officer and chaplain.

Speaking during the Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition webinar in May, she explained how other dioceses and community groups can provide similar guidance for the women, 85% of whom have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse in their lives.

"It all started for me when I was a volunteer chaplain in Gatesville [women's prison in Texas] and realized that the women who had been incarcerated two or three times basically needed a safe place to live when they left prison to get away from negative people, places and things," O'Connell said.

Since 2002, she has developed a program of interventions focused on trauma-informed counseling, addiction recovery, employment readiness, and personal and spiritual growth including residential living at Angela House in southeast Houston, free for women recently released from incarceration.

Now director of the archdiocese's Secretariat for Social Concerns, O'Connell introduced Sarah Mabry, a former inmate who is now a licensed dependency counselor and case manager at Angela House, and Teresa Doyle, the program psychotherapist.

"Many in society don't have patience with women who get in trouble and disconnect from family. But they need to heal first from physical and sexual abuse and deal with

self-medicating substance abuse and mental health issues," Doyle said.

"The kids may be happy to see her at first, but they've learned to survive without her so the client may come back saying, 'They were mean to me and didn't listen to me.' So we try to help them learn how to be a different kind of parent than in the past," she said.

Case manager Mabry shared her story: "I was a former client at Angela House seven and a half years ago. I got into drugs and alcohol at 16 and wound up in prison by 19. By 2012, I lost my business, was homeless and addicted. By 2013, I was back in prison.

"My mom gave me one last chance and picked me up when I was released at 3 a.m. and gave me a ride to Angela House."

Mabry testified that the program is different from many others she had tried. The personal and multipronged approach, "saved my life and I wanted to help others like I had been helped."

So in 2016, she went back to school to become a licensed counselor and ended up on the dean's list with a 3.86 GPA.

"Shame is a huge reason for relapse, but we give women back the ability to hope and have gratitude," Mabry said.

- - -

Zuñiga writes for the Texas Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.

Advertisement