

'I left my past in my past': Ex-offender tries to turn life around, with community's help



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To look at him, you wouldn't figure clean-cut, calm and soft spoken Carlton Harris for someone who once tried to shoot a fellow high school student. You wouldn't suspect that he started dealing drugs at age 12 and built a criminal resume that includes numerous assault convictions, plus more for drug dealing, robbery, burglary and bail jumping.

Harris doesn't like to dwell on all that. He's preoccupied with the future.

"When I got out of prison I was ready to become a productive member of society," he says, "to change my past ways. I know I can't take back everything that I've ever done, but I can work toward my future because I'm still young."

But the community isn't ready to forget about his past offenses — at least not yet.

Harris, 31, is one of 10 violent offenders put on notice three months ago as part of a program started by the Madison Police Department but carried out in no small measure by social service providers, nonprofits and faith-based groups willing to take on the challenge of helping chronic offenders succeed.

The "notification call-in," as police dubbed it, took place on Nov. 8 in a somber proceeding that had the feel of a criminal sentencing, something with which the offenders in attendance were all too familiar. One by one, an unprecedented array of law enforcement people — state and federal probation and parole agents, prosecutors, and representatives from the FBI, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and Dane County law enforcement — told them that this was their last chance.

The 10 men, deemed the worst chronic violent offenders in the community, were offered an array of services to give them every opportunity to succeed: drug and alcohol counseling, mental health treatment, job training, educational resources, help with housing. Or they could shun the offer, re-offend, and have the weight of the entire criminal justice system come down on them and send them back to prison for as long as possible. Either way, they would be watched, monitored by cops looking for any sign of a screw-up.

"The ultimate win is that somebody contributes to the community, changes their behavior," says

Lt. Tom Woodmansee, who heads the Madison Police Department's new Special Investigations Unit, a three-detective team whose sole purpose is to keep tabs on the offenders. "One way or another their behavior's going to change. If they compel us to put them in prison, their behavior's going to change. We're not going to have any more victims in the community."

Unlike some of the others at the call-in, Harris hadn't offended recently. He made the list because of a violent past.

On Nov. 25, 1997, Harris, an East High School student who was already on bail for dealing drugs, confronted another student in the school's parking lot after a basketball game. After insulting the other student's sister, Harris pulled a handgun from his pocket, held it to the neck of the other student and pulled the trigger. The gun jammed, and Harris tried to work the slide to clear the weapon. He raised the gun again to the other student's neck, pulled the trigger, and again the gun wouldn't fire.

At the south-side townhouse he shares these days with his new wife and her three kids, Harris is optimistic as he talks about the notification program, the opportunities it offers and how he wants to give back to the community that is helping him.

"Now I have five-and-a-half months left" on parole, he says, "and they asked me to do a video at the end to just tell about the program and how you can make it in the program — just a success story. So I agreed to do that."

Chatting about his turnaround at his home, Harris is easygoing and quick with a smile. But the smile evaporates when he's asked what was going through his mind when he pulled that trigger.

"I don't know," he shrugs. "I was involved in a lot of different stuff — gangs, drugs. I don't know, just a different mentality."

But that wasn't the end of it. Sentenced to 10 years for the East High incident, he served four. He moved to Minnesota and committed a string of offenses, including firing a gun at an armed security guard who had earlier bounced him from a St. Paul bar. He served time in Minnesota and in Wisconsin and was released last May.

During that last six-year prison stretch, he says he turned a corner.

"I just got tired," he says. "I didn't want to do it anymore. I was just done. I gave up all my old friends, everything. I just let everything go and basically left my past in my past."

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Chronic violent offenders, some of them racking up mind-boggling numbers of violent offenses, take up a lot of resources. You have to arrest them, jail them, prosecute them, put them through court, then incarcerate them. It's expensive. The group of offenders in the first notification alone were responsible for some 400 offenses.

As of right now, the group is for the most part staying out of trouble, which means they aren't clogging up the criminal justice system.

You give them a chance, the theory goes, help them with their basic needs and they might succeed, which provides the community with a net gain in terms of money and safety.

If they don't take the chance that's offered, you send them away for as long as possible so

they can offend no more.

The Madison Police Department plans to give offenders that chance, 10 at a time, three times a year in an effort to whittle away at the chronic offender population in a way that other communities have. The second group faces the music on March 20.

Of Harris' group, two are facing new charges and are likely headed back to prison if convicted. The rest, despite some minor offenses, are still in the community. About half of them are availing themselves of the services offered in the program.

But there are glitches to work out.

Currently, it's unclear who will spearhead the program. It was initiated by the Madison Police Department, but detectives working with the offenders say they don't want to be involved in coordinating services. Detective Cory Nelson, a member of the Special Investigations Unit, refers to the service provider side of the program as Community Against Violence, a title adopted for similar community efforts elsewhere. But as a functioning organization, police say, it's not clearly defined.

"Ideally, it should be a stand-alone organization that is the other half," says Nelson. "We have law enforcement and we have Community Against Violence."

For instance, in High Point, N.C., where the program has become a national model, the Community Against Violence group organizes services and even checks in on offenders, a job currently undertaken here by Madison police.

The community side of the Madison program is continually expanding the list of services available as it gears up for the second wave of offenders, says Angela Jones of the United Way of Dane County, who has been the main organizer of services so far.

"We don't want to overburden any one particular service provider," she says, "so we want to make sure that we have more than one service provider in any one area of service."

That will become more important as the police name the second group of offenders.

The city of Madison is also getting more involved. Nancy Rodriguez, a neighborhood liaison with the city's Community Development Division, recently began consulting with the various providers in an effort to organize the system.

"My goal is to get everyone on the same page in being strategic as to what services they provide," she says.

Barbara McKinney, an associate director of Madison-Area Urban Ministry who directs the organization's adult re-entry program, says the addition of Rodriguez fills a hole in the system. Her work will allow groups like the ministry, which provides a case worker to guide offenders through the system, to track which service providers the offenders are supposed to contact, whether they followed through and the result of their contact with the provider.

"We needed a person in that slot," McKinney says, "and we identified that by going through the first round."

While employment services from Centro Hispano, the Urban League of Greater Madison and the Vera Court Neighborhood Center are part of the package, nearly everyone agrees that a

lack of employment opportunities is one of the main sticking points.

"As much as we want to hook people up with jobs, because of people's backgrounds as ex-offenders there is going to be difficulty in creating buy-in from certain employers to hire ex-offenders, especially with the rap sheet they have," says Rodriguez.

Nelson says employers need to step up to the plate since as community members they have a stake in the success of the program.

"I'm kind of surprised, with Madison as big as it is, that we don't have some of the bigger companies stepping up and saying, 'Hey, we'll go out on a limb and give somebody a chance,'" he says. "The thing I'd look at is these guys are under extra scrutiny by the police department. I would think that as an offender, they're probably less likely to re-offend than anyone else on the street."

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For Harris, finding work wasn't the issue. It was finding work that paid enough to support his family.

"Since I've been out, I've always had a job," he says. "I've been blessed."

He's worked as a retail clerk, a security guard, a taxi driver and he's done a stint at a car wash, always trading up in pay or hours. But it's not enough, and recently he had to seek help to pay rent. His wife, Angela Harris, an old girlfriend he ran into shortly after his release, has three children, and she's out of work.

Just recently Harris landed a job for \$12.75 an hour packaging beef jerky for Jack Link's in New Glarus.

That's the best he's done yet, but he hopes to do better still. While at a halfway house last year, he enrolled in a free building trades class to learn carpentry, a skill he hopes to use to find better work in the summer. And he's enrolled in Ashford University out of Clinton, Iowa, working online to finish a degree in business administration. He's already two years in, having earned credits while in prison. He hopes one day to run his own business.

Their south-side townhouse is modest, but exceedingly tidy. Angela's daughters, Aniya, 4, and India, 11, are cheerful, well-behaved and act as though they've known Carlton Harris for years, not just months. She also has a 17-year-old son who lives at home. Carlton, who took to weightlifting in prison, works out with him regularly.

Angela says Carlton has taken an active role in parenting.

"It took a lot of stress off me now that I have help at home," she says.

But the family continues to struggle financially. Recently an income tax refund payment the family was counting on was diverted to Minnesota to pay child support Harris owed for a 7-year-old son he has there.

Asked if he might turn back to a life of crime if times got hard, he says he's "more than positive" that he never will.

"My wife helped me find God, and that's a major part of it," he says. "We pray together and this

is my main support system — her and the kids."

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But there's more to his support system.

Offenders seeking help from the program work through resource specialist Josh Clauer with the Madison-Area Urban Ministry, who specializes in high-risk clients. Clauer works to make sure they are getting help with residency, employment, treatment, education, transportation and other support. He also works with probation and parole agents who sometimes recommend services for those they are overseeing.

Clauer says he has worked with about five of the offenders and is currently actively helping two.

"Throughout the process, some guys have been arrested and some have gotten jobs," he says. "So one of the reasons some are not coming around as much, fortunately, is because they are employed."

Clauer says he can't comment on specific cases like Harris' because of confidentiality issues. But he points to housing and employment as the biggest challenges. He says he meets on a weekly basis with those who want his help to establish goals and find resources — like subsidies to help with back rent — to get them out of jams.

Then there's the law enforcement side. All the offenders are being watched closely by detectives. So when one of the offenders, 22-year-old Emon Hollins, allegedly victimized a woman in an episode of domestic violence, the detectives found out, even though the incident was never reported to police. They found out when they talked to the woman during a routine check on Hollins. Then they heard that he was threatening the woman from jail, which also would likely have escaped police notice had detectives not been paying special attention to his phone activity.

Hollins and another offender in the group, Eric Alston, who has also been charged in a domestic violence incident, face new charges and are likely headed back to prison if convicted.

"The crimes that are going to get them thrown back in prison are crimes of violence, domestic abuse and drug dealing," Nelson says. "Those are the big three."

Lesser offenses won't get them thrown back in prison.

"We realize that it's unrealistic to expect that they're going to go to prison for six or seven years on a possession of THC case," says Nelson.

He was referring to a recent situation in which one of the offenders was cited for marijuana possession during a traffic stop. The detectives saw it as a chance to get the man's attention.

"We found out the next day and we were able to bump those charges up from citations to misdemeanors to hold this person more accountable," says Detective Samantha Kellogg, who works with Nelson. "That's the extra scrutiny they're being subjected to."

Nelson says the unit is working closely with probation and parole agents, and detectives are even accompanying agents as they visit offenders.

"They are held accountable for minor stuff," he says. "So if they're late for curfew they might

get thrown in jail for a night or two by their probation agents to remind them that we're taking this seriously."

Lance Wiersma, the community corrections chief for the south-central region of the state, says his agents are treating the offenders as they would any high-risk cases, making extra contacts with not only the offenders, but also with family members, employers and treatment providers. And when they screw up, the agents come down hard.

"With any high-risk person, effective supervision calls for quick and immediate sanctions when they engage in negative behavior," he says.



The practice of targeting a community's worst offenders dates back to the 1990s, when it was employed in Boston to successfully reduce an alarming youth homicide rate. Since then it has been adopted by some 100 localities, most notably High Point, N.C., where police have seen a dramatic decrease in recidivism.

But officials have taken different approaches.

In High Point, for instance, undercover detectives build cases against the offenders before calling them in for notification. When the offenders arrive, prosecutors have the charges against them in hand.

"The prosecutor says, 'All I have to do is sign this piece of paper and you're probably going to prison for 25 years,'" says Mike Scott, founder of the University of Wisconsin Law School's Center for Problem Oriented Policing, which lent support to Madison's effort. "Madison doesn't quite have that sword of Damocles over their heads. Instead, it's saying, 'Stop offending or we're going to start building a strong case against you,' which is a slightly weaker threat."

The center keeps tabs on police trends nationwide and is a clearinghouse for law enforcement research and how it is used in the field. Scott says his group has also provided student researchers to the Madison Police Department, resulting in confirmation that a disproportionate amount of local crime is committed by a relatively small number of offenders. That led to a discussion about what to do with chronic offenders, out of which the current effort grew.

For the violent offenders program to work, Scott says, it needs to shatter two widely held perceptions among criminals. One is that law enforcement won't follow through on the threat.

"Most habitual offenders, they don't really believe that anything all that bad is going to happen to them," he says, "because they're committing so many crimes and they don't get caught for that many. When they do get caught they do a couple of years in the penitentiary then they're back to doing what they do."

The other is that they "don't believe that anybody's really going to offer them some significant help."

Watching some offenders succeed and others get stiff prison sentences changes the way offenders perceive the program, Scott says. "You have to turn both perceptions around."

Harris says that in his case, it's a moot point. He came out of prison determined to straighten out his life.

And he's won the confidence of the cops.

"He's a guy that's going through school, who's trying to do the right thing," says Nelson. "He's made the right choice in that he's trying to follow the path to become a productive member of the community."

Nelson says Harris has gone above and beyond the call in playing by the rules. He once even called to tell Nelson that he got a ticket for not wearing a seat belt.

"I've been a cop for 23 years," says Nelson. "I've never had an offender call me up and tell me he had a police contact."

Harris has also made a point of attending weekly peer group sessions and has made a couple of presentations, talking about his past, his current challenges and his hopes for the future — something he says he wants to do more of in an effort to keep at-risk teens out of trouble.

To show their appreciation for his efforts, the detectives chipped in at Christmas to buy Harris a ham.

The appreciation goes both ways.

"It's shocking to me because I've been in the system basically all my life and I've never, ever had people do the things they're doing for me now," Harris says.

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