

SANDIA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

News From The SPC Volunteer Front

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Parole Empowerment Partners

What happens to a young person who is paroled out of a juvenile facility in New Mexico? Adjusting to life on the outside is hard after being locked up. Half the time, that young person ends up back in the juvenile or adult prison system. Our national and local current economic conditions, and the increased stresses on individuals, families, and communities, only increase the difficulty of returning to productive life.

Parole Empowerment Partners (PEP), an affiliate of the New Mexico Conference of Churches, is working to change this grim scenario, one young person at a time, by forming teams of caring people from congregations to walk with youths through the difficult months of parole and maybe even a little beyond. The partnership begins before the youth is released and continues through the parole period.

PEP was established as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in March 2007, specifically to address the needs of paroled youths through mentoring teams. In its first two years PEP served 50 youths in some capacity, with 36 actually assigned to mentoring teams in Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, and Elephant Butte. Of these 50, 35 are Hispanic, 10 are Anglo, 3 are African American, and 2 are Native American, with 39 of them male and 11 female. Sixty volunteer mentors from 25 religious organizations have participated, some with multiple youths.

PEP team typically works with a youth for six to eight months, helping him or her formulate positive goals and work toward them. The PEP team is like a cloud of witnesses cheering the youth on, people who say, "You can do it. I believe in you." The team approach has many advantages:

- With two or more mentors, a youth has a greater chance of connecting with a particular adult in the group, while the others play supporting roles.
- The group dynamics allow one adult to interact directly with the youth while the other observes, notes nonverbal cues, and suggests alternatives.
- A mentoring team offers multiple adult role models of varying ages, and it allows a youth to observe healthy interaction of adults as they model consideration and respect that may be lacking in the youth's own experience.
- People are more likely to enlist as a team member than as a solo mentor, especially for a youth in

trouble with the law.

- Use of teams allows women (who often outnumber men as mentor volunteers) to be matched with young men on parole as part of a team.
- By having teams, PEP can require that two or more mentors from the team be present at any meeting with a youth who is under 18 years of age, providing safeguards for both youths and adults.

The team approach lets people from the same congregation work together, helping a youth through that difficult and crucial adjustment to life back in the community. (The congregation also benefits, as stronger bonds are created among members.) PEP staff give careful training and support to each individual and team throughout the process.

Sandia Presbyterian Church already has some active mentors, and PEP is seeking additional ones, as the needs of



PEP program participant, Alfonso, meets with NM Lieutenant Governor, Diane Denish

the community are greater than existing resources.

Individual volunteers are combined into teams, so a pre-formed group is not needed in order to sign up. The time commitment is typically one hour/week plus a phone call

or two, although mentors can choose to involve youths in special activities that frequently have been lacking in their lives, such as hikes in the Sandias, trips to museums or zoo, even a first-ever birthday party.

PEP representatives and SPC mentors will present a Sunday Forum on PEP at Sandia Presbyterian Church on **Sunday, October 18, at 9:30 a.m.** Please mark your calendars and come learn about this hands-on opportunity.

To learn more about this presentation or about PEP, please contact Linda Hawley at 856-5040 x108 (W), 856-5040 (H), or spc_wm@sandiapres.org.

"In response to our Lord's charge to 'Go and make disciples of all nations' and 'Take care of my sheep', our mission is to provide the people of Sandia Presbyterian Church an avenue to serve in humanitarian efforts and evangelistic outreach in local and world communities."