

Helping hands

County halfway house gives former criminals chance to volunteer

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Since his 18th birthday, Jerimia Culbertson has been homeless, jailed or addicted to meth.

He's lived in his pickup truck, crashed on friend's couches and slept in abandoned cars. He's been in and out of Gallatin County's jail on drug charges, unable to hold a job.

Meth and alcohol were his escapes.

Four years after spiraling downhill, Culbertson is giving back to society. The 22-year-old is one of 36 former criminals in Gallatin County's halfway house required to volunteer in the community.

Culbertson cleans parks, gathers litter around the county dump and helps price items at The Salvation Army. If he doesn't complete a total of 65 hours of community service during his six-month residency, he can't leave the halfway house.

"It's not bad," he said, taking a break from volunteering Thursday at The Salvation Army. "It's actually quite nice."

Like other residents of the halfway house on South 16th Avenue, he is sober and trying to get his life on track. He moved into the house after being released from jail. In addition to volunteering, he has a job working construction and attends counseling sessions at night.

"I actually have a roof over my head that doesn't involve jail," Culbertson said.

Serving at places like The Salvation Army allows him to interact with people who are different from the men in jail and the halfway house. That has helped him adjust to normal life. He can become part of something good, trying to make up for his mistakes.

"We're trying to reintroduce them into society," said Pat Donath, who coordinates the service projects. "This is their community, too."

Since the halfway house opened in December, residents have collectively completed 678 hours of community service, Program Director Melissa Kelly said. They are unsupervised, although spot checks are conducted regularly to ensure they're on task.

Despite the men having criminal records, many organizations offer projects for the residents.

"I've never had any problem with them," said Kristi Ping, a supervisor at The Salvation Army. "As long as they're polite, that's all that matters."

They're hard workers, she said, and their help is appreciated. They empty the trash, sort items and straighten the sales floor. About 25 percent of her volunteers come from the halfway house.

"We pretty much need all the help we can get," Ping said.

Culbertson will continue doing service projects for the next six months while living in the halfway house. When he's released, his experiences may benefit him.

He hopes to continue working construction, rent an apartment, buy a car and stay out of trouble. He's unsure whether he'll continue his volunteer work.

"I've been homeless and out of the circle for so long," Culbertson said. "I'm going to enjoy this experience."