

## A FORWARD-LOOKING JAIL

The grounds of the Hampden County Correctional Center in Ludlow are well kept. Staffers and even some of the 1,800 inmates walk with a bounce. Posters promote well-being and personal responsibility. And nowhere is heard the baleful background of curses and clanging so common in most prisons.

Hampden County Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr. had already been practicing "community corrections" for more than a decade when William Weld as a gubernatorial candidate in 1990 made his pledge that he would reintroduce the state's burgeoning prison population to the "joys of busting rocks." Ashe, a former social worker, instead addressed the prisoners' poor educational backgrounds, bad work habits, negative attitudes, and substance abuse problems. Even as far back as 1986 he found that some inmates could be trusted to sleep at home and report to prison details during the day, allowing the sheriff to stretch his budget.

Today, the Romney administration, with the help of two blue-ribbon panels, has come to the wise conclusion that the successful reentry of prisoners should be among the state's highest public safety priorities. And there is no better place to look for answers than Hampden County, where about 75 percent of the prisoners come from urban sections of Springfield and Holyoke.

Work and study opportunities are numerous at the Correctional Center. GED classes, welding, graphic arts, light manufacturing, and other vocational and academic offerings are combined with drug and alcohol treatment. Unlike other jails with similar programs, Hampden County requires its inmates to spend 40 hours each week in these activities. The immediate reward for their labors includes privileges such as television viewing time, but the long-term goal is a transfer to a prerelease center or a day reporting program, where electronically monitored inmates are allowed to live at home while performing community service.

"This isn't MIT level 4," says Ashe, who has been reelected every term since 1974. "It's breaking sticks. It's people working together."

### **Community benefits**

Ashe favors work opportunities that allow prisoners to make restitution. On a recent afternoon about a dozen inmates and correction officers with construction skills were rehabbing a 26-unit apartment house in downtown Springfield for eventual use by parolees. Other prisoners lent their labor for a Habitat for Humanity construction job in the North End section of the city. Studious prisoners who meet their commitments behind the walls are provided admission and tuition assistance at Springfield Technical Community College.

The approach makes both social and fiscal sense, says Ashe. The fewer prisoners he has to house and guard in the main jail, the more of his \$53.7 million budget he can use to create employment, education, and housing opportunities for ex-offenders.

The "country club" label is rarely leveled against the institution, primarily due to the mandatory nature of the programs. Recalcitrant inmates comprise only about 5 percent of the prison population, says Ashe. The disruptive ones wind up in segregation. The merely unmotivated are placed in the "accountability pod," where curfew is early, privileges rare, and staffers emphasize issues of personal responsibility. Walk-aways from community corrections programs are exceptionally rare.

The Hampden County model makes sense for the roughly 13,000 county inmates spread across the 13 county jails in Massachusetts. Many share characteristics with the typical Hampden County inmate: a 22-year old male serving an eight-month sentence for selling drugs or breaking and entering. The roughly 10,000 inmates serving time in state prison are often older, meaner, and are serving longer. But they, too, are coming out.

Governor Romney and the Legislature appear to be moving toward a system of mandatory post-release supervision for all offenders. It makes sense given that 97 percent of the state's prison population is eventually released. But Hampden County officials warn that success will depend on adequate availability of drug treatment programs, vocational training, and housing assistance. The state needs to increase such opportunities.

Other challenges await. The recidivism rate after three years for Hampden County inmates during Ashe's tenure has been in the 35-40 percent range, not much lower than for state prisoners. That doesn't seem particularly impressive. But Hampden County administrators warn that the data must be interpreted carefully. Many of their recidivists, they say, are returned to jail for technical parole violations such as curfew violations, not for new crimes that pose a risk to the community. Any new statewide policy must resolve whether such violations warrant the expense, in every case, of re-incarceration.

### **A motivated staff**

Staff dissatisfaction can be an impediment to prison reform. Many correction officers feel trapped in a dangerous job with marginal status. In Hampden County, however, opportunities for advancement are numerous for staff as well as inmates. Promoting from within is as central to the institution as inmate accountability. Ashe says signs of good morale are evident in the infrequent worker compensation claims, low use of sick time, and little turnover.

Ashe seems to know the career trajectories of scores of his workers. Walking the grounds, he introduces the facility's director of training, who started 11 years ago as a summer employee. The teachers in the graphics arts and metal fabrication programs both started their careers as correctional officers.

The community corrections approach, says Ashe, opens career paths for correction officers. Many opt to become prerelease counselors and reentry specialists, even if it requires them to give up union protections.

The "busting rocks mentality" added little to the public safety debate. Ashe, a proponent of "strength reinforced with dignity," seems to have found the balance needed to move corrections forward in Massachusetts.

