

The second meeting of the Joint Subcommittee Studying the Commonwealth's Program for Prisoner Reentry to Society of the 2007 interim was held Tuesday, July 31, 2007, at the General Assembly Building in Richmond. Following opening remarks by Senator Puller and review of a video report on the Bard College Prison Initiative, which provides higher education to prison inmates in New York State, the joint subcommittee received several presentations on a range of topics.

Correctional Education Programs in Other States

Ms. Brenda Edwards of the Division of Legislative Services, presented information on correctional education programs in other states, highlighting state programs with unique features.

Special Education Overview

Dr. Pat Abrams of the Virginia Department of Education, gave an overview of federal and state laws and regulations governing special education in Virginia and the role of the Department of Education in special education in adult and juvenile local and regional facilities. Dr. Abrams also discussed issues associated with re-enrollment of students committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice and provided an overview of the rights and responsibilities of students and parents regarding enrollment upon release from confinement.

College Programs Offered in Virginia's Correctional Centers

Ms. Gwynne Cunningham, Director of Special Programs for the Department of Correctional Education, described higher education programs offered in Virginia's Correctional Centers. She identified several issues affecting the Department's ability to deliver programs, including lack of available funding. Ms. Cunningham also discussed post-release outcomes for inmates receiving higher education while incarcerated, noting that studies have determined that inmates who participate in college courses have significantly lower recidivism rates than those who do not. Ms. Cunningham also identified a number of benefits to the children and families of incarcerated individuals who receive higher education, benefits for the community, and benefits for prison management.

Impact of Learning Disabilities on the Correctional System

Ms. Judy Philpott, Senior Assistant Superintendent for Academic Programs for the Department of Correctional Education, discussed special education issues affecting Virginia's correctional institutions. She stated that prevalence rates of learning disabilities range from estimates of 12% to 70% for adjudicated youth and adults and that studies have found youth with learning disabilities display higher rates of recidivism than those who do not have learning disabilities. Additional research has shown, however, that improvement in academic skills through remedial education reduces delinquency and recidivism among adjudicated youth. As of December of 2006, Ms. Philpott stated, there were 405 students identified as needing special education services in Virginia correctional facilities, with 103 identified as having a specific learning disability. Moreover, approximately 900 adults in Virginia's correctional system have been identified as potentially having a specific learning disability. To address the issue, Ms.

Philpott reported, the Department of Correctional Education has trained all adult academic teachers in instructional strategies for working with adults with learning disabilities. They have also established a procedure that allows the Department to seek accommodations for individuals identified as having learning disabilities on the GED exam. In the future, she reported, the Department will continue to provide training, will seek better assessments that teachers may be able to utilize to identify strengths and weaknesses of students with learning disabilities, and explore possible collaborations with human services agencies, such as the Department of Rehabilitative Services. These activities may be negatively impacted by the fact that the Department lacks resources for additional diagnostic testing.

Public Comment

Following the scheduled presentations, the Joint Subcommittee received comment from members of the public, emphasizing the need for additional services for sex offenders, and suggesting other changes to the Commonwealth's correctional system.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Joint Subcommittee Studying the Commonwealth's Program for Prisoner Reentry to Society will be held on September 26, 2007, at 1:00 p.m. at the General Assembly Building in Richmond.