



Don S. Wright of The RECOVER Project in Greenfield is opening a community workshop in the Webb building on Hope Street. Here he is with a table being refinished. Recorder/Paul Franz

Former inmate sets up community workshop as outreach program

By CHRIS CURTIS
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GREENFIELD — At 58, Don Wright has resolved to become a productive member of the community, after about five years in state prison and six months in the Franklin County House of Correction. It doesn't sound it, but five years was a last-chance light sentence, he said.

Wright is taking advantage of the judge's decision not to sentence him to the 15 years he might have served by engaging in a multitude of efforts to help others out of addiction, notably a drop-in center and community workshop he has half built and hopes to launch in the spring.

"I wasted a lot of time. I spent so many years in prison, wasting time, I spent several years in addiction, wasting time, so my

last time around in Franklin County (House of Correction) I was in a treatment program, and they brought programs that helped me identify some of the significant behaviors that caused me to relapse, caused me to commit crimes and by being involved in those programs, I got the message on what I needed to do," Wright said.

Wright left the Franklin County House of Correction a year ago in February for the sheriff's then-new transitional housing program in the Winslow Apartments and has since returned to South Deerfield but spends much of his time in

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Greenfield. Not everyone who knows him knows about his criminal record, Wright said, and discussing his past publicly isn't something he does lightly. In the year since his release he is becoming known for the right things, he said, rather than the false checks and theft Amherst police knew him for in the decade he was actively addicted to crack cocaine.

The stigma of prison time is plainly visible to any prospective employer running a criminal background check, and he thinks it may be responsible for his difficulty finding a job, or it may be that

the jobs aren't out there. Wright is therefore taking an alternative approach to productivity, focusing on others. He is a member of The RECOVER Project peer-to-peer addiction recovery group on Federal and Osgood streets, and is pushing the peer-to-peer model in a different direction on his own.

Wright and friends have set up a community workshop space in rented rooms on the top floor of the Webb Building on Hope Street. The workshop is one half of what he plans as a two-part symbiotic outreach program. In the Webb space, he has a room partitioned off for sanding and refinishing used furniture to sell online, a lounge area and an office space with laptops donated by a Greenfield business. The plan is that the workshop and a handyman service will support

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itself and a drop-in center on Main Street, if he can clear the hurdle of the renters' initial first and last months' rent and security deposit.

"I spent the summer watching people look for things to do, and I myself have been a handyman for a long time, and I began to just get things donated to me like this table," Wright said, indicating a recently varnished dining room table.

With the idea of creating a work space for himself and others where they could connect those who need it with community resources, he began the workshop late last year with help from a donor who covered the initial down payment.

"This community workshop at 76 Hope St. has come out of one person paying first-last-security, so it's been three months now that I've held on paying the rent," he said. He has done that by selling furniture he refurbished over the summer and by taking odd jobs like building a backyard chicken coop and raking leaves with a few friends from the RECOVER Project. "A part of this process is about recovery, working on one's individual recovery, as we work on something to do for ourselves and other individuals," he said.

With no heating, winter is down-time for the workshop/drop-in center, and Wright is trying to establish a year-round drop-in center by Veterans Mall on Main Street.

"Like most drop-in centers we're looking to help people find the community resources that are available, and a lot of people who hang out down-

Beyond money to launch the second-floor Main Street office space, Wright is seeking donation of a van as a community resource.

town in Greenfield sometimes do not access all the resources that there are in the community," Wright said. "For a guy like myself, I came to the community and I just see so many resources."

Resources like the RECOVER Project, ServiceNet and Clinical and Support Options, all of which offer help with addiction.

"These places are hard to navigate when you're on drugs, because your patience is very small," Wright said. Knowing people who know what help is available could, for instance, help a drug user look for a bed in a detox, then find a ride to a distant detox during the brief openings when a bed is available in the over-booked facilities.

"My goal is to meet people where they're at," people at a stage of recovery referred to as "pre-contemplation," he said.

"Am I happy with the way my life is today or am I honestly thinking about changing that? Pre-contemplation is about that, but then what do I do, where is the support if I decide someday that I want to change my life, who's going to help support that?"

Wright said he has found that support and wants to help others find the same. "Drugs isolate people, he said, and that makes them harder to

leave. Now, Wright is intent on turning his hand to helping people out of that isolation.

Marisa Hebble, director of the Greenfield-based Opioid Task Force, said she wasn't familiar with Wright's drop-in center plan but she said the concept is something the area needs more of. "In general, we do need more outreach with active users," Hebble said.

Wright jokes that if he's going to be a con man, it will be for this, and he is working hard to find donors to launch his plans. Beyond money to launch the second-floor Main Street office space — he thinks the workshop can carry the \$350 rent and he is looking for business support and grants — he is seeking donation of a van as a community resource. Holding a job and making sometimes court-mandated appointments is a serious problem for people without vehicles and sometimes licenses in a rural county. Wright said he has seen people lose jobs because they simply couldn't make it to work.

Meanwhile, Wright can often be found at the RECOVER Project. He plans to begin posting fliers for the workshop/drop-in center soon, and can be reached at 413-387-9664 or wrightdon@gmail.com.

"I still don't have a real job, but what I do have is the support of the community, which has helped me create the community workshop," Wright said. "I want to give back to the people that I see every day, the people that I know that need support the same as I need support every day."

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