

Status of Virginia's Prisoner Reentry Initiative – May 2005

Virginia's approach to reentry is to identify barriers to successful community reintegration and to determine appropriate responses. An appointed workgroup sought to:

- Identify needs that require attention during the period of incarceration
- Establish an inventory of programs designed to address those needs
- Review how the transition from prison environment and control to community life is managed prior to release
- Review how transition is managed upon release
- Identify programs we have to manage issues that arise after release
- Identify what we can do to improve outcomes after transition

The following notes several measures Virginia has taken to date. Our first objective was to ensure that we are making the best use of existing resources to meet these needs. While public safety always comes first, successful reentry extends well beyond public safety agencies and resources. State, local and non-profit entities all play key roles, and insufficient communication and coordination of services limits opportunities for success. A new **dedicated Reentry Coordinator** position was created to facilitate communication and follow-up across the many organizations that comprise the reentry work group.

While the Offender is Incarcerated

The Department of Corrections (DOC) has completed a pilot and adopted a **standardized risk assessment instrument**, completed during the initial classification process when the offender enters prison, designed to identify required programming prior to release. Procurement of the instrument is in progress.

While incarcerated, programming will be better timed to address institutional needs early on, while preparing for reentry in the period leading up to release from prison. The 2005 General Assembly approved funding to **increase space, equipment and instructors for both GED and vocation skills** at three prisons from which large numbers of inmates are traditionally released.

Because most offenders rely on family support in the first months after release, DOC is attempting to facilitate improved family communications. It recently released a handbook on visitation expectations and rules to inmate families. It also expanded a project that provides for videotapes from inmates to children (**'Messages from Mom/Dad'**) to five prisons. At the same time, the Department of Social Services (DSS) is developing an **adult-to-adult and family-to-family mentoring program**, which will begin preparing families and inmates for reunification up to 6 months prior to release, and will extend up to 12 months after release.

The Transitional Process

Several steps have been taken to improve preparation for release. The **Productive Citizenship** curriculum has been revised and expanded and is currently being evaluated. Several additional prerelease initiatives have been implemented that seek to smooth out the transition process. These include a **jail-based transition program**, where offenders are moved from prison to the jail in their communities about 90 days prior to release. They participate in Productive Citizenship and other programming during the first 45 days, and work release during the last 45 days. This allows for additional family and probation staff visitation, and provides greater job opportunities upon release. Eight such programs currently exist, and new funding will expand the program to 15 jails by the end of fiscal year 2006.

Funding has also been provided to **increase community based pre/post release contract beds** – a six-month program (3 pre-release and 3 post-release), including a substance abuse treatment component, providing beds for up to 200 additional offenders. Additionally, DOC and the Department of Rehabilitative Services are planning to utilize available space at the state's residential rehabilitation facility to **allow appropriate inmates with disabilities to receive services, training, and placement assistance** at the facility.

Because an estimated 15% of inmates have continuing needs for mental health services after release, a **memorandum of understanding has been signed between the DOC, the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, and each of the local Community Service Boards** throughout the state to provide for a coordinated assessment of needs prior to and at the time of release. A series of meetings have also been conducted to improve a memorandum of understanding between the DOC, the Department of Rehabilitative Services, and the Social Security Administration to improve the process **for those who may qualify for disability services and benefits** upon release.

The DOC has modified procedures to allow inmates to obtain key documents, such as a birth certificate and photo identification that will be required for job search, housing, etc. upon release.

What Happens After Release?

Offenders return to their communities under a set of probation or parole rules. Probation officers monitor compliance with the rules, and provide offenders with assistance in transitioning from inmate to citizen status. Basic **probation/parole officer training** has been modified to incorporate evidence-based practices designed to improve communications, and to better identify programs that improve success rates. **Evidence-based practices** have been implemented at four pilot probation/parole districts (Lynchburg, Charlottesville, Williamsburg, and Winchester). Additionally, after receiving 25 new probation officer positions at the 2004 legislative session, the DOC

created two specialized POs, with mental health/substance abuse credentials, in a pilot effort to develop and measure interventions designed to reduce the numbers of technical violations.

Several steps have been taken to address the numbers of offenders being returned to prison for technical violations of their probation. While some violations may indicate a threat to the public and warrant reincarceration of the offenders. However, other violations may better be addressed through sanctions in the community, including programs to improve the chances that offenders will become productive citizens. The Virginia Sentencing Commission has developed a **risk-assessment instrument to identify violators who present a risk of reoffending**, as well as those who present a low risk. With **funding to initiate new local jail-based programs**, violators may now receive both a sanction and corrective programming, increasing the likelihood that they will complete their transition.

Coordinating Services at the Local Level

In four pilot programs, beginning in September 2005, local Departments of Social Services are taking the lead in developing **local reentry boards**, coordinating agencies that provide services that are accessed by offenders. Each department is associating with a specific prison that releases offenders to its locally, and will begin visiting the facilities (and the inmates) prior to reentry. Primary principles are integrated service delivery and interagency collaboration.

Virginia, currently operating a SAVORI program in Fairfax County, recently expanded to a second site in Newport News.

Other Activities

A statewide **conference on housing for offenders**, jointly sponsored by the Policy Academy workgroups for Reentry and for Chronic Homelessness, was held in April 2005.

The Department of Correctional Education has created a new Youth Transition Coordinator position to improve the transition of juveniles from the Department of Juvenile Justice back to their homes and local schools.

Recent Legislation

At the 2005 General Assembly, legislation was passed which:

- Creates a joint Senate/House subcommittee to study reentry.
- Codifies the ongoing reentry effort through the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety.
- Requires development of mental health transition plans for incarcerated juveniles.

- Allows offenders convicted of drug possession, who were previously ineligible for food stamps, to qualify - provided would otherwise be eligible and are meeting court imposed and treatment requirements.