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Community Corrections Officials Look to Successful Past and Future Challenges

NEWARK – Members of the New Jersey State Parole Board joined here today with their partners in statewide community programs to mark successes and plan for continued challenges in helping parolees reenter their communities.

They met at a conference entitled, “Impact of Community Corrections in New Jersey: Reducing Prison Population, Incarceration Cost and Recidivism,” sponsored by the Reentry Coalition of New Jersey. The coalition is comprised of seven non-profit organizations who contract with the Parole Board and Department of Corrections (DOC) to provide programs for individuals reentering their communities after incarceration.

State Parole Board members attending the conference included Reni Erdos, Charlie Jones, Robert Riccardella and Norman Robertson.

Opening speakers included Darcella Sessomes, assistant commissioner of the DOC for Programs and Community Services, and Lenny Ward, director of the Parole Board’s Divisions of Parole and Community Programs. Both highlighted what they said had been the significant role of community programs in reducing New Jersey’s prison population – down 31% since 1999 – and shifting the emphasis of parole supervision to assistance with reentry and the imposition of graduated sanctions including residential and non-residential programs in lieu of re-incarceration.

Pat McKernan, president of the Coalition and chief operating officer of Volunteers of America – Delaware Valley, noted that coalition members provide a wide range of services statewide including assessment, substance-abuse and mental-health treatment, gender-based services and work release.

“The evidence-based programs provide a safe, structured environment where offenders nearing release to the community rebuild their lives,” McKernan said in a letter distributed to all conference participants.

Kevin McHugh, executive director of the Reentry Coalition, said community programs have played a major part in easing a prison overcrowding “crisis” in New Jersey which began in approximately 1980. McHugh said a proliferation of “tough on crime” laws requiring mandatory minimum sentences dramatically increased the need for additional prison beds. Trying to keep pace, the DOC built new prisons in 1985, 1987 and 1997 and saw an increase in its budget from \$92.3 million to \$845.7 million.

The overcrowding was largely eased by the expansion of privately run community programs, which significantly lowered recidivism and provided ways to sanction parole violators without sending them back to prison, McHugh explained.

He provided a report by the Coalition which noted, “Over the past two decades, community corrections programs have played a vital role in reducing the prison population and the cost of incarceration in New Jersey. At the same time, they have contributed to marked improvement in public safety as evidenced by significant reduction in offender recidivism rates and dramatically lower crime rates.”

The conference also included a presentation by Hudson County officials discussing the advantages of greater offender participation in programs focusing on substance abuse and mental health programming by county jails in conjunction with greater collaboration with county Boards of Social Services and social service provider agencies.

NJ Governor Chris Christie is committed to reducing recidivism and helping offenders get the support they need to successfully re-enter society, break the cycle of criminality and lead productive lives through a number of key initiatives.

These include New Jersey’s widely acclaimed mandatory Drug Court program, which will be operational in all 21 of the state’s counties by next year and the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, a one-stop model for connecting comprehensive streamlined services to ex-offenders re-entering their communities. Other innovative approaches include education and employment opportunities such as NJ-STEP, which provides access to college for qualified incarcerated students, while assisting in the transition to college life upon their release.