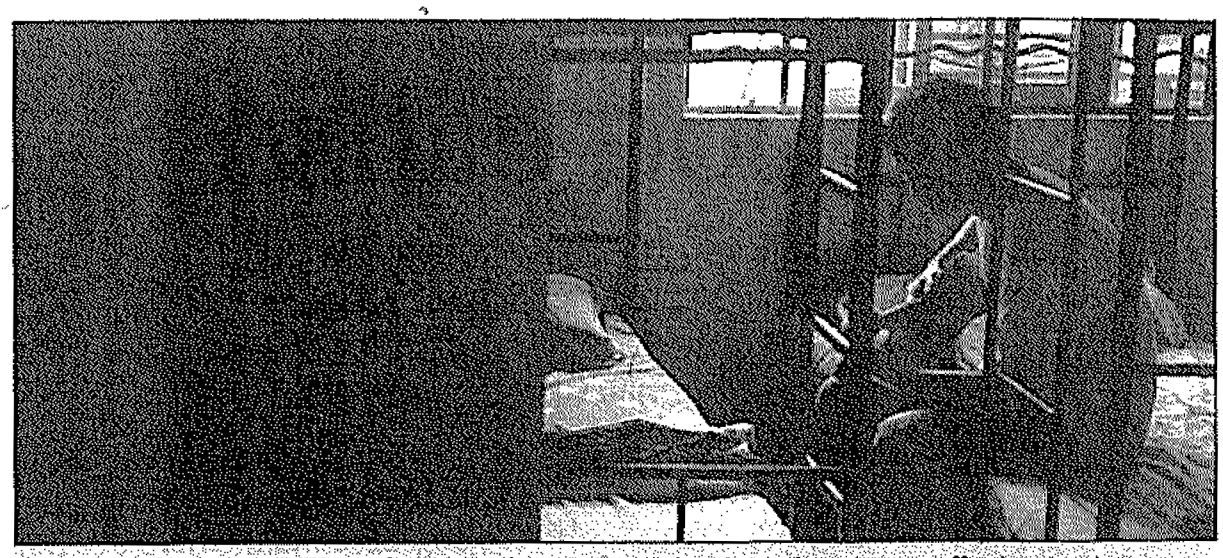
Prison life tough, but life after jail can be harder



THE NEW HOPE SHELTER FOR MEN, which offers temporary housing to homeless ex-offenders has been running at full capacity since opening in 2004. Currently, 21 residents share the shelter's 18 beds.

ST PHOTO: MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN

Ex-offenders find refuge at Sembawang shelter which is already bursting at the seams

▶ **Nur Dianah Suhaimi**

FOR one man, being jailed eight years for armed robbery was better than life after prison.

When the 40-year-old was released in May last year, he found he had nowhere to go.

His cousin – his only living relative – had moved house without telling him, leaving him on the streets with no job or money.

"I just felt like going back to prison. At least I'd be assured of a place to stay and food," said the ex-prisoner, who has been to jail six times, mostly for drug offences.

He turned to ex-offenders welfare group Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) which referred him to the New Hope Shelter for Men.

Housed in a single-storey old bungalow in Sembawang, the shelter is the only one in Singapore that provides temporary accommodation to homeless former offenders. About 11,000 former offenders are released from Singapore prisons each year.

Many have no homes to return to and end up sleeping in the streets, said New Hope's executive director, Pastor Andrew Khoo. This year, it took in 51 ex-prisoners and had to turn some away.

Since the shelter was set up in 2004, it has been running at full capacity.

Its 18 beds are shared by 21 residents now.

"Some of our residents work the night shift. So at night, their beds will be used by those working the day shift," said Pastor Khoo.

The shelter, a service provided by voluntary welfare group New Hope Community Services, is funded through public donations and practises what the Yellow Ribbon Project campaign preaches – giving ex-offenders a second chance.

It is looking for a second home nearby to accommodate more ex-inmates. The residents stay between a week and as long as a year, until they get a job and can afford to buy or rent their own place.

All declined to reveal their real names for fear that their current employers find out that they are former offenders.

One 52-year-old, who has been at the shelter for nine months, is determined not to return to prison – he has been behind bars 15 times since 1974, mostly for drug addiction offences.

Now earning $1,300 as a cleaning supervisor, he is waiting to get an HDB rental flat. "The shelter is the first place I can call home. Before this, I was just staying with friends, a week here, a month there," he said.

There are also some residents who return because they go back to their old habits or prefer the disciplined life at the shelter.

Residents are offered counselling and given courses on money and anger management.

Rules are strict – lights out by midnight and no smoking at all times. Anyone found with drugs will be expelled immediately.

Household chores, including cooking and cleaning, are distributed equally.

"We want to help them get jobs, move on with their lives and be independent. This is only a temporary shelter, not a long-term solution," said Pastor Khoo.

A 45-year-old resident, who was just released from prison last week, has already secured a job as a food and beverage supervisor and hopes to buy a flat soon.

He was serving a seven-year sentence for drug trafficking. All his family members are dead. "I want to be independent and buy my own flat, maybe a two- or three-room," he said.

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