Las Vegas — It’s a breathtaking moment. Jon Ponder, a convicted armed robber who has rehabilitated himself into a criminal justice reformer, stands authoritatively before two dozen ex-prisoners.

Desperately wanting to change their lives, these men and women have just completed the first part of Ponder’s intensive 18-month program in preparation for rejoining society.

Story by Marie Rohde  Photos by Ronda Churchill
Hope for Prisoners graduates perform a visual exercise during their graduation ceremony at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department on July 22 in Las Vegas.

Innovative program that helps ex-inmates rejoin society could serve as a model for the rest of the nation.

It's a breathtaking moment. Jon Ponder, a convicted armed robber who has rehabilitated himself into a criminal justice reformer, stands authoritatively before two dozen ex-prisoners. Desperately wanting to change their lives, these men and women have just completed the first part of Ponder's intensive 18-month program in preparation for rejoining society.
In a country where police and some minority communities are increasingly at odds, Ponder is leading their graduation ceremony in an unlikely place — an assembly hall at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

The 26 former inmates are a wide variety of ages and ethnicities; six are women, the rest men. All have served hard time in local or federal correctional institutions. Also present at the July 22 graduation — here’s the big surprise — are hundreds of upright citizens: police officers, judges, prosecutors, business people and relatives, all of whom have pledged to embrace and guide these ex-offenders to success.

Ponder commands his graduates: "Hold up your hands, palm facing you!"

They each lift their hands, hold them about a foot from their faces. "Closer!" he commands. They bring their palms within a few inches of their faces, nearly touching their noses.

Ponder declares: "You can’t see me now, right?"

They call out their agreement. All they can see are their palms.

“Listen to me!” says Ponder, with the fervor of a preacher. “I symbolize your future! Your palms are your past!”

He shouts: "You cannot see your future with your past in your face!"

The packed room is transfixed, enthralled.

In a few powerful words, Ponder has summed up the purpose of his program, Hope for Prisoners.

Everyone in the assembly hall knows that this graduation represents a profound community change of heart and mind toward ex-offenders.

Offenders are normally ignored after their release — given a few bucks and sent on their way with the clothes on their backs and with probation and parole officers offering some help but ready to slap on handcuffs at the first slip-up. Not our problem anymore, society generally says.

But these ex-offenders are being surrounded by an array of caring volunteers, including the police officers who arrested them, the district attorneys who prosecuted them, the judges who sentenced them and the parents and siblings whom they have disappointed.

The implications are profound — not just for these Las Vegas offenders but for offenders across the United States. Many think that Ponder’s program, which early research has shown to have a high success rate, could serve as a national model.

In Las Vegas, the public and private sectors have joined to create a new future for released prisoners. Can the country — can Wisconsin, particularly Milwaukee — follow suit?

**States seek alternatives**

The most recent U.S. Justice Department figures are alarming:

- There are 2.3 million men and women behind bars in the
United States, costing taxpayers $68 billion annually.
• Of those, 95% eventually will be freed and return home.
• Roughly 40% of the federal and 60% of the state prisoners are rearrested within three years of release for new crimes.

Across the country, states are looking for alternatives to prison that cost less while still protecting the public and holding offenders accountable. Ending the recidivism cycle is critical.

In Nevada, Ponder leads a private-public partnership that draws heavily on volunteer mentors from law enforcement, the judicial system, business and the faith community. The nonprofit Hope for Prisoners, supported chiefly by donations, is generating national buzz as a model that is working to address not only the cost to taxpayers but the insidious long-term effects of incarceration on families and on communities.

A recent study by the University of Nevada-Las Vegas found that of 522 participants who had completed the program’s job readiness course during an 18-month period in 2014–15, an astonishing 94% had not returned to jail, according to a recent study.

Program mentors include some 40 police officers.
For more information, go to hopeforprisoners.org

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Hope for Prisoners graduate Isaiah Charles stands during the national anthem.

opened a program in the Clark County Detention Center that will give prisoners its weeklong job preparedness course prior to release. Once out, they will get the same 18-month job preparedness and mentoring that current participants receive.

Many of the participants have been convicted of violent crimes. That’s no surprise to criminal justice experts, who say the notion that prisons are overcrowded with nonviolent offenders is a myth.

“The majority of ‘nonviolent drug offenders’ released by (President Barack) Obama had records for violent offenses,” says Clark County District Attorney Steven B. Wolfson, a volunteer advisor to Hope for Prisoners and the man who sent many of the prisoners to jail. “Not all of these offenders are 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds. Many are in their 30s and 40s and got tired of getting in trouble all the time and having to look over their shoulders.”

Since relatively few of those in prison are lifers, society
needs to do more to make sure ex-inmates succeed after doing their time, he says.

The vast majority of those who enroll in Hope for Prisoners — it is voluntary — want to succeed, and that’s key to success, Wolfson says. He met a program participant who was so impressive that he promised to find the man a job if the participant made it through law school.

“It doesn’t matter if they’ve been incarcerated for 30 days or 30 years,” Wolfson says. “It’s hard to make it back. This program gives them someone to turn to when they need it.”

Most of the ex-offenders, Wolfson notes, have no money, no jobs, no skills, no transportation, few family or friends who can help and little hope. And many owe court-ordered restitution and child support.

From startup to success

Others agree with Wolfson that Hope for Prisoners is a unique program and that it is working.

“There are a lot of re-entry programs out there,” says Robert L. Woodson Sr., founder and president of the Washington, D.C.-based Woodson Center, formerly the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise. “What is different here is that it also addresses character, and that’s what these men and women need for transformation, for redemption. That makes it unique.”

Woodson, one of the architects of President George W. Bush’s faith-based poverty initiatives, has been touring the country with House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), advocating Ryan’s anti-poverty agenda.

Woodson held a national summit in October in Las Vegas in which Hope for Prisoners was presented as a model that others can adopt.

The charismatic Ponder founded Hope for Prisoners — of which he is CEO and president — with the help of the International Church of Las Vegas, a non-denominational house of worship with more than 6,000 members. Ponder joined the church after his release from prison in 2009.

The International Church’s pastor, Paul Goulet, was there for the birth.

“Jon came up to me at church one day and said he wanted to start a ministry for ex-prisoners,” Goulet recalls. “I asked him what he knew about prison, and he said, ‘I just got out.’ ”

Goulet enrolled Ponder in a church leadership program. Soon other church leaders joined Ponder in the startup program. It raised enough in donations to get a modest office.

Jon Ponder’s journey

Ponder had been in trouble with the law from the time he was 12, when he got involved with the gang life on the streets of New York. “At 16, I was arrested for my first armed robbery,” he says. “Drugs and booze were part of the problem.”

While in his 20s, he moved to Las Vegas in 1989 to be with his mother, who had moved here in retirement. He didn’t leave his life of crime behind.

In 2004, he was drunk and strung out on drugs when, armed with a handgun, he robbed a bank. It wasn’t long before he was arrested, kicking and fighting all the way to
solitary confinement, where he awaited his court date and a possible 23-year prison sentence.

Ponder, then 38, believes he was touched by the hand of God while in that cell.

“One day, a chaplain slipped a Bible through the slot in my door, along with another book, 'Pursuit of His Presence' by Kenneth and Gloria Copeland,” he recalls, saying he read them because he had nothing else to do.

Then a fellow prisoner on his way out gave Ponder a transistor radio that he no longer needed. Ponder could only tune in a Christian station. “One night, I heard Billy Graham preach on the Prodigal Son,” he says. “At that point, I became a Christian and prayed the sinner’s prayer.”

By the time Ponder appeared before U.S. District Judge James Mahan, he was sober and had a plan for his life.

Mahan, a George W. Bush appointee who exudes law and order and wears a handgun in a shoulder holster beneath his robes, didn’t necessarily buy it.

“A lot people come in here at sentencing saying they’ve found Jesus and they intend to turn their lives around,”

Jeffrey Monroe served five years for a burglary and cashing a stolen check before getting out last year and finding a path forward through Hope for Prisoners.

“The most important thing I got out of the program was how to be a better man, a better father, and it’s helped me become the person God intended me to be,” he says.

Monroe says he came to realize that it wasn’t him against everyone else in the world. “The true enemy was all the demons I had inside of me,” he says.

Now 52, he landed a job at Firehouse Subs, where he is the opening manager on weekends. Monday through Friday he also works full time doing air conditioning repairs.

While working at Firehouse, Monroe met Vivian Nehls, another ex-offender who found her way through Hope for Prisoners.

Nehls got off track at the age of 38. Hooked on drugs that she used to mask the pain of childhood abuse, she was caught breaking into cars to finance her habit. Sentenced to four years, she worked in prison to get her high school diploma but, more important, found a way to get past the abuse she experienced as a child. “I realized there was nothing wrong with me.”

Once estranged from her family as the result of imprisonment, she says that she is now taking care of her mother and spending time with a daughter who is going away to college next year.

She and Monroe were married on Aug. 14. Hope for Prisoners founder Jon Ponder officiated at the ceremony.

— Marie Rohde
Mahan says. “They’re either sincere or delusional. You can’t tell which it is.”

Ponder seemed sincere. “He was very impressive, and I told him that if he accomplished half of what he said he was going to accomplish, he’d walk out of prison a changed man.”

Mahan, who now regularly speaks at Hope for Prisoners graduations, sentenced Ponder to six years in prison. “He didn’t get a break,” Mahan recalls. “That was within the sentencing guidelines.”

In prison, Ponder associated with a group of Christians rather than one of the gangs. “I was impregnated with the seed of Hope for Prisoners while in jail,” he says. “It became my purpose in life.”

Released from prison, Ponder was luckier than most. He moved in with his mother and got a job in the office of a moving company.

A friend took him to Goulet’s International Church. Goulet was receptive to the newcomer’s idea but had to sell the idea to skeptics in his congregation. Not everyone bought it. “I tell people that the greatest work is not done within these four walls,” Goulet says. “It’s done in the community.”

By all accounts Ponder, now a certified chaplain by the state, does not proselytize in the traditional sense. He does not use Hope for Prisoners as a platform for converting others to his faith.

“Real faith is in action, not words,” Ponder says.

Police role was turning point

The first two years were a struggle. Angela Brookins, a church member who joined Ponder from the program’s inception, recalls everyone kept their day job while spending most of their spare time creating Hope for Prisoners.

“It seemed that every month, we’d get a miracle,” says Brookins, now the program’s operations manager. “We always managed to get just enough (in donations) to pay the rent and the utilities.”

Volunteers showed up, but the organization remained small, including a few police officers who were members of the church.

A turning point came about four years ago when Police Lt. Chris Petko and Detective Cindy Williams went to their boss at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department with a plan to help Ponder’s fledgling program.

Petko, then the operations chief in the department’s gang unit, had met Ponder at a community meeting. The cop and the ex-con later met for coffee.

“He talked about personal accountability being the first step for ex-offenders turning their lives around,” Petko says. “That resonated with me.”

Williams met Ponder at a different community meeting and saw something special in him.
“I saw this guy in a suit, and he was very well-spoken,” Williams says. “But police officers notice things, you know? I saw he had tattoos on his neck and on his hands. I knew he had a story to tell.”

After hearing Ponder’s story, she met with Petko, who asked her what she thought of Ponder. “He’s the real deal,” Williams concluded. “We have to get the department involved with this.”

Several Las Vegas police officers who had volunteered with the program had to tread carefully. Department rules forbade officers from associating with felons except at arm’s length. It was an understandable policy, rooted in the history of organized-crime influence in some of the casinos.

Petko and Williams proposed that the department fully endorse a mentoring program of trained volunteer officers working with ex-offenders navigating the land-mined path to a successful post-prison life.

Now, some 40 officers participate in the program, joining more than 150 other mentors from various walks of life, including reformed ex-inmates.

Petko retired from the Police Department last year and is now director of Hope for Prisoners’ re-entry leadership academy. Williams is the department’s volunteer mentor coordinator and a Hope trainer.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department is seen as progressive in many ways, an early adopter of community policing policies. Still, there has been a chasm between police and ex-offenders — much like the breach between segments of the community and police that has played out violently in cities such as Charlotte, Ferguson and Milwaukee.

**Community outreach**

One of the Police Department’s first community outreach programs was an affiliation with RECAP (Rebuilding Every City around Peace), modeled after a faith-based Boston program. Ponder joined RECAP soon after founding Hope.

Pastor Troy Martinez, of the East Vegas Christian Center and chairman of the RECAP board, says church leaders go to the hospital rooms of young victims, often black or Hispanic, after an incident. He and Ponder frequently partner in the ministry.

“Before RECAP, a lot of times when a young person on the street was shot or killed, there was no outcry from the community,” Martinez says. “The families, even the churches, were afraid of retaliation. Many times, the churches wouldn’t do the funerals out of fear.”

He recalls going with Ponder to one victim’s hospital room. The victim’s mother said another son was bent on retaliation. The two pastors went to the man’s home and caught him just as he was about to leave.

“He decided not to go,” says Martinez, recounting how they talked for hours about there being another way. “He told his friends to stand down.”

Eventually, three men were convicted in the shooting. The victim is in rehabilitation; the brother who resisted the temptation to retaliate is in the military and a third brother who was in prison at the time is now a Hope grad.

The success of RECAP — there has been a 65% drop in shootings and 40% decline in murders in the targeted area — prepared the department to support Hope.

The department’s commitment to Hope for Prisoners was in evidence at the July graduation ceremony. Both Petko and Williams say it was significant that the ceremony was held at the police building.

“A lot of groups ask to use the facility, but we are picky about who we align ourselves with,” says Williams.

Nevada Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske, a longtime
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founder and president of the Woodson Center

Republican, attended the July graduation. She was an early supporter, and when she was a state senator she spearheaded passage of a bill that enables ex-offenders to get state identification cards upon release. Ponder pushed for it, saying IDs are an invaluable asset when looking for a job.

“We have got to stop this revolving door of people going to prison again and again and again,” says Cegavske, who serves on the Hope advisory council. “I met with Jon, and he told me about his vision. I saw how he had transformed his life. No one else was out there with a plan that worked.”

Support from business community

Nevada business leaders are also behind the program. Scott Gragson is senior vice president of one of the world’s largest real estate companies, Colliers International Las Vegas. He says that when a friend asked him to help out at Hope, “I figured I’d give them a few dollars.”

Gragson visited the program and came away a board member.

“It’s not a cure for all the problems, but it’s a start,” Gragson says. “We are spending way too much money on prisons. I’m for ‘you did the crime, you do the time,’ but these people are not coming out of the system any better than they went in. It costs more to keep them in jail for a year than it would to send them to college.”

Some are in prison so long that they are “unfixable,” says Gragson, a Republican, but adds, “There are many more who want to change, but they don’t know how to do it.”

Gragson’s most recent project was in helping Hope get its own building, a deal he says will be a reality soon.

From contractors to casino operators, local businesses support Hope and are benefiting from it.

Take, for instance, former burglar and recent Hope graduate
Freddy Duarte. He was a habitual criminal when he got two 10-years-to-life sentences in 2005 after being convicted of burglarizing the home of a federal magistrate.

“In prison, I realized I made a mess of my life,” Duarte says. “I did Bible study and whatever else was allowed. I eventually got my associate degree in business.”

When Duarte got out in February 2016, he went to see Ponder, who suggested a course in landscaping. “I told him I had a passion for cooking.”

Ponder sent Duarte to the Station Casinos headquarters, where he was hired as a line cook. Within months, Duarte was promoted to sous chef and now has hopes to rise in the organization. His goal is to become the company’s corporate chef, managing the menus for all Station’s facilities.

“I want to keep the doors open for the next guy who gets out,” Duarte says.

When they do get out, some of the ex-offenders are introduced to police mentors in the first week of the program. On Thursday afternoons, the officers show up in uniform, not with wagging fingers but with open arms.

Petko adds that it’s important that the officers appear in uniform, but the style is conversational rather than confrontational. “We want them to see past the uniform, to see us as human beings.”

**Police and ex-inmates connect**

At a training session this summer, several officers stand before 26 newcomers to the program. Their message: The line that separates the good guys from the bad is drawn by personal choices, not others.

Officer Aden Ocampo-Gomez talks about how he came to California as a child with his family from Mexico illegally and made the transition to U.S. citizen and police officer.

In the states, every kid in his neighborhood learned to run at the first sight of cops, he says. “Most of the people from my high school class are dead or in prison,” he adds.

Ocampo-Gomez says he decided to join the military after high school. That’s when he got his green card and could legally work in the states. His family, which had seen the violence of police and military as well as the drug cartels in Mexico, was horrified. When he decided to become a cop after leaving the military, his mother “wailed with grief.”

He says he believes the department is bridging the gap to the Hispanic community. “We have a lot of outreach to the community, and we’re making inroads,” he says.

Detective Bernard Plaskett tells the group about how he grew up poor on the streets of the Bronx. Two of his brothers wound up in prison.

“I was blessed because I could run,” he says. “Whenever the cops showed up, we all ran. I was fast. They never caught me.”

But Plaskett, who is African-American, says he was fascinated by a beat cop, a white man, who had a talent for twirling a baton. “He told me to get off the streets. ‘Go to the Boys and Girls Club. Go home.’ He yelled that at me every time he saw me. I thought that dude hated me. So did everyone else.”

Eventually, Plaskett says, he came to understand that the cop was trying to keep him out of trouble. “That cop saved my life,” he tells the ex-offenders. “He understood that if I stayed on the streets, I’d get in trouble. I’d wind up dead or
Capt. Jason Letkiewicz, commander of the homicide division, says everyone makes mistakes, even cops. “We need to acknowledge it when we make mistakes, accept the punishment and move on,” he says.

He met Ponder through Robert L. Woodson Sr., whom Ryan describes as his mentor and whom he has known for over 20 years. Woodson is the founder and president of the Washington, D.C.-based Woodson Center, formerly the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and has been on the front lines of fighting poverty for decades.

Ryan sees the broad involvement of the community, including religious leaders, as integral to the success of community-based programs.

“One of the bad aspects of the War on Poverty is that it became so federal, so distant from our communities that it took people out of it,” he says. “What Jon Ponder represents is not only a program that reduces recidivism, a program with excellent results, but he also represents the regeneration of the involvement of the community in a way that can be effective over the long term.”

while some people might oppose spending money on programs to help convicted criminals, Ryan notes that money will be spent in other ways with less hope of helping the ex-inmate or the communities where they will live after being released.

“The question is whether we can help people rebuild their lives by getting to the root causes of the problem,” Ryan says. “If we can break the cycle of recidivism and poverty, then these people can rebuild their own lives, redeem themselves. Then they are better off, society is better off — and, oh, by the way, the taxpayer is better off at the end of the day.”

He sees Hope for Prisoners and programs like it as a poverty-fighting approach that, instead of taking away money and power from communities, restores local control.

“By engaging the people in being the source of their own redemption, enlisting people in their own communities, you are healing our culture and our communities at the same time,” Ryan says.

The role of the federal government, he says, is to “get out of the way and let more of these programs happen.”

Criminal justice reform is a related issue that can be dealt with in part at the federal level.

“I think that is where we can help,” Ryan says. “We need to remove barriers, get out of the way so more of these community-based programs can occur.”

— Marie Rohde