

## **Nonprofit on a mission to help ex-offenders**

### **Blue Jacket aids former prisoners with jobs, training**

By *Gina Potthoff*

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The road for any nonprofit organization is rarely easy, so the fact that Blue Jacket Inc., is still running - even expanding - after four years is significant. Still, Executive Director Tony Hudson has big plans for the nonprofit, which helps ex-offenders transition to civilian life.

Blue Jacket, 3702 S. Clinton St., opened as a spin-off of Allen County Community Corrections in 2005. Backed by meager grants allowing for little flexibility, Hudson and his "one and a half" employees ran the free information sessions and \$15 30-hour training programs that led to graduation and, it was hoped, job offers for ex-prisoners.

"Trust is absolutely everything. We want people who are willing to acknowledge 'Yes, I made a mistake,'" Hudson said. "It's about trust in themselves, not just in society. We work to fix those underlying issues."

After receiving better grant funding and a \$10,000 grant from the city of Fort Wayne two weeks ago, Hudson is certain Blue Jacket is in for the long haul.

"We're not struggling anymore," he said. "We've stuck with being transparent financially. We've gone down to the bare bone, and we've been very efficient that way."

Because of the economic downturn, Blue Jacket had to scrap its construction initiative started in 2007, refocusing its purpose as a temporary employment service that offers graduate assistance for life.

"We are there for life. We just request they give five hours of service a year," said mentoring coordinator Jill Leal.

Blue Jacket started a mentor program two weeks ago for one-on-one interaction and support. Leal said 20 clients are already signed up and mentors are excited to get started. Mentors must be 25 years old, complete one hour of orientation, three hours of training, commit to six months of service and meet with clients four times a month.

At least 60 area companies employ Blue Jacket graduates, compared to about 15 two years ago. The number of graduates has increased from year to year. Eighty-four graduated in 2006, 196 in 2007, 287 in 2008 and more than 400 are expected to graduate in 2009, Hudson said.

Now eight employees strong, the agency has outgrown its 4,000-square-foot building, using basement space next door to house its clothing room, where volunteers sort clothes that Blue Jacket offers graduates for job interviews.

Though Blue Jacket's strategic plan won't be completed until the end of September, Hudson said his 10-year plan would be to bring back the construction initiative, acquire more grant money and post a re-institution rate of less than 8 percent. The national rate of offenders sent back to prison is 60 percent. About 1,200 prisoners a year end up back in Allen County Jail, he said