

## Introducing Returning Citizen ~ Ernest Rice-Bey

Ernest Rice-Bey is the Program Coordinator at Our Brothers' Keepers in East St. Louis. In 1976 Ernest was recruited into a gang called the Metros. He went to prison for the first time at the age of seventeen. He would eventually end up serving two more prison terms for armed robbery and armed violence.

Ernest reflects, "I was trapped in a delusionary world of drugs and headed down a path of destruction. I thought I was in control but soon I discovered I was not. Then one day I was blinded by a great light, like St. Paul. I was humbled and started to view my circumstances from a different perspective. I began to change slowly and methodically. God began to show me what the plan was for my life. Today I am a transformed individual. I work as a community activist, a USA Level 1 boxing coach and as the Program Coordinator at Our Brothers' Keepers."

Ernest experienced the paralyzing and life-threatening effects of the trauma he endured from going into prison, living in prison, and returning from prison back to the community. As a Returning Citizen he assists other Returning Citizens to make a successful transition back to the community.



## A Holistic Approach to Reentry for Returning Citizens

Almost everyone in prison ministry is talking "re-entry" these days. After decades of unacceptable recidivism rates we've belatedly come to see that attention must be paid to that critical time of transition from incarceration to freedom. Even some of the more enlightened corrections departments are realizing that when a sentence is completed, the returning citizen needs something more than a bus ticket home and the parole officer's phone number.

"Halfway houses" are not something new, but there have never been enough of them to meet the needs of the growing numbers of parolees. Heroic attempts that vary widely in scope and quality have been made to provide transitional housing and a variety of services, however they all are insufficiently funded.

Our Brothers' Keepers addresses this need in Southern Illinois, an area rife with poverty, unemployment, infrastructure decay, and certainly the "revolving door" of crime and punishment. It recognizes the futility of recycling human subjects from a badly broken prison system into a dysfunctional home environment and back again. Where does one start restoring all the failed relationships of people and their institutions?

As its name indicates, OBK believes that it begins by accepting the responsibility of caring for one another at the human level. Unlike the biblical Cain who turned the other way in the aftermath of crime, OBK is committed to being the welcoming "innkeeper" who provides a safe haven for the weary travelers of criminal justice. Following the highest principles of Restorative Justice, we strive to create—as much as possible under one roof—a holistic and therapeutic environment to foster the family-life and good citizenship that are essential to successful re-entry.

### OBK in Numbers

100+

Current OBK Clients

95%

Clients below the Federal Poverty Level

75%

Percentage of clients who attend Life & Job Skills classes.

3.0%

Only 3% estimated rate of recidivism

## Mike's Corner



Michael Schuette – Program Director

As the number of returning citizens served by the OBK Reentry Services Center continues to grow, so does the need for more staff and lay volunteers. More staff and volunteers, while important to many areas of OBK, could especially be used to ensure proper implementation of the Multi-Step Reintegration Process. This system is used to better assess the needs and track the progress of those who OBK serves. This multi-step process includes; 1) Intake and Relationship Building, 2) Assessment of Needs, and 3) Goal Development. OBK uses a computer software program to intake and track the progress of OBK clients. As clients work to meet their short and long-term goals, the tracking program documents their progress at the 3, 6, and 9 month review periods. Tracking clients progress also allows OBK to provide documentation of that progress to clients to use in whatever way necessary in order to have a successful transition back to their family and community.

committed • service • stabilization • support • confidence

***“OBK is committed to finding pathways to success for as long as the client wants to stay the course. Sometimes the challenges appear impossible, especially if substance abuse or mental health issues are present, but working together produces some pretty darn good solutions. Prayer is a powerful weapon too. Part of the success is due to the fact that OBK simply will not accept failure.”***

**~ Mike Schuette**  
(Program Director)

DIGNITY  
HOUSING  
TRANSITION  
COMMUNITY  
EMPLOYMENT  
REINTEGRATION  
SOCIAL SUPPORT  
RESPECT FOR ALL  
CAPACITY TO GROW  
GOAL DEVELOPMENT  
RELATIONSHIP BUILDING  
RESOURCE ASSESSMENTS  
SOLUTIONS TO CRITICAL NEEDS

## How OBK Came To Be

Our Brothers' Keepers is dedicated to the full integration of formerly incarcerated persons, otherwise known as “returning citizens”, and assisting them in attaining productive citizenship by participation in reentry services. OBK came into existence when after years of dedicated service inside Southern Illinois prisons, several prison ministers decided more can be done to help reduce recidivism rates. OBK grew out of the dreams of these prison ministers, who through their work inside prisons became aware that prison ministry is not enough. They took action to help those released from pri-

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son avoid returning to prison. Retired Bishop Stanley Schlarman and Fr. Christian Reuter, O.F.M., recognized the need for a reentry center in St. Clair County. On October 17, 2013, a group of about 25 prison ministers, social service providers and caring citizens met at the Shrine

of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois, to begin the first stages of planning. The planning committee was committed to an ecumenical approach and before long several churches, community agencies and non-profits began a dialogue about how best to serve returning citizens recently released from prison. OBK was incorporated in 2014 and received tax exempt status in 2015. OBK now has a set of by-laws, a Policy Handbook, a Board of Directors, a small but dedicated staff, volunteers, a Reentry Center, and is currently serving over 100 clients.

Clients' basic needs are assessed during the OBK Intake Interview

OBK then refers clients with special needs to the proper area programs.

OBK has established strong relationships with many local programs to ensure clients' needs are met in a comprehensive way.

Partner programs deal with; housing, jobs, mental health & substance abuse treatment, connecting to faith groups & mentors, dealing with family matters.

## Literacy is a Root Cause of Unemployment, Poverty and Incarceration: The Staggering Numbers

Research studies going back to the late 1960s show that literacy is one of the main causes of unemployment, poverty, and incarceration in Illinois. OBK seeks to address this because they know that reading impairment can be quickly & permanently fixed, and that in order for their clients to be able to obtain and keep a job, they must be able to read.

80%

80% of inmates who leave prison without learning how to read will return to prison.

It is imperative that **returning citizens can read at a 5th grade level or above** to decrease recidivism.

70%

IDOC has a current inmate population of some 40,000. Some 28,000 (70%) are reading impaired.

Depending upon how many classes a client takes per week, on average **OBK increases their reading skills one grade level per month.**

12%

Only 12% of inmates who learn to read while in prison repeat offend.

Upon intake, OBK staff test ALL returning citizens to ascertain if literacy advancement is a need of the individual. Testing takes 5-10 mins, and if needed, an appointment is scheduled with a lesson instructor.

97%

OBK can help 97% of our reading impaired clients learn to read.

OBK encourages both clients and volunteers to assist tutoring returning citizens in need of help with reading skills.

## More About OBK's Literacy Classes...

- OBK tests each client's literacy level during the Intake Interview.
- Clients who test below Grade 7 are admitted to OBK Literacy Classes.
- OBK Literacy Classes advance readers up to Grade 7.
- Research shows that clients with at least Grade 7 reading skills are able to get and keep good jobs.
- OBK does continue to work with clients who want to advance farther with 1 on 1 tutors.
- However, clients are strongly encouraged to move on to other educators, for instance Southwestern Illinois College (SWIC), in order to benefit from full class participation.

## Our Mission

Our Brothers' Keepers of Southern Illinois (OBK) is an ecumenical faith-based organization dedicated to the full inclusion of former individuals in custody (returning citizens), into St. Clair County, Illinois communities.



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Please bookmark (<https://smile.amazon.com/ch/47-2977358>) and support us every time you shop and ask your family, friends, and employees to bookmark it also so that all eligible shopping will benefit the mission of OBK!

#### OBK Board of Directors

- President: Peter Cerneka
- Vice-President: Lizanne K. Young
- Secretary: Louis F. Slapshak
- Treasurer: Jesse P. Gurley III
- Members: Julie M. Orlet, Rick Crosby

#### OBK Staff

- Program Director: P. Michael Schuette
- Program Coord: Ernest Rice-Bey
- Outreach Specialist: Frederick James
- Operations Manager: John Laker

OBK assists returning citizens in attaining productive citizenship through an array of reentry services, including counseling, life and employment skills training, and referrals to supportive services in order to build community, family & faith-based relationships. OBK reaches out to all social and human services providers, faith communities, government agencies, and businesses to help in the process of full inclusion.



## Ways To Support Our Brothers' Keepers of Southern Illinois

As a 501 (c) 3 tax exempt organization, OBK provides transitioning services to returning citizens as they rejoin their family and community. Your donation will give individuals coming out of prison a second chance to lead productive lives.

- ~Learn more about the work of OBK and contribute online at: [www.obkministry.org](http://www.obkministry.org)
- ~Or mail your contribution to:  
OBK, P.O. Box 398, East St. Louis, IL 62202



- ~Like us on **Facebook** and spread the word about our important work: <https://www.facebook.com/obkministry>
- ~Schedule a visit to the OBK Reentry Center in East St. Louis, contact: **Program Director, Mike Schuette** (618) 271-7821 or email: [obkpmsschuette@gmail.com](mailto:obkpmsschuette@gmail.com)

## OBK Volunteer Opportunities

OBK is in need of volunteers who can provide specific services as requested by parole, probation and half-way houses.

OBK offers Life Skills classes addressing trauma, financial planning, learning how to communicate in today's world (smartphones, social media, etc), learning ways to bring reconciliation and healing. As well as Job Skills classes, such as, resume building, job searching and applying.

If you have an interest in serving these needs OBK can provide the training required and also provide a flexible schedule. Please contact **OBK Program Director, Mike Schuette: (618)271-7821** email: [obkpmsschuette@gmail.com](mailto:obkpmsschuette@gmail.com)

## Our Vision

We aspire to be an organization that honors the talents and contributions of all its stakeholders, including clients, employees, volunteers, donors, and vendors. As we assist returning citizens in finding real solutions to their critical needs, no one is left behind: we all progress together, care for the welfare of each other, and help each other grow in personal maturity and independence.