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Inmates preparing for release attend fair connecting them with resources at CMCF

JACKSON –Inmates preparing for release at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County won't have to wait until they are on the outside to learn about resources they can use in transitioning back to their communities.

Fifty-seven inmates who are six months to a year of release on Thursday talked one-on-one with representatives of various groups, including a trainer with Families First for Mississippi, an outreach coordinator with the Mississippi Division of Medicaid, a job placement counselor with the Prosperity Center of Greater Jackson, and a transition specialist with the Rankin County School District.

“This has been a blessing because when I came in, I was a kid,” said inmate Juanita Berry. “I didn't know anything.”

Berry was 18 when she began serving 20 years for two violent crimes in 1998. She turns 38 in July. While her tentative discharge date is in September, another inmate, Arnika Nichols, 35, will be paroled as of July 1.

“This has been just the kind of info I need,” said Nichols, who has been serving three drug convictions since 2011. “I won't get out and then wonder which way to go or who to turn to answer these things.”

Holding up a fist full of pamphlets, Nichols said, “I got Medicaid questions answered, and I know how to get in touch with the right people. And, I got housing and a job lined up. The job is with my mom and some others. I have my cosmetology license. Not a certificate. I have a license.”

The resource fair is among the activities planned in observance of June as statewide re-entry month. Similar events have already been held at the Mississippi

State Penitentiary (MSP) and South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI) were planned again this month.

"We are holding these fairs to help prepare inmates for the day they will return to their communities," Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said. "Our ultimate goal is to give them a leg up so that they are better prepared to be successful and not return to prison."

In addition to resource fairs, the department also will host a re-entry symposium on Thursday, June 21, to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to talk about best practices in re-entry. The event at Christ United Methodist Church is free, but registration is required. (Go to www.mdoc.ms.gov/Pages/default.aspx to register.)

"As the commissioner said, it's not just about incarceration," said Viscia Pointer, Pre-Release director at CMCF. "It's also about rehabilitation. This resource fair doesn't give just hope; it's helping these inmates make a better way for themselves once they're released."

Thursday's resource fair lasted three hours. Overall, in addition to the MDOC, there were 10 organizations represented: the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Families First for Mississippi, the Medicaid Division, the Prosperity Center, the Rankin County School District, the ASC Housing Consortium, Grace House, Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Hinds Behavioral Health, and Catholic Charities.

Rankin County Schools Transition Specialist Andrew Strehlow said he participated to help and encourage inmates to see beyond a GED.

"A GED is a good start," Strehlow said, "but now you need more." "I want to encourage them to further their education, and I am here to help them get *more*."

Some of the same state agencies also participated in last week's second Pre-Release Resource Fair at SMCI. About 100 offenders and representatives from 15 various agencies attended. A resource fair also is planned on June 28 at Parchman.