

April 2014



Issue # 4

The STAR Project's **Mission** is to provide the guidance and support that will successfully re-integrate ex-offenders into the community as contributing members of society.

Our **Vision** is to increase community safety and reduce recidivism by assisting persons to successfully transition from incarceration to the community.

## New Year, New STAR Project



The first three months of 2014 have been very eventful for STAR. One of the biggest changes has been a move into a new office, located at 33 S Palouse, Walla Walla.

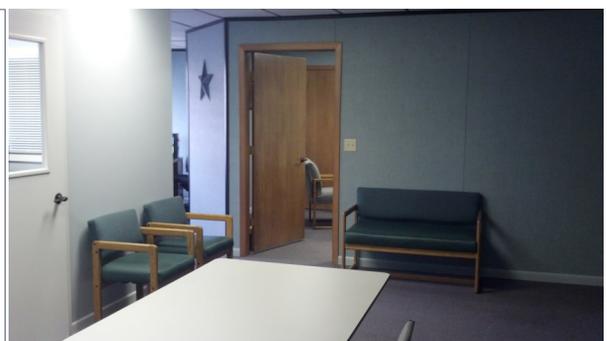
This space provides offices for confidential client interviews, has room for group meetings and allows staff a comfortable, secure environment in which to work. Still in the works is a small area for clients to take online classes for Food Handler certification, employment applications and complete financial aid and college admittance forms.

While the new office meets many of STAR's needs, it does not have space or the equipment needed for weekly group dinners. Pioneer Methodist Church as kindly agreed to allow STAR to continue to use its dining facilities for this important support.

Along with our new space we have updated our look with a brand new logo designed by graphic designer Kristina Adams. Keep your eyes peeled for our new website as well.

Please join staff, clients, and board members between **2pm and 5pm on April 25th** for an informal open house/reception. Light fare will be served that has been prepared by two clients currently enrolled in the Culinary Arts program at Walla Walla Community College.

We look forward to having you stop in for a nibble, a chat, and a chance to see this lovely space.



## A Long and Painful Journey: SSDI



*MRI depicting the severe spinal pinching that characterizes lumbar stenosis. Courtesy of University of Florida Dept. of Neuro-surgery*

Spinal Stenosis is a condition where the disks in the spine degenerate leaving the spinal chord pinched. It often results in pain, numbness, and muscle weakness in the lower back and legs as well bladder and bowel control issues. Imagine experiencing these conditions on a daily basis in combination with PTSD and general anxiety. Your ability to find and hold a job, maintain stable housing and generally take care of yourself would be severely impaired. You hang on by utilizing the services of the Christian Aid Center and eventually the STAR Project.

Now, imagine spending two years in that daily pain and precarious living situation while also trying to convince experts and a judge that what you are experiencing is real and serious enough to justify receiving SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) so that you can take care of yourself. This entire two year time span your income is only \$197 a month. As the pièce de résistance imagine that you have felony which can have a prejudicial effect on everyone from potential employers to doctors and judges.

Marsha had SSDI for spinal stenosis before her incarceration (she applied 3 times before she got it the first time.) She had been put to work in the prison kitchen which had aggravated her condition. However, she could not prove this to the judge in her SSDI case because of incomplete health records kept by the prison. She then had to reapply upon her release. That was in December of 2011. She spent the next two years in appeals. Fighting conflicting doctors reports and trying to get DSHS to approve the funding to get a new spinal MRI from the only spine specialist in town to overrule the previous doctor who had told her that her condition was "not that bad."

Finally, two years later, in January of 2014 the judge made a favorable ruling on the basis of her mental health diagnosis that gave her the time and funds to get her new MRI which confirmed her stenosis. She had sought approval from DSHS for a course of steroids to treat the pain that approval was denied. However she has now started a course of physical therapy and hopes that she will be approved for steroid treatments in the future.

The entire course of her appeal process left her scared and feeling invalidated by the people constantly denying the reality of her experience. However the support of STAR Project and her reliance on a higher power helped her make it through the process. Reflecting positively on such a painful process Marsha says that she had learned perseverance. "If you really feel like something's going on in there just keep going."

Now that she has been approved for her SSDI claim Marsha is looking forward to being more independent. She is especially excited to finally be able to go to Idaho with her son and grandchild to visit her family who she hasn't seen in 30 years.

## Women in Transition - by Laura Mote, MSW

Women are often incarcerated due to non-violent offenses including: substance abuse, property crimes, and public order offenses. According to a 2010 study women are more likely than men to commit these poverty linked crimes due to marginalization or criminal influence from their intimate partner. Even worse is the fact that many of these women will be reincarcerated within three years of release for the *same* poverty linked crimes they originally committed. How do we break this cycle?

Successful reentry is often measured by achieving stability in reintegration with family, friends and community, employment, and maintenance of mental and physical health. Women continue to be marginalized after they exit prison because they remain uneducated, often times are a single parent, lack job resources, and on top of all of that have the stigma of a criminal conviction to hinder the stability process. In order for a transition program to work for women it must take these facts into consideration. First and



foremost, a reentry program's main goal should be to assist clients in finding clean and sober **child friendly** housing. When mothers remain separated from their children due to a lack of stable supportive housing, the parent-child relationship continues to be strained the building of mother child relationship is stalled. STAR Project has directly attempted to address this issue by working to found the Blue Mountain Women's Oxford House. This residence provides supportive clean and sober group living.

The second step towards stability for formerly incarcerated women with children is to begin building parenting skills. Many women, especially from eastern Washington, do not see their children while incarcerated because there are only two women's prisons in the state and both are on the west side of the mountains. The 2009 study revealed that upon exit from prison women often have a strained relationship with their children due to their past behavior and inability to nurture a relationship during their incarceration. Therefore the deliberate building of parenting skills has the opportunity to promote positive changes in reintegrating families.

Next assisting women in securing childcare is essential in the reentry process to provide the parent with the time and flexibility to be able to continue on the path of stability in attending substance abuse and mental health classes, looking for and gaining employment, and/or obtaining an education. As so many women are originally incarcerated for substance abuse related crimes following through with treatment for substance abuse and mental health services is paramount to gaining stability. In conjunction with school and worker retraining services childcare gives women the opportunity to develop the skills that will keep them out of the system again.



Finally, for women to gain stability and successful reentry positive social support is imperative. Social support such as the STAR Project's mentoring program and weekly group support model healthy behaviors such as responsibility, communication skills, and goal setting, as well as providing a sense of community. A mindfulness based support group has helped to reduce the intensity and frequency of triggering events and allowed individuals the opportunity to gain coping skills to reduce harmful behaviors and prevent relapse.

At the forefront of services provided by most reentry programs are social support services followed by education, employment, and job training services. What is often lacking is support for housing, childcare, and parent education. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs proposes: until we fulfill the basic needs of food, shelter, safety and security women struggling to gain stability will continue to falter and the cycle of recidivism will continue.

## Get Involved!

There are a number of ways to help The STAR Project:

- STAR has ongoing need for donations of starter packs that include things like: razors, towels, personal hygiene products, shampoo, comb, towels, and toothbrush/toothpaste.
- STAR is always looking for landlords that are accepting of people that are ex-offenders.
- Our clients benefit greatly from Individuals willing and able to mentor them.

## Staff & Board

- Glenna Awbrey - Executive Director
- Aubrey Hill - Executive Assistant
- Kathryn Farrell Guizar - Transition Specialist
- April Love-King - Bookkeeper
- Chuck Hindman - Board President
- Daniel Clark – Vice President
- Sally Kearsley - Secretary
- Mitch Clearfield - Treasurer

### *Board Members*

- Austin Archer
- Chuck Akes
- Dr. Gary Crabtree
- Anastasia Christman
- Rich Jacks
- Mike Howell

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For more information  
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