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**ONLY IN THE
 WORLD-HERALD**
**Giving break
 to offenders
 is benefit to
 them, others**

Winners in a United Way diversion program are community groups and Douglas County.



Nick Dowling
 A marijuana charge led not to jail but to a volunteer experience that he thinks will help him run his own business.

By **BETSY FREEMAN**
 WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Nicholas Dowling didn't want to be locked up.

He was caught trying to grow marijuana and charged with intent to deliver a controlled substance. He'd never been in trouble and didn't consider himself a criminal, so the felony charge scared him.

"I was pretty upset. I thought I'd spend some time in jail," said Dowling, 33, an Omahan who works as a mover and has a second job with a sign and printing company.

But Dowling got a break. Because he was a first-time offender and his crime was considered low level, a judge sentenced him to probation and 120 hours of community service. He became one of hundreds who participate each year in the United Way Court Referral Program, a partnership between Douglas County and United Way of the Midlands.

The program is different from others of its type: A United Way staff member places an offender with a nonprofit agency, keeps track of his hours and ultimately closes the case when the offender has served his time, thus easing the workload for court personnel. The Sarpy County court system runs its own community service program.

The Douglas County part-

nership started in 1977 with volunteers and now operates with \$49,427 each year from the county.

That's far less than the cost of putting low-risk offenders in jail, said Mike Boyle, the Douglas County Board member who recently took over as chairman of the board's Criminal Justice Committee.

The program so impressed Boyle that he recently called a meeting of his committee to inform fellow board members about its success.

"I'm excited about the work that's being done," he said in an interview.

That work includes not only the United Way's administration, but the community service performed by the offenders.

Participants in the program cut a wide swath across society.

"I've had CEOs of nonprofits, businesses," said Cathie Greise, who has been the United Way's court referral coordinator since 1999. Her youngest client was 8 and the oldest was 87.

Last year, people in the United Way program performed the equivalent of 1,292 days of community service, she said.

Greise has a list of more than 200 programs that accept volunteers, everything from the Benson Plant Rescue to Radio Talking Book to the United Way itself.

Dowling, in fact, performed

his sentence in building maintenance at the United Way headquarters near 18th and Harney Streets. He has a background in electrical work and mechanics, but said he learned a lot more about those fields through volunteering.

The work was varied. He tightened bolts on toilet seats, strung wire through ceilings, worked with the boiler and the air-flow system and with IT personnel — "getting to know how a big building like that works, the whole in and out of it."

The people were great, he said.

"It wasn't like it wasn't work — it was. But they made it fun."

Greise said she strives to find offenders situations in which they will thrive, matching the time they have available with location, transportation needs and areas of interest. Common assignments include cleaning, clerical work and landscaping.

About 535 people are currently in some stage of the program. The majority have alcohol offenses such as minor in possession and driving under the influence, but people found guilty of theft, property crimes, minor assaults, traffic violations and other infractions also participate. If they fail to complete the program, they face jail time.

The program doesn't serve people convicted of violent

crimes, such as rape or murder.

The chief probation officer for Douglas County said the program has several benefits.

It's a huge time saver because probation officers don't have to chase down offenders to track community service, Ron Broich said.

And, Broich said, it gives participants the sense that they're paying back and righting a wrong, resulting in a more positive attitude.

It also helps people hone skills and gives them work experience and praise they may not get otherwise, Broich and Greise both said. Some even find full-time employment with the agencies they serve.

Nonprofits are grateful to have volunteers, Greise said, and they tell the offenders how nice it is to have them.

"It may be the first time someone has told them that they did good," she said.

David Hibler of Benson Plant Rescue said the high quality of the program's volunteers has impressed him and has allowed his group to accomplish things it couldn't have done otherwise. The group "rescues" unsold plants and trees from nurseries, nurses them to health and plants them.

"Even more importantly, we have seen evidence of positive changes in people's lives by

virtue of their taking ownership in and feeling proud about the tasks performed,” he said in an email. “Volunteers frequently say things like ‘That’s my garden’ or ‘That’s my tree; I planted it!’”

Dowling hopes his volunteer experience will help him operate his own business. Before his arrest, he started a motorcycle and moped repair service, but quit because he wasn’t making enough to live on. He plans to put what he learned at United Way to good use.

“If it has wheels, pedals or is made of metal, I’m your guy,” he said.

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