

## **Sheriff Ashe May Hold Key To Prison Reform**

Tucked inside an 80-page report detailing the need for sweeping reform of Massachusetts' failing prison system, there were a few pages suggesting that a model for change can be found in the western part of the state.

The Hampden County Sheriff's Department was singled out for praise in the final report of the Governor's Commission on Corrections Reform, the 15-member panel led by former Attorney General L. Scott Harshbarger that spent eight months examining the state prison system.

Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr. is essentially "getting it right" by emphasizing programs that prepare inmates to re-enter society, according to the report. "Inmates understand that their status in the institution and their progress toward community release are tied directly to their active participation in programs to prepare for release and to their institutional behavior."

The report also gives Ashe high marks for his "hands-on" management style that "includes a fair amount of responsibility for uniform staff non-uniform staff and inmates."

Much of what is contained in the report on the prison system is not flattering, however. The prison study commission was created in response to problems in the state prison system identified by another panel that investigated last summer's murder of convicted pedophile and defrocked priest John J. Geoghan at the hands of a fellow inmate.

Among the findings, the report said the Department of Correction developed a tolerance for abuse and did little to prepare inmates for release. The report said one in two prisoners released commit a new crime within three years and are sent back to jail.

In addition, the report criticized the prison system for allowing personnel costs to overwhelm corrections budgets, noting high sick time rates among correctional officers with guards using 17.5 days of paid sick leave per year.

Romney endorsed the report in a signal that his administration is breaking from former Gov. William F. Weld's lock-them-up-and-throw-away-the-key philosophy. Public Safety Secretary Edward Flynn said the report pointed to a need to be "tough and smart."

It appears as though the state should look west for a change find a prison system that is both tough and smart. Sheriff Ashe's jail may hold the key.