

# Fort Smith organization helps people recently released from prison

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**FORT SMITH, Ark.** — Nearly half of Arkansans released from prison return within three years, according to the state Division of Corrections.

Felicia Lyons is the founder and CEO of Chance for Change, a nonprofit organization based in Fort Smith that focuses on helping people reenter society after being incarcerated.

"It opens doors and opportunities. It helps you find employment. It helps you find housing. It tells you what your next steps are. It gives you the know-how to do those things that you are being required to do," Lyons said. "Because if you don't do those things, guess what? You go right back through that revolving door."

More than 150 attended the organization's first expo at St. James Missionary Baptist Church in Fort Smith on Wednesday.

The event provided multiple resources for people with criminal records.

"You see that they're still people, just people that have come across and had challenges in their lives, and we've all had challenges, they may just look different," Lyons said.

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Attendees were able to learn about topics ranging from furthering their education to finding employment. An amnesty program allowed for people with arrest warrants for unpaid court costs and fines to schedule court dates without being arrested and jailed. The Center for Legal Service in Arkansas educated people on how to have criminal records sealed or expunged.

Adria Smith told 40/29 News that a felony drug conviction from 2017 continues to make it difficult for her to support her family.

"You know, young and dumb, made some mistakes and I'm trying to find a job. I can't get one, so I need to get my record expunged so maybe I can get a better job," Smith said. "And like I tell all the young people I run into today, make good choices. Because the choices I made at your age are kicking me in my butt right now. I'm telling you it's hard."

Crawford County Sheriff Daniel Perry was a guest panelist at the event.

Perry told 40/29 News that approximately 70-75% of inmates inside the county detention center are repeat offenders.

"We had to come up with something to start looking at and say, okay, let's fix this problem. Let's get them back established in the community. And so that's what we're working towards now, rebuilding

their lives instead of — have a nice day and we'll see in a couple of months," Perry said. "We've been working with a lot of businesses in Sebastian and Crawford County that want to hire these guys. Because honestly, their work ethic, most of these guys that are in jail now, they want to get out and reestablish their self."