

Virginia State Crime Commission

Virginia Prisoner Re-entry Policy Academy

2007

VIRGINIA PRISONER RE-ENTRY POLICY ACADEMY

At the Crime Commission's December 13, 2007, meeting, The Honorable Barry Green, Interim Deputy Secretary of Public Safety, and Jane Brown, Director of the Office of Community Partnerships for the Virginia Department of Social Services, briefed the Commission on the Virginia Prisoner Re-Entry Policy Academy.

Mr. Green reported that the growth of Virginia's state responsible population in prisons and those held in local jails is expected to average 1,000 per year over the next six years. This forecast will require construction of a new prison each year over the next six years. A new, 1,000 bed, medium security prison costs approximately \$100 million to construct and, once opened, costs about \$25 million per year to operate. Mr. Green further reported that the 2007 local responsible population was 20,703 and that, in addition, jails held 5,980 state responsible offenders. The local responsible population is expected to grow an average of 4.8% per year for the next six years, with an average growth of about 1,100 inmates per year. In calendar year 2006, 12,811 inmates were released from prisons back into their communities, with the largest number returning to Norfolk, followed by Newport News, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, and Richmond.

The Commission was informed by Mr. Green that the average age of inmates at commitment was 33 years, and that 56% entered without a high school diploma or GED, 22% had no history of employment, 67% had a history of substance abuse, and 15% had a mental illness requiring treatment. Of new commitments, more than 42% had been in prison at some time in their past. Over 46% were probation violators, 9.5% of whom had committed a technical violation; the remainder had committed a new crime. While incarcerated, 36.2% participated in either GED and/or vocational and educational training and 32% of those with a history of substance abuse received treatment. Ninety-two percent of those eligible for job assignments worked.

Mr. Green stated that Virginia DOC measures recidivism as the percentage of inmates who are recommitted to DOC within three years of release. Virginia's recidivism rate is currently 29%. Virginia has the 8th lowest recidivism rate of the 30 states that measure recidivism in the same manner.

Mrs. Brown informed the Commission that the National Governor's Association ("NGA") Center for Best Practices announced in 2003 that Virginia was among

seven states selected to participate in its Prisoner Re-Entry Policy Academy. Virginia's Policy Academy project team brought together representatives from agencies and organizations that deliver services to ex-offenders and their families. The NGA assisted state teams in developing effective prisoner re-entry strategies designed to strengthen public safety and reduce recidivism through the improvement of both pre-release and post-release services. Four sub-committees were established to identify causes of recidivism, based upon categories of need or barriers to successful re-entry. These involved: i) financial obligations, community resources and housing; ii) family and community reintegration; iii) employment and education; and iv) health, mental health, and substance abuse. Each sub-committee developed work plans that proposed actions to address barriers to successful re-entry.

In June of 2006, the Governor issued Executive Order 22, establishing the Virginia Prisoner Re-Entry Policy Academy, comprised of 24 Executive Branch agency heads. Order 22 strengthens support for the NGA Policy Academy, fosters successful transition of offenders into communities, and supports the fulfillment of Va. Code § 2.2-221.1, which directs the Secretary of Public Safety to establish a system for coordinating the planning and provision of re-entry services. Among other responsibilities, the Policy Academy provides coordination at the executive level for re-entry initiatives across the state, explores programs that will aid in offender reintegration, and addresses policies and practices that impede successful reintegration.

The Virginia Re-Entry Model is being piloted in five localities. The pilot programs allow for testing and evaluating implementation of the model developed from Virginia's participation in the NGA Policy Academy on Prisoner Re-Entry. The pilot programs were selected on a voluntary basis and include Greensville Correctional Center, Coffeewood Correctional Center, Haynesville Correctional Center, Powhatan Correctional Center, Fluvanna Correctional Center, and the surrounding communities. Albemarle County and Charlottesville are also implementing the Virginia Re-Entry Model as a jail-only pilot program, and southwestern Virginia has begun a regional pilot program to implement the model for federal offenders returning to the community.

The Virginia Re-Entry Model is characterized by pre-release planning, community collaboration, integrated service delivery, and connection to positive community influences and family support. Program participants are provided information about services and obligations that affect them and their families during their incarceration. Representatives from the correctional family and the

local re-entry council meet with the offender to develop plans for the offender's return to the community. Further, in the year following release, the offender will enjoy ongoing contact with representatives of the local re-entry council. The program model includes family mentoring during the re-entry process and for the year following release. Guidance is provided on parenting skills, strengthening relationships through communication, conflict resolution and problem solving, education, and financial skills.

Program volunteers have identified three major challenges upon release: the payment of debts, obtaining employment, and locating housing. Mrs. Brown reported that better release planning, interagency coordination, integrated service delivery and links to positive community influences will help to decrease re-entry barriers and help to increase the opportunities for former prisoners to become contributing members of their community. Successful reentry, she asserted, will improve public safety, support families, and will amount to a good stewardship of tax dollars. Mrs. Brown concluded by stating that Virginia State Senator Toddy Puller chairs a sub-committee that would be making recommendations to the General Assembly in the near future.

