

## Our Brothers' Keepers of Southern Illinois



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## Moving Mountains – Easier Said Than Done

Much easier said than done, OBK helps returning citizens transition from incarceration back to their families and communities. In most cases, this means OBK endeavors to do the impossible, to change lives forever...to move mountains! At the same time OBK is a great opportunity for those who care to help others in need, and a wonderful blessing for returning citizens.

This program is based upon a recently released University of Illinois study indicating all returning citizens have two traumas they must address else they are likely to repeat offend:

- 1) The trauma of incarceration (if the inmate is not “broken” upon incarceration, the prison will make sure they will be before release); AND
- 2) The trauma of returning home to their families (to a wife or children who do not know or trust them) and communities (who prefer the returning citizens go live somewhere else).

The University studies indicate that prison hurts in a lot of ways, and that those incarcerated sometimes push others away to protect themselves from that pain. Some avoid relationships, grieving, and emotional self-care to avoid feeling helpless, or armor themselves with distance and indifference to keep from being vulnerable. Although the returning citizens cannot address these traumas on their own, with help they can begin to heal and re-establish important relationships.

To successfully “move mountains”, OBK Life and Job Skill Classes:

- 1) Use suggestions from the University study.
- 2) Involve OBK returning citizen staff who have successfully addressed their personal traumas.
- 3) Incorporate Faith perspectives; and
- 4) Utilize some of the most wholesome human relationship stories and teamwork movies we could find.

### Our core principles in these regards are:

**A: NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND.** Our classes are small. There is no reason to go forward unless we are all ready to go forward. Every individual must contribute and share their story, their situation, their fears, their needs. If someone is not contributing, not talking...then they better be praying.

**B. HAVE DEEP PERSONAL DISCUSSIONS.** With faith, with friends, with honesty, with hope...we help each other to become aware of and learn how to get through the traumas of imprisonment and traumas of coming back to their families and communities. We make sure everyone

understands that if the traumas are not addressed, most of the returning citizens will struggle to secure gainful employment...and will likely give up and repeat offend...and go back to prison.

**C. WE WILL NOT SET UP OUR CLIENTS TO FAIL:** Since the late 1960s studies have confirmed that reading impairment is the #1 root cause of unemployment, poverty and incarceration. To train and assist clients to obtain employment without addressing literacy issues they may have is heartless and unconscionable. We literacy test 100% of our clients to discern needs in these regards, and then help them address their literacy needs. We can usually help clients advance 5 grades in 6 months! Although all clients go thru our Life Skill classes, clients cannot go thru our job skill programs until they have addressed their literacy to be at minimum grade 6.

**We also have professional and experienced volunteer class educators** who assist clients with the following classes: job skills, money management, iPhone and computer communication skills, career choices and job skills, and job resume/application, interview skills and job searching.

Just as important, we have an extensive list of community resources that we partner with to help our clients' other needs. These resources include assistance with housing, utilities, and rent; mental and physical health; legal aid and parole/probation expungement; hygiene, food and clothing; substance abuse; counseling; family and emergency assistance; etc.

Some concerns we have in these regards:

- Housing is our #1 St. Clair County problem. St. Clair County does not allow individuals with a record to get into low income housing. Of course, 100% of our returning citizens have a record. This means our returning citizens (who usually have little money), must get housing they cannot likely afford.
- Most employers do not hire individuals who have a criminal record. Although the State of Illinois has offered "bonding" for returning citizens to protect employers, there are many employers who do not want to take risks.

We have the following volunteer needs:

- a) Literacy tutors or tutor trainers
- b) Computer Skills Teachers
- c) Job Assisting and Searching
- d) Qualified previously incarcerated to assist OBK client intakes
- e) COVID-19 cleaning staff

We welcome volunteers from local churches and community colleges.

**WARNING: Rest assured, moving mountains and helping a returning citizen's life change is a serious endeavor with significant ramifications. Everyone's life will likely be changed for the better. We owe it to ourselves to somehow, someday get involved.**