

THE BOTTOM LINE



United Way of Chicago

WINTER 87

FRONT LINE

The Safer way to reduce crime

Crime is one of the greatest fears of individuals and a major concern in Chicago as well as in other cities throughout the country. While much of the nation's attention is focused on assisting victims of crime and tackling gang activity, domestic violence and other criminal offenses, little thought is given to those who commit crimes, other than getting them off the street by locking them behind prison walls.

What happens when those cell doors are unlocked, releasing offenders back into the community? They return to society no better prepared to deal with the problems that led them to prison in the first place.

"People who commit crimes will continue to do so unless there is some type of mid-course correction to help them change their lives. Prisons do not rehabilitate—people do," said Bernie Curran, executive director of Safer Foundation. For nearly 15 years Safer Foundation has been in the business of combating crime by helping offenders and ex-offenders redirect their lives. The agency provides a full range of training and support services that relate to a few basic individual needs—survival, self-respect, and acceptance by others. "Our ultimate goal is to disarm offenders with stability," said Curran, "and that means getting them a job."

Through its basic human needs service, Safer Foundation helps former offenders obtain food, clothing, shelter and medical care. The agency works cooperatively with state, city and community groups to help offenders overcome critical problems, such as alcohol and drug addiction, which Curran stressed is one of the biggest problems. Counseling and therapy also are provided to aid attitude adjustment.

Once these roadblocks to progress have been addressed, the client can move on to the training component of the agency's program. Because the majority of those who come to Safer have little education, a basic skills program provides academic instruction, tutoring and job training. Finally, when clients are prepared for employment, they are

able to benefit from Safer's job placement service.

Safer Foundation has established relationships with hundreds of employers in the community who increasingly are willing to hire those who have been reformed through the agency's program. It is the clients' responsibility, however, to initiate job opportunities with the cooperating employers. The skills needed to obtain employment are developed and encouraged during special sessions for clients, in which they are required to establish at least six interviews per week.

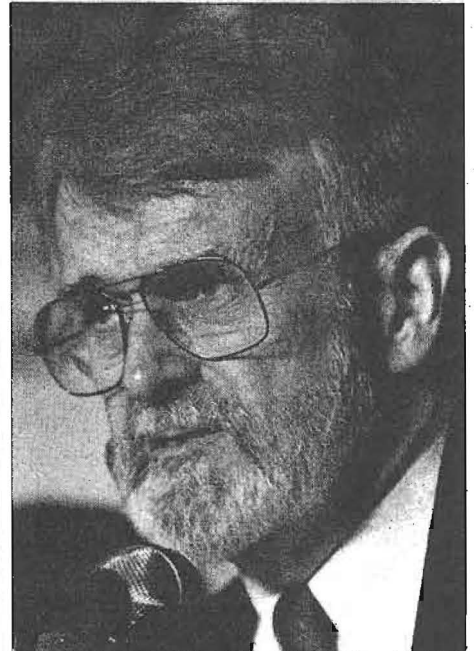
Annually, more than 7,000 ex-offenders and parolees seek Safer's assistance. Of them, some 2,500 get jobs, 800 learn to read and write, and thousands receive emergency services. Their average age range is 16-30, and less than 5 percent are women.

For juvenile offenders, ages 14-17, Safer offers the Troubled Adolescents Program (TAP). "The kids in this program are here because they have a history of arrests, are not allowed in public schools because teachers can't deal with them, and they are too young for the department of corrections," said Ray Auclair, director of Private Sector Development. "TAP serves approximately 65 juveniles a year, providing them with basic education. Some return to public schools, others go on to vocational programs," he explained.

Safer Foundation is recognized as one of the country's oldest, largest and most successful not-for-profit organizations addressing the needs of ex-offenders. The agency has received increased media exposure in recent years, which has helped to raise community consciousness about the value of helping offenders as one means of making communities safer and more productive. Yet Curran feels that individuals and the community as a whole have not fully grasped the role they must play in rehabilitating offenders to reduce crime. He says that people still need to overcome the misconception that all offenders are "vicious animals, cruel, uncaring and incapable of changing."

"None of us are without guilt," said Curran. "People must realize that offenders are human beings. If we give them a chance, an opportunity, they can change and they can help

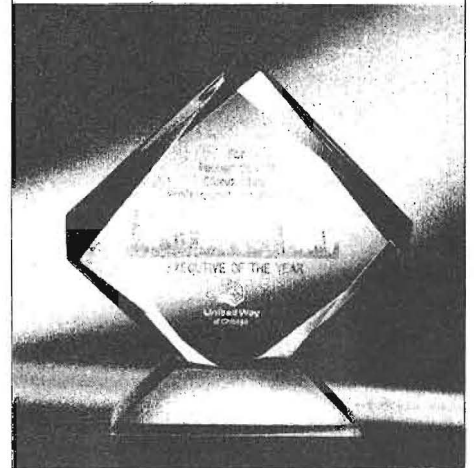
Executive of the Year



Raymond D. "Bernie" Curran, executive director and co-founder of Safer Foundation.

"Being elected Executive of the Year is truly an astounding and overwhelming honor. It makes me think about what Safer is really all about," Curran said. "Even though the award honors me, it also honors the staff and the work that is done at Safer."

Curran is the second recipient of the United Way award, which annually recognizes outstanding leadership by a chief executive officer of a not-for-profit human care agency in Chicago.



others."

Auclair agreed. He pointed out the fact that most people don't understand that offenders also are a victim of their own crimes. "If people were more open-minded, half the battle would be won."