

The first meeting of the Joint Subcommittee Studying the Commonwealth's Program for Prisoner Reentry to Society of the 2007 interim was held Thursday, June 28, 2007, at the General Assembly Building in Richmond. Following opening remarks by Senator Puller and an overview of activities of the 2006 interim, 2007 legislation and budget items affecting prisoner reentry, and the study resolution, the joint subcommittee received several presentations on a range of topics.

Prisoner Reentry Planning

Mr. Mark L. Early, President and CEO of the Prison Fellowship, discussed the growing prison crisis and the need for prisoner reentry planning. Mr. Early stressed six key principles that form the basis of the Prison Fellowship's approach to planning, which include: community, consistency, character, comprehensiveness, continuity, and collaboration. He emphasized that working to increase reentry planning efforts and maximizing resources available to support reentry activities, including volunteers, would ultimately have a positive impact on public safety as well as prisoner well-being.

Review of Prisoner Education Programs in Other States

Mr. Paul Barton, Senior Associate at the Policy Information Center of the Education Testing Service, provided the joint subcommittee with an overview of national trends in correctional education policy and practice. Mr. Barton highlighted the fact that funding for correctional education has consistently been reduced across the nation, and that the ratio of inmates to instructors has increased. Another problem highlighted by Mr. Barton was that of accessing information. In many cases, Mr. Barton noted, detailed information on specific programs simply wasn't available.

Educational Programs for Inmates in Virginia

Ms. Judy Philpott and Ms. Gwynne Cunningham of the Department of Correctional Education briefed the members on academic and vocational programs for adults and juveniles in Virginia's correctional facilities. During the presentation, Ms. Philpott highlighted special education efforts undertaken by the Department. Ms. Cunningham presented information on a number of special programs including college courses, Productive Citizenship, and parenting classes. The presentation concluded with a survey of challenges affecting the programs, programs needs, and a few recommendations to address these challenges and needs.

"Drive-to-Work" Program

Mr. Randy Rollins presented information on his new Richmond-based nonprofit organization, Drive to Work. The program utilizes volunteer attorneys to assist low income, previously incarcerated persons with the process of restoring their driving privileges so that they can drive to work and hold a job. Mr. Rollins also presented several suggested legislative actions which would address problems confronted by

recently incarcerated persons attempting to obtain licenses to support employment activities.

Other Business

Ms. Lisa Thomas brought the joint subcommittee's attention to a problem arising as a result of potential conflicts in facility visitation policies. These policies, Ms. Thomas reported, may prevent volunteers engaged in reentry activities from gaining access to inmates. The Department of Public Safety agreed to work with the Department of Corrections, to review Department of Corrections policy to determine if a policy change would be required to resolve the problem.

Senator Puller introduced an issue raised by a member of the public regarding release of inmates with serious communicable diseases and the lack of information regarding such diseases to both the inmate and public health agencies. The Department of Corrections agreed to look into the matter further.

Public Comment

The joint subcommittee heard public comment from three members of the public, emphasizing the need for additional services for sex offenders, requesting that prisoners no longer be allowed to refuse transfer to other states or the federal system, and suggesting the need for overall changes in the system.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the joint subcommittee will be held in Richmond, date and time to be determined.