

Prisoner Re-entry in Public Safety By Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr.

Several bills are before the state legislature which relate to the re-entry of offenders into the community. I wanted to take the opportunity to convey to the citizens that I serve my vision as regards the best way that we can seek to accomplish offenders re-entering our communities as law-abiding, productive citizens.

I am in favor of the Sheriff's Department of each county being the mechanism of prisoner re-entry into local communities, including state-sentenced prisoners who are returning to that locale, and I am in favor of re-entry being a gradual "step down" through lesser levels of security.

The Sheriffs' Departments of our fourteen counties are the proven avenues for prisoners to return to the population centers from which they come. Because of the local and regional nature of Sheriffs' Departments, no Sheriff's Department facility or satellite facility is remote from our urban centers.

In addition to this geographic logic, all Sheriffs are constantly building upon literally hundreds of years of community partnerships. I have, for instance, at this present moment nearly 300 working partnerships with community agencies, organizations and institutions, all of which I utilize to help effect the successful re-integration of offenders into our local communities. In addition, my department is working daily with all the members of the public safety/criminal justice team in my region. These longstanding community relationships and partnerships are in some sense intangibles that one cannot replicate or replace by building a physical structure, or a system, or a bureaucracy. As I've said, the roots of these partnerships go back literally hundreds of years to the beginnings of our department in our county.

Sheriffs are experts at re-entry because they do so much of it. I am just one of fourteen county Sheriffs, and I supervised the re-entry of 2,362 sentenced offenders last year. The average time served in my institution is only 8 months, so I'm constantly working on offenders' re-entry. Because we deal with offenders with shorter sentences, Sheriffs, more than any other correctional practitioners, live the expression that "Re-entry begins on day one of incarceration".

The best way for our local Sheriffs to re-enter offenders is through gradually lessening levels of security, also known as community corrections/intermediate sanctions. Because there is a misconception that these community corrections/intermediate sanctions programs are soft on crime, I would like to address the efficacy, indeed the necessity, of community corrections/intermediate sanctions as part of a continuum of levels of incarceration in corrections. The truth is that, quite the opposite of being soft on crime, operations such as Pre-Release and Day Reporting are indeed crime-fighting tools. It is common sense that an individual who progresses through the system by productive and disciplined behavior and graduates to lesser levels of security, where he can be closely supervised for community re-entry, is less likely to return to crime and jail.

If common sense is not enough, I offer you the following statistics: In a study of releases from the Hampden County Sheriff's Department in 2007, in the twelve months after release, 12.6% of those released from Day Reporting were re-incarcerated for a new crime, as were 14% of those from our Pre-Release/Minimum Security Center, and 14.7% of those from our Correctional Alcohol Center. Fully 20.7% of those who were released from our higher security main institution were re-incarcerated for a new crime. That means that those who were released from our higher security level, those who did not go through step-down lesser levels of security for re-entry, were re-incarcerated for new crimes at a rate 64% higher than those released from Day Reporting, 48% higher than those released from Pre-Release/Minimum Security, and 41% higher than those released from the Correctional Alcohol Center. How's that for a testimony to the effectiveness of step-down levels of security in re-entry.

Each Sheriff should have the statutory authority to place each prisoner in his custody in the level of security that best serves both the short term and long term needs of the community. The long term safety of the community is best served by offenders' going through the gauntlet of a continuum of lesser security levels, all the while closely supervised and supported in a gradual re-entry. That's what works best and that's what Sheriffs are trying to do on a daily basis.

Beyond the fact that we know that community corrections/intermediate sanctions fight crime, they are also extremely cost effective. Our Pre-Release program, because of its lesser level of security, costs less per prisoner than medium security, and our Day Reporting program costs one-fourth of medium security per prisoner.

As someone who has been a criminal justice practitioner for over 34 years, but also someone elected to office, I am no stranger to, nor opponent of, the rightful place of our political system in shaping criminal justice policy. Through their elected leaders and representatives, the public is able to infuse our laws with sound fiscal practices, to assure that we have the resources to back up our laws.

It costs in excess of \$120,000 to build each hard cell, and \$30,000-\$40,000 a year to operate it. I believe that we should do all in our power to assure that these hard cells are occupied by individuals who require them.

We as a commonwealth have got to utilize demanding, smart community corrections/intermediate sanctions programs whenever we can or all our efforts at prison and jail construction will be as building sand castles against an incoming tide.

As in so much of life, the answers in criminal justice do not lie at the extremes, nor will they fit on a bumper sticker. We have to seek both common sense and balance in structuring a prisoner re-entry system that best serves the public safety in a real and sustained way.

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