

# Corrections: More Safety for Less Money

## COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES • Innovative diversionary programs help lower Connecticut's prison count

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Two decades ago, Connecticut politicians hewed to the "get tough on crime" line in a big way. The state spent more than \$1 billion on new or expanded prisons from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. The result was some improvement in public safety, to be sure, but also a huge and expensive penal system. Today, the Department of Correction has 7,000 employees and an annual operating budget of almost \$700 million.

About six years ago, leaders such as then-state Rep. Robert Farr and new Department of Correction Commissioner Theresa C. Lantz urged a shift in thinking. Understanding that nearly all inmates eventually leave prison, they proposed strategies to keep them from going back. They and others supported the use of pretrial programs such as drug treatment for appropriate offenders.

This approach seems to be making headway here — just as a major national study says it is the right way to go. "One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections," a study released this week by the nonprofit Pew Center on the States, says public safety can best be achieved, and money saved, by better use of community-based programs.

Connecticut is ahead of the curve. A decade ago, officials estimated the state would have 22,000 people behind bars by 2007. But the highest the prison population count reached was 19,894 inmates on Feb. 1, 2008. That number was inflated because parole was temporarily suspended in 2007 after recent two horrific crimes committed by released inmates.

On Feb. 1 of this year, the number of inmates in the state's prisons and jails had fallen to 19,107, slightly below the 2007 level.

Part of the reason for the drop is that the reconstituted Board of Pardons and Paroles, now headed by Mr. Farr, has eliminated much of the backlog.

But officials say some programs also appear to be keeping the prison population down. These include:

- A pre-adjudication "jail re-interview" program that diverts some people who cannot make bail to community-based programs. If they perform well in the program, they may earn the right to stay out of jail.
- Intervention by Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services clinicians on behalf of mentally ill people in court and in prison. The agency's goal is to divert the mentally ill into a treatment program to keep them out of prison, or prepare a discharge that will keep them from going back to prison. Nonviolent people diagnosed with serious mental illness should not be in prison; that didn't work well in the 17th century. Those who do pose a threat should be detained in a clinical setting.
- A special unit that deals with technical violations of parole. Violation of conditions for community release is the most common offense for which inmates are incarcerated. Violators make up 12 percent of the prison population. Officials offer some parolees — who may have missed meetings or curfews or begun using drugs again — a 60-day refresher course and another chance.
- Prisoner re-entry programs. The Correction Department has expanded these to prepare inmates to live in their communities and hold a job, which would make them less likely to commit another crime. Preparation for release can involve everything from education, job training and drug treatment to simply getting an identification card. Officials credit this program, begun in 2003, with achieving the first decline

in the prison population in more than 20 years.

Recidivism remains a stubborn problem, but these numbers may be headed downward. The most recent study of the subject, released last month, shows a slight drop from 38.2 percent to 36.7 percent of inmates returned to prison for a new offense within three years. The rate of return for parolees was 23.4 percent, which suggests there is benefit in community supervision as part of a release program. This study was of inmates released in 2004, when many of the new programs were just starting.

There is little question that community alternatives are less costly than prison. It costs an average of \$89 a day to keep someone in prison in Connecticut. Although the state doesn't have comparable numbers for parole and probation, the Pew survey of 34 states found the average daily cost of monitoring a person on probation and parole was \$3.42 and \$7.47, respectively.

But what of the risk of more inmates in the community?

The study avers that serious, chronic and violent felons should be put in jail for a long time, a sentiment with which most people would concur. But the authors say locking up hundreds of thousands of low-level inmates who pose little risk "costs taxpayers far more than it saves in prevented crime."

There is always risk in sending criminals back into a community, but the study says new and sophisticated risk-assessment tools and methods of treatment, as well as supervisory aids such as global-positioning systems and rapid-result drug tests, make the risk manageable.

So Connecticut is on the right track. Agencies are working together. The thrust of public policy has changed diametrically. And there is hope that the new changes won't be derailed by lack of funds.

With the budgetary crisis, officials are already looking for ways to lower the cost of the correction system. One idea is a 45-day furlough program; another is earned-time incentives for early release. Both have promise.

The cities of Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport, home to about half of the state's released inmates, are trying to focus resources on the neighborhoods where the inmates live. Jobs may be the hard part; it is tough enough for ex-offenders to find employment in the best of times.

But the legislature should not endanger the community programs. They may at some point allow the state to close a cellblock or a prison, and that would save real money. Last year the state wisely invested in more parole officers and other programs. It seems to be paying off — let's not go backward.

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