

# Sheriff Raises Bar For Jails

Hampden County Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr. does things in a different way.

Compared to his counterparts in the state Department of Corrections, Ashe is providing a model for working with prisoners from the day they are incarcerated until well after release.

His efforts, and that of his staff, stand in contrast to the findings of two commissions established by Gov. W. Mitt Romney, each of which concluded that the commonwealth's desire to punish lawbreakers has led to a prison system tilted much more toward warehousing inmates than rehabilitating them.

The commissions' reports, one released last spring and the other last month, concluded that the state does not adequately prepare inmates to return to society. The panels also believe that the effort to reduce recidivism should include both expanding programs that assist inmates and the monitoring of them after their release.

One of the groups, the Governor's Commission on Criminal Justice Innovation, drew a stark picture of what a return to society can look like for some lawbreakers.

"Without supervision upon release, prisoners are expected to make what has been described as a 'safe crash landing' back into society after a long period of debilitating incarceration, without programs for a sensible reintegration," the reported stated. "Still burdened with addictions, lack of job skills, and poor life management skills, many (cannot) compete in our society."

The other panel, the Governor's Commission on Corrections Reform, lavished praise on the Hampden County Sheriff's Department for its work with inmates.

"Instead of simply serving their sentences, inmates are challenged to use their period of incarceration to engage in productive activities and make positive changes in their lives by focusing on those attitudes, behaviors and (cognition) that brought them to jail," the commission's report stated.

For the first five weeks in the jail, formally known as the Hampden County Correctional Center at Stony Brook, inmates spend several hours each day enrolled in a mandatory orientation program. The jail also offers programs for substance abuse, anger management and pre-employment training.

And before inmates are released, many participate in a program geared toward helping them adjust to the outside world.

A post incarceration program was instituted in 1996 for inmates who have less than 90 days of their sentence remaining. The program provides counseling and monitors inmates, sometimes for months after release. Since its inception, almost 8,000 male and female prisoners have participated.

"We seize the opportunity," Ashe said last week. "We get their attention. We have a plan. We intervene. We show them another way."

The programs all stem from his background in social work. J. John Ashe, his brother and superintendent of the department, has a similar background and philosophy.

The jail has been termed a model for the industry by the American Correctional Association.

"It is probably the best facility that I've ever been in," said Julie Von Arx, a jail evaluator for the association. "I hope the community and the public realize what a gem they have in the Hampden County Sheriff's Department, and what a gem they have in Sheriff Ashe."

As both commissions pointed out, state sentencing laws do not make the job of working with inmates easy. For example, Frank J. Carney, executive director of the state Sentencing Commission and a member of the Commission on Criminal Justice Innovation, said that many prison inmates avail themselves of an easy loophole to avoid supervision upon release.

By law, an inmate is eligible for parole by serving the minimum sentence, but Carney said that frequently the difference between the minimum and maximum sentence is only a day, and by opting to serve that maximum term, almost half the prisoners avoid formal supervision upon release.

He also said that, under current law, many drug offenders are not eligible for programs that might help prepare them for life after prison. He believes this also has to change.

"There really needs to be some sentencing reform," Carney said. "You got to start assessing and planning and implementing the appropriate programs right from the beginning, and you've got to have a sentencing structure that supports that."

