

# **SJR 126: Joint Subcommittee Studying Prisoner Reentry to Society**

*July 27, 2006*

The Joint Subcommittee Studying the Commonwealth's Program for Prisoner Reentry to Society, a continuation of the study conducted during the previous interim pursuant to HJR 273, held its first meeting on July 27 at the General Assembly Building in Richmond.

The Honorable Senator Linda T. Puller continues to serve as Chair and the Honorable Delegate John J. Welch, III continues to serve as Vice-Chair.

## **Staff Briefing**

DLS staff presented an overview of the authority and terms of the 2006 study under SJR 126, recommendations from the 2005 study, and described related 2006 legislation and budget measures. The staff also referenced the proposed study plan for the 2006 interim and projected meeting dates for future discussion.

## **Related 2006 Budget Amendments**

*Barry Green, Director of the Department of Juvenile Justice*, provided an overview of the recent budget amendments that impact prisoner reentry. Mr. Green referenced status reports from the Department of Correctional Education and Secretary of Public Safety that have been mandated by the budget. The status reports on the implementation of state jail transition programs and on state actions to improve offender reentry services are due October 16 and November 15, 2006, respectively. Mr. Green indicated that much of the funding awarded replaces Federal grants that are expiring. In response to questions, Mr. Green described successful vocational training programs for inmates such as barbering and horticulture. See Materials.

## **National Perspective on State Prisoner Reentry Programs**

*Keri Beth Cain, Policy Analyst at the National Governors Association (NGA)*, addressed the national picture, the growing inmate population, success in other states, and how Virginia has been selected to participate in the NGA Policy Academy on Prisoner Reentry. NGA continues to study and promote best practices in prisoner reentry through its Policy Academy. Ms. Cain described obstacles to reentry such as uncoordinated service systems, cuts in funding for prison programs, and both systemic and legal barriers. She set forth the following strategies for improvement: 1) develop interagency approach; 2) improve preparation of prisoners beginning on the first day of confinement; and 3) improve how prisoners are released. Ms. Cain indicated that Virginia was one of seven states selected for Round One of the NGA Policy Academy due to top-level support, involvement by non-correctional agencies, use of existing resources for new purposes, and funds designated for research and evaluation. Ms. Cain confirmed that Virginia also qualified for Round Two of the NGA Policy Academy in competition with 16 other states, and its programs have been awarded foundation and federal grants. Ms. Cain acknowledged growing national momentum and the Second Chance Act of 2005 to support prisoner reentry, which Congress recently considered, but has not passed. See Materials.

## **Virginia Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy:**

### **Overview and Executive Order**

*Dawn Smith, Assistant Secretary of Public Safety at the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety,* introduced the Virginia Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy. Ms. Smith presented the recent Executive Order, whereby the Governor formally recognized the Academy and designated the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety to lead it. Ms. Smith described the origin of the Academy and its four subcommittees on the following subjects: 1) Employment and Education; 2) Social Reintegration; 3) Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse; and 4) Financial Obligations, Housing, Financial and Community Resources. In conclusion, Ms. Smith stated that present challenges include a lack of dedicated funding and staffing devoted to reentry. See Materials.

### **Employment and Education Subcommittee of the Policy Academy**

*Gwynne Cunningham, Director of Special Programs at the Department of Correctional Education,* and chair of the Employment and Education Subcommittee, set forth many programs to promote employment of prisoners upon release. Ms. Cunningham emphasized that Virginia is one of only three states in which no agency serves as the bonding coordinator for federal fidelity bonds to protect employers of former inmates. She also described the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) that provides an incentive for employers to hire former inmates. She indicated that the Department informs offenders about the WOTC in its Productive Citizenship curriculum, while the Virginia Employment Commission provides notice of WOTC to employers. Ms. Cunningham explained that the promotion of reentry through national media campaigns is crucial to the process. In addition, she described mock interview events, job/career fairs, college for juvenile offenders, university benefits for incarcerated veterans, business/education partnerships for vocational training, and career readiness certificates that the Department provides for inmates. The members requested copies of a report on statutory Restrictions to Employment for Individuals with Criminal Histories ("barrier crimes"). See Materials.

### **Social Reintegration Subcommittee of the Policy Academy**

*Carol-Lee Raimo, Program Coordinator of the Department of Criminal Justice Services and Co-Chair of the Social Reintegration Subcommittee,* gave a presentation on the status of the subcommittee objectives and programs. Ms. Raimo noted the shortfalls of current state appropriations and the federal grants that are expiring. Successful programs that she described included a handbook for inmates' family members regarding prison rules and visitation, a video project by offenders who are parents that reaches a total of 450 children, a contract for less expensive collect calls from inmates, parenting courses, the Milk and Cookies Program for children of incarcerated parents, a Risk/Needs Assessment Instrument to track offender progress, preparation on emotional coping skills for reentry, and additional Transitional Therapeutic Community (TTC) beds. Ms. Raimo explained that the Subcommittee plans to increase awareness of the prison visitation service, add family-counseling pilot programs, a support group for caregivers of inmates' families, care packages from home, and help for inmates to obtain vital identity documents upon release. A member of the joint subcommittee suggested that Ms. Raimo include a crime victim on the Social Reintegration Subcommittee. Members also commented on the importance of parenting classes, visitation, and transportation services for families of inmates. See Materials.

### **Transitional Therapeutic Communities**

*Dudley Bush, Substance Abuse Manager, Department of Corrections,* provided a brief overview of the Transitional Therapeutic Communities (TTC) program. He explained that TTCs provide a six month transition period within a community of substance abuse treatment. TTCs require

employment by the inmate or probationer and have demonstrated success in supporting recovery and reducing recidivism. Mr. Bush described the six current TTC providers in five cities: Harrisonburg, Newport News, Roanoke, Richmond, and Arlington. He answered questions and explained that separate programs for men and women have been most conducive to success. He also highlighted SB 611 on the Therapeutic Incarceration Program for the members' consideration. See Materials.

## **Virginia Prisoner Reentry Pilot Programs**

*Jane Brown, Director of Community Programs at the Department of Social Services*, discussed the Reentry Pilot Programs and Local Reentry Councils that enable a wide range of government officials, faith-based organizations, and other community leaders to come to the table for positive dialogue on reentry measures. Ms. Brown stated that the Virginia Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy is conducting pilot programs in five localities. The reentry pilot programs allow for testing and evaluation of the recommendations developed by the Policy Academy. Ms. Brown noted that although pilot localities readily volunteered for participation, there is no designated funding. She further anticipates expansion to other localities based on recent discussions. Ms. Brown advised that each locality has a Prisoner Reentry Council that consists of the director of the local department of social services and representatives of interested public and private organizations. She explained that each locality has an assigned state correctional facility from which 25-50 offenders participate under individual plans developed three to six months prior to release. Reentry services offered by the pilot programs include family mentoring, parenting classes, education, job placement, and financial literacy instruction. Ms. Brown invited the members of the joint subcommittee to attend upcoming Reentry Council meetings. See Materials.

## **Proposed Work Plan**

The joint subcommittee members discussed the possibilities for future meetings and speakers. They agreed that the next meeting should address inmate mental health issues and consider the Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Subcommittee of the Policy Academy. Members suggested speakers on transitional services from non-profit organizations for the second meeting. For the final meeting, members suggested consideration of economic matters, workforce investment issues, and proposed legislation.

## **Public Comment**

*Randall Pepin of Virginia C.U.R.E. (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)*, former inmate, and current graduate student, spoke before the joint subcommittee and submitted a report on successful offender reentry. Mr. Pepin, a convicted sex offender, credits his rehabilitation to psychological treatment during incarceration, combined with faith-based counseling. He asserted that a faith-based approach is necessary to change sex offenders. Mr. Pepin recommended mandatory group counseling paid for by offenders that would continue after release. Mr. Pepin reminded the subcommittee that most offenders return to live and work in their communities. See Materials.

*Lillie Branch-Kennedy, Director of RIHD (Resource Information Help for the Disadvantaged)*, a non-profit organization dedicated to reducing recidivism, described her work and recommendations. Ms. Branch-Kennedy endorses SB 105 (Marsh) and SJR 95 (Hanger) to benefit prisoner reentry. She described several RIHD programs that provide educational self-help and alleviate transportation problems between families and inmates. For example, the proceeds of the RIHD inmate art program mitigate debts to help inmates and their families. Ms. Branch-Kennedy stressed that prison does not have to be inside the prisoner. She advocates beginning reentry services on Day One, along with mental health and substance abuse treatment to prevent recidivism.

*Brenda Jefferson McLauren, Office Manager of RIHD, underscored support for the reentry programs and advised that such programs must begin on the first day of incarceration. Several other members of RIHD appeared for public comment, including Claudette Williams, Carolyn Suspene-Braxton, Marilyn Roberson, and Leonie May.*

*Kim Mummert, Virginia C.U.R.E. member and mother of an inmate, implored the subcommittee to consider increased funding and incentives for inmate participation in reentry services. She maintains that a percentage of the substantial expense incurred by families to telephone inmates should go to funding reentry programs.*

## **FUTURE MEETINGS**

The next meeting authorized by SJR 126 (which includes a Public Hearing at 2:00 p.m. on the same day) is set for October 26, 2006 at 10:00 A.M. in Senate Room A of the General Assembly Building in Richmond. The joint subcommittee has scheduled its final meeting on November 14, 2006 at 2:00 P.M. in Richmond.

**Chairman:** The Hon. Linda T. Puller

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