

## Support crucial to ex-inmates

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O'Harold Staton's first child was born the same day he was sentenced to 23 years in prison for robbery. It was July 7, 1968.

Today, his daughter is a bank manager, and Staton, 55, is a barber with a shop of his own on Hull Street in South Richmond. He has been on parole now for 12 years.

One of his barbers, Eric Foster, 24, served more than three years for armed robbery. He said he completed his probation in October.

Some ex-convicts, such as Staton and Foster, successfully return from prison to society, primarily with the help of their families.

Across Virginia and the nation there are also programs - governmental, private nonprofit, and faith-based - that try to help former prisoners become successful citizens.

But there isn't enough help for all who need it, say parolees, inmates and inmate advocates. Many inmates are released unprepared for freedom, and they often are destined to return to their cells.

Staton, Foster and many experts also say the transitional programs often don't work, particularly when drugs are so available, if the inmate re-entering society does not have family or community help.

James R. Camache, deputy director of the state Department of Corrections, agrees. "You can develop all the programs in the world," he said. But "when all the cutting and shooting is over, it's sobriety, it's jobs, it's housing and somebody that cares about them and holding them accountable."

Corrections experts across the country are focusing as never before on how to reduce the recidivism rate - roughly one-third of released inmates return to prison within three years.

The National Institute of Corrections' Transition from Prison to Community Initiative provides a new model for states. Virginia is studying the plan, and a meeting is set for the end of this month for more than 70 officials, from judges to parole experts, who are involved in inmate re-entry.

Virginia is also one of seven states involved in the National Governors Association's Prisoner Reentry State Policy Academy studying the problem and ways to solve it.

"Re-entry needs to start the minute they enter incarceration," said Carl A. Wicklund, executive director of the American Probation and Parole Association. "It shouldn't be something that starts their last two weeks of their prison sentence. Prisons need to be something more than a warehouse."

H. Scott Richeson, correctional programs manager for the state Department of Corrections, said that is the approach taken in Virginia: "We really try to begin release-planning when the person is received into the department."

The department uses the court's pre-sentence report, which has a great deal of information on the offender's background, crimes and problems, to help draw up a treatment plan for an inmate while in prison, she said.

The length of a sentence frequently determines which programs an inmate can get into. Some programs are too long, or there is too long a waiting period to join, so short-term inmates cannot participate, Richeson said.

"Right now, we have vocational training, anger management, substance-abuse services - all those relate to release skills."

Closer to release, prisoners are supposed to attend a 45-hour course that teaches, among other things, how to apply for a job and catch a bus. But because of staffing and other limitations, only about half of departing inmates take the course.

The department also has started helping inmates with documents they can use to obtain an identification card or a license from the Department of Motor Vehicles. Many also lack Social Security cards, so they need help to obtain one.

The preparations inmates make for their transition varies widely, Richeson said. "In the worst-case scenario, we have a violent offender with no home plan."

On the other hand, some inmates with substance-abuse problems benefit from 18 months of treatment inside prison and an additional six months of residential treatment and transitional services when they are released.

There are 1,300 residential substance-abuse-treatment program beds in Virginia prisons. For some of those who complete the 1½-year program behind bars, the final phase is in contract residential community facilities such as the 180-day, 41-bed Gemeinschaft Home program in Harrisonburg.

"That's the ideal situation. . . . You're not just releasing them cold turkey to the street. You're putting them in a place where they can get a job, they can save some money," Richeson said.

Approximately 90 post-release residential beds are available statewide, she said. She hopes a recent budget increase will double capacity by 2006.

Barry Green, deputy secretary for public safety, said the General Assembly added \$1 million this fiscal year, and \$1.8 million for fiscal 2006, to expand post-release residential treatment programs.

But it isn't enough, officials said.

"We estimated we would need 400 beds to meet demand," Richeson said. She noted that the residential treatment programs, both in prison and post-release, can handle only a fraction of the substance abusers among the 11,000 Virginia inmates released every year.

A relatively new program sends prison inmates back to the jails in their old communities before their release so they can meet and work with the local probation, parole and employment officials and better establish bonds with friends and family.

That program now has 242 inmates. Eventually, officials hope the majority of inmates will participate. Violent inmates or those with serious medical problems will not be eligible, Richeson said.

Camache, deputy director of the Department of Corrections, said there are a number of other programs for offenders once they have left prison. Many leaving prison are required to go into a detention or diversion center, he said.

A diversion center provides a 20-week residential program. Offenders live in the facility, and staff monitor them as they work in the community at paid jobs.

A detention center is a 20-week residential program that emphasizes military drill, military discipline, strict hygiene and limited privileges.

Offenders in both programs are subject to urine tests for drugs and have a mandatory year of probation supervision upon release.

Camache said there are approximately 500 to 600 people in five diversion centers and about 400 in four detention centers around the state. Many in those programs are probation and parole violators. Violent offenders cannot participate.

Violent offenders are sent to day-reporting centers - nonresidential programs that involve daily contact between the offender and staff, including random checking on daily itineraries, job interviews, counseling and community service.

Camache said there are between 500 and 600 offenders in 10 day-reporting centers. Most of them have had difficulty under regular or intensive parole or probation supervision. The centers focus on employment, substance abuse and stabilizing homes.

The two most common parole and probation violations are failed urine tests and failing to report, he said. "Usually those two things are tied together. They know they got a dirty urine, so they drop out of sight. So, those are the things we try to focus on" in the centers.

A sex-offender program is run by officers who do nothing but supervise high-risk sex offenders. It includes contracts for individual therapy, a lot of home visits and a lot of polygraph testing.

"They tend to be highly skilled officers," Camache said.

Intensive probation is for career criminals, those who keep returning to a criminal lifestyle. "We supervise those offenders in a very aggressive way, and we don't apologize for it," he said.

Richeson said the Department of Corrections hopes to start a risk-assessment program that predicts the chance a given inmate has of reoffending once released. The risk level is modified as the inmate completes programs while incarcerated or afterward.

"We want to focus our resources on the highest risk people . . . the 30 percent in the revolving door," she said.

Camache said the number of released inmates committing new crimes and returning to prison has stubbornly remained high in recent decades, mainly because of drugs.

He said that 40 years ago, as a probation and parole officer in Richmond, he did not have a single drug offender on his caseload. "I didn't know anybody else that had any," he said.

"Now, 75 or 80 percent of them are drug-involved. These folks that we supervise - they have to be drug and alcohol-free." If the offender is a substance abuser, "you're kind of shoving against the tide."

Staton knows that in his case, it was the support of relatives that enabled him to make a successful transition from prison.

"My family was there for me. A lot of people were there for me," he said.

Staton said that in prison, "a lot of guys sit there year after year and do nothing. They just watch TV and they do nothing to prepare themselves so when they get out they will have something to do."

And, he said, "most of the guys in prison, they come from a broken home. If you come from a broken home . . . there's no one really to assist you while you're incarcerated" or when you get out.

Foster said the transition is difficult. He, too, credits his family for a large part of his success. Also, he said, he cut himself off from his old friends and other bad influences.

Staton and Foster learned to cut hair in prison. Each complained, however, that vocational training is available to fewer and fewer inmates.

Other ex-convicts complain of a lack of training or educational opportunities in the prisons, though the Department of Correctional Education says more than 19,000 inmates participated in its programs in 2003-04, which is 2,600 more than five years ago. That is more than half the prison population.

The department teaches a functional literacy program, which emphasizes math as well as reading, and a GED program. It also offers training in more than 30 vocations.

Staton said the best thing prisons can do to prepare inmates for release is to make it mandatory they learn a trade or a skill "that will enable them to do something when they are released."

Still, he said, "prison is not going to force you to become a better man. You have to do that on your own.

"If you come out and do the right thing, you ain't going to have no problem with parole. You come out and do the wrong thing, then you're going to have a problem."

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