

SJR 126: Joint Subcommittee Studying Prisoner Reentry to Society

November 15, 2006

The Joint Subcommittee Studying the Commonwealth's Program for Prisoner Reentry to Society held its second meeting on November 15, 2006 at the General Assembly Building in Richmond. The joint subcommittee heard presentations on a range of issues.

Virginia Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy Status Report and Highlights from the Report on the Status of the Department of Correctional Education's Career and Technical Education Programs

Clyde Cristman, Chair of the Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy and Deputy Secretary of Public Safety provided the Virginia Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy Status Report. Executive Order 22 establishes the Virginia Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy to provide coordination at the executive level of reentry initiatives across the state, explore programs that will aid with offender reintegration, address policies and practices that impede successful reintegration, work collaboratively to implement new policies and procedures, and submit a status report to the Governor and Chairmen of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committees annually.

The Academy met on October 22, 2006 at Greensville Correctional Center to discuss issues of prisoner reentry on the national, state and local level. Attendees included representatives of the Governor's Cabinet, Policy Academy members, Policy Academy Subcommittee members, members of the Joint Subcommittee Studying Prisoner Reentry to Society, law enforcement officers, and community action groups. During the meeting, state agency representatives provided an overview of state programs and services relating to prisoner reentry, representatives of Jefferson Area Offender Aid & Restoration discussed local reentry efforts, and local social services directors shared information on unique aspects of their local pilot reentry programs.

Looking to the future, the Academy plans to participate in a spring 2007 statewide conference on prisoner reentry hosted by the Office of the Secretary of Public Safety, and to seek a Prisoner Reentry Initiative Grant designed to reduce recidivism by helping offenders find work and access other critical services. Additionally, the Academy will continue to focus on issues surrounding prisoner reentry and to provide leadership to identify and coordinate initiatives and resources, to encourage exploration of effective programs that will aid with offender transition, to direct those involved with reentry issues to address policies and practices that impede successful reintegration, to work collaboratively to implement new policies and procedures, and to provide guidance and support to local pilot programs.

The joint subcommittee also heard highlights from the Report on the Status of the Department of Correctional Education's Career and Technical Education Programs. The report identified 36 Department's vocational training programs which enrolled 2476 youth and 5739 adults in Vocational Training Programs, with 280 and 1791 completions respectively, and 26 juveniles and 687 adults in Apprenticeship Programs, with 88 adult apprentice program completions, during FY 2005-2006. The report also identified a range of industry based certifications, as well as job interview fairs, career readiness certificate programs and programs which provide real work experience offered to students by the Department. In addition to highlighting beneficial programs offered by the Department, the report touched upon factors affecting implementation of the Department's vocational training programs. These include:

- lack of suitable space for vocational shops in correctional facilities;
- cost of equipment for Department vocational program set-up and updates;
- inability to provide industry-based certificate testing, as on-line or downloaded exams are not currently approved by the Department of Corrections ;
- matching job market trends with programs due to facility security level and concerns;
- matching student academic ability with programs offered, especially when many related factors including space, budgets, security levels and concerns, and job market projects are out of the Department's control; and
- lack of sufficient operating budget for the Department.

Report of the Subcommittee on Financial Obligations, Housing, and Financial and Community Resources of the Policy Academy.

Jane Brown, Chair of Subcommittee and Director, Office of Committee Partnerships and Department of Social Services offered the Report of the Subcommittee on Financial Obligations, Housing, and Financial and Community Resources of the Policy Academy. The report indicated that lack of affordable housing or long term housing options, lack of financial resources, and financial obligations often reduce a prisoner's chance for successful reentry into the community. To address these issues, the Financial Obligations, Housing, Financial and Community Resources Subcommittee of the Virginia Reentry Policy Academy identified financial barriers to successful reentry, established goals to address these barriers, and developed strategies and recommendations for change.

Financial barriers or obligations related to reentry identified by the Subcommittee included:

- lack of access to and/or resources for housing, which may lead to homelessness;
- fines, court costs and restitution;
- child support obligations and arrearages; and
- consumer credit.

To address these issues, the subcommittee recommended:

- working with local housing authorities and supporting adoption of admissions policies that will take into account consideration of evidence of rehabilitation, the effect of denial of applications for housing on family reunification and whether denial will leave the applicant homeless;
- supporting the development of transitional housing;
- provision of assistance in completing housing applications, linking to community support systems, and identifying available resources for rental assistance;
- development of uniform guidelines for assisting offenders to work out payment plans or substitute community service for financial obligations;
- developing reporting and recording systems that will allow inmates to better understand their financial obligations;
- exploring ways to increase child support revenues by enhancing the ability of incarcerated and recently released non-custodial parents to discharge their financial and medical support obligations toward the children in their child support cases; and
- considering allowing courts in both civil and criminal cases of non-payment of child support to make determinations of supervised probation instead of jail sentences.

Other Topics

]Other presentations heard at the meeting included information on prisoner reentry parole issues presented by *Ms. Helen Fahey, Chair, Virginia Parole Board*; federal prisoner reentry programs

and initiatives discussed by *Ms. Janet Morris, Supervisor of Education, Federal Correctional Center, Petersburg Complex*; and reclaiming the formerly incarcerated by linking government and church communities, presented by *Mr. Evans Hopkins, Director, The Reclamation Movement and Author, Life after Life: Rage and Redemption*.

Teleconference Visitation Program for Inmates and Their Families.

Mr. Bruce Grulke, NCARB, AIA, LEED, Project Architect, Clark-Nexsen Architecture & Engineering presented information on teleconference visitation program for inmates and their families. The system he described would utilize cable internet systems to allow teleconferencing and would also include digital recording capabilities. This system would improve inmate visitation capabilities.

Proposals for Discussion

Prior to the November 15 meeting, the joint subcommittee released a series of nine reentry related proposals for discussion. While not exhaustive, the proposals presented broad issues, concerns, suggestions and recommendations garnered by the joint subcommittee through presentations, research and public testimony during the interim as it deliberated on prisoner reentry issues. During the meeting, members of the public were given the opportunity to respond to these proposals.

Next Meeting

No additional meetings of the Joint Subcommittee Studying Prisoner Reentry into Society have been scheduled.