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Article published Sep 8, 2007

follow-up

Program redirects support for ex-cons Blue Jacket leader learned from program's mistakes.

Everyone makes mistakes.

Far fewer have the courage and wisdom not only to admit their mistakes, but to learn from them – especially where public money is involved.

So Tony Hudson deserves a minimum of criticism, and a lot of credit, for helping to refocus a program that tried to meet released inmates' two most pressing needs. He was ultimately disappointed because it tried to do too much, too soon.

"It's been a learning experience," said Tony Hudson, the 33-year-old executive director of Blue Jacket Inc., who three years ago was gushing with optimism about the chance to offer convicts returning to Allen County not only a job but also a place to live. Then reality intervened, and the promise never quite matched the problems.

"Getting grants misdirected us," Hudson said, fully aware that, in the nonprofit world, *not* getting grants is normally considered a bigger hardship. "It was like asking your uncle for money then having him say, 'Here are the restrictions.' By then, it's too late."

When Blue Jacket spun from the county's Community Corrections program in 2005 to help recently released prisoners gain job skills, Hudson applied for at least 11 grants. But the federal government was one of the few funding sources to say "yes," providing \$90,000 earmarked for construction training. That led to a logical – but flawed – decision:

Why not train – and pay – ex-cons to build or remodel homes, then allow them to live in those homes until they get back on their feet? After all, as Hudson told me three years ago, offenders with no place to live are 80 percent more likely to commit crimes within three months of their release.

For a while, everything seemed fine. But it didn't take long for doubt to creep in, even though five dilapidated homes ultimately were remodeled and have been sold or are on the market.

"I'm not a contractor, not all (released prisoners) wanted to get into construction, and we began to realize how difficult it is to rehabilitate old homes. It wasn't our strong suit," said Hudson, who acknowledged the costs often exceeded estimates. "At one point I had 27 people on the payroll, and being in the landlord business just took too much time." To add insult to injury, one of the people hired to supervise the ex-cons allegedly stole some of the program's construction equipment.

By then, though, Hudson and his board had already decided to pull the plug on Blue

Jacket's home-improvement efforts, which officially stopped in January. Today the organization, based in the old license branch at 3702 S. Clinton St., is, in effect, a temporary employment agency for adult ex-cons. After 35 hours of training in job and life skills, Blue Jacket attempts to find jobs for them with any of about 15 participating companies.

About 175 people completed its training course last year, and the normal placement rate is about 80 percent, although Hudson said Blue Jacket found work for all of its clients last month. Companies hiring through Blue Jacket pay the program for its services, as they would a normal employment agency.

But why would any company hire an ex-con when there is no apparent shortage of job-seekers with no criminal record?

"We try to instill conservative, middle-class values," Hudson explained. "We tell them, you have to earn a second chance – it isn't given to you. They violated a trust, and this is the first step in earning it back."

Blue Jacket participants must also pass drug tests and are bonded. The program also provides appropriate clothing for job interviews. Participants in the Community Corrections program, which monitors released inmates electronically, and the county's Re-Entry Court, which allows early release for convicts who agree to certain conditions, can enter Blue Jacket for \$10. All others must pay \$100 – a price Hudson knows is steep for many ex-cons. That's why he's still seeking financial support for his program, which receives about \$112,000 from the county annually and another \$80,000 from employers.

The organization is named for the Shawnee chief whose warriors were defeated by Gen. "Mad" Anthony Wayne on the banks of the Maumee River in 1794.

"But we don't look at grants as free money anymore," Hudson said. "The (state) Department of Corrections wants us to replicate in other counties and I've said, 'No, we're too young. We don't want to get distracted. We're doing great things now.'"

Nicole Sterler, human resources director for National Serv-All Inc., agreed. Two Blue Jacket participants are working at the company's recycling center on New Haven Avenue and "are doing a fantastic job," she said. "We were reluctant at first, but I'm impressed with the program. They're trying to change their lives."

In other words, people who made mistakes and a program that made mistakes have combined to produce progress. How often does *that* happen?
