

LAW WEEK COLORADO

Defy Colorado Tackles Recidivism With Business Skills

Nonprofit seeks to teach inmates to be ‘CEOs of their own lives’

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Defy Colorado wants its participants to think of themselves not as prisoners but as “entrepreneurs-in-training.”

“They, their families and the prison system have already labeled them the worst thing they can think of,” said Bob Omer, executive director of the Colorado nonprofit dedicated to teaching business and employment skills to people in prison.

About half of the 9,000 people released from Colorado prisons every year end up back in prison within three years, according to Defy Colorado’s website. Omer said the organization views the recidivism rate as a largely economic problem with an economic solution. Many who end up back in prison do so because they lack employment opportunities. Some caught in the “revolving door” of the prison system never really had a “first chance” at life because their parents were in prison, Omer said. To end the cycle, Defy Colorado’s program aims to build entrepreneurial and job skills — a process that begins with changing how inmates see themselves.

None of the participants believe they are entrepreneurs on day one, Omer said, but after eight months of an intensive curriculum, homework, mentoring and a “Shark Tank”-style pitch session, they learn to become “CEOs of their own lives,” even if they never go on to run their own businesses.

“From a program standpoint, we’re agnostic whether one of our graduates starts a busi-

ness or pursues permanent employment,” he said. But by teaching the entrepreneurial spirit, Defy Colorado equips people inside prisons with the qualities needed to survive on the outside, such as perseverance, grit, empathy and vulnerability, according to Omer.

The in-prison program also teaches practical skills like how to put together a resume or use LinkedIn to find job opportunities. Volunteers offer one-on-one mentoring on how to run a business, and the in-prison program requires the entrepreneurs-in-training, or EITs, to come up with and pitch a business idea to a group of judges. The event is followed by a graduation ceremony that the inmates’ family members can attend, and those who complete the curriculum earn a certificate in entrepreneurship from Colorado State University. Defy Colorado also offers a post-release program for graduates to help them find jobs and adjust to life outside prison.

Omer expects the total number of people served by Defy Colorado to reach 200 by the end of the year. The program operates in Colorado State Penitentiary, Arkansas Valley Correctional Facility and La Vista Correctional Facility.

Holland & Knight partner Stephen Dietrich, who has been doing pro bono work for Defy Colorado since 2017, said the program’s emphasis on fostering confidence, empathy and initiative among graduates resonated with him.

“That’s core change in a human being,” said Dietrich. His work with the organization began when Omer, a friend of nearly two de-



Defy Colorado’s volunteers provide one-on-one mentoring to program participants. / DEFY COLORADO

cadec, called him up two years ago to ask for help establishing the organization as an independent non-profit. It had been operating as a state chapter of Defy Ventures for a few months but decided to break from the group after the organization’s national leadership was accused of sexual harassment and misleading donors.

Dietrich, who does corporate transactional work at Holland & Knight, had previously worked with Omer, formerly an in-house attorney at various companies in Denver. Dietrich said the opportunity was a good match for his skill set and experience in helping companies get up and running.

Through their pro bono work, Dietrich and a handful of others throughout the firm’s Denver, Washington, D.C. and Dallas offices have helped Defy Colorado establish itself as a 501(c)(3) organization, advised it on tax issues, contracts and board governance, and helped with community and donor outreach.

They are also helping one of Defy Colorado’s first entrepreneurial success stories. The client, a graduate of the program who has since been released, had won first place in the program’s pitch competition for a company called Prison Art — an e-commerce website for art made by inmates. Dietrich and his team at Holland & Knight are helping him set up the company and talk to investors to make his idea a reality.

Dietrich said he first participated in Defy Colorado’s in-prison program last year, when he went to the Colorado State Penitentiary in Cañon City to attend the pitch session and graduation ceremony there. He said seeing the

EITs celebrating with their families after eight months of hard work really moved him.

“To feel the energy and the aliveness in that particular environment is a stark reminder that, wow, there’s a lot of hope and goodwill being generated here,” Dietrich said.

Omer calls Defy Colorado’s hands-on mentoring component the “secret sauce” of the program. In 2018, about 350 volunteers visited the prisons where the program was operating. That group included CEOs, business owners and even former Gov. John Hickmlooper. Volunteers provided one-on-one coaching on customer development, marketing and other topics related to running a successful business.

“We’ve seen, through hundreds and hundreds of volunteer experiences, that’s really where the true impact happens is in one-on-one and small group coaching,” Omer said. The organization is always looking for more volunteers and, he said, the main qualifications are showing up and having an open mind.

Dietrich said that while volunteering and pro bono work are rewarding in general, working with Defy Colorado has been especially fulfilling.

“Your whole purpose is: let’s figure out how to build connections, help people build self-esteem, build self-respect,” Dietrich said. “Both sides of that conversation are going to benefit.”

“It is nice to have something that does have a very deep emotional resonance when you’re working on a project. And this was an opportunity to do that,” he said. •

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Defy Colorado’s “entrepreneurs-in-training” receive training in business and job skills. / DEFY COLORADO