

Prison reforms urged at meeting

Conference attendees call for expanded instruction, rehabilitation and post-release programs

By Lynn Anderson
Sun Reporter

January 14, 2006

State prison officials, researchers and in-the-trenches advocates gathered at a West Baltimore church yesterday to call for prison reforms, including expanding educational and drug rehabilitation programs, and a support system for inmates after they're released.

"It makes no sense to drop people back into the community and say, 'Go for it,'" said Joseph T. Jones Jr., an ex-convict and founder of the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development, a Baltimore organization that helps those who have been incarcerated find job training and employment.

According to advocates, the need for reform has never been greater.

Over the past 20 years, the state's prison population has more than tripled, from 7,000 inmates to 24,000, according to the Open Society Institute-Baltimore, which organized the gathering. The state spends about \$794 million a year to cover expenses related to prison upkeep and inmate housing. Most of the state's inmates -- about 60 percent -- come from Baltimore. Some 9,000 inmates are released annually, most with no idea of what they will do or where they will stay.

"None of us is very far removed from this issue," Jones said.

Many of those who attended the conference, titled a "Community Conversation on Ex-Offender Re-Entry: A Focus on Families and Communities," signed a letter to policy makers and legislators written by Jones.

Copies of the letter will be distributed in Annapolis during the current General Assembly session. A large number of advocates will travel to the state capital Monday for the 2nd Annual Civil Rights/Human Rights Rally, when they will also push for prison reform.

Specifically, advocates say they want to work with the Maryland Department of Public Safety to expand an existing program called Project Restart that was supposed to change the focus of the state's correctional network from merely incarcerating people to rehabilitating them. Although the program has been in place for more than a year, it has

not received the funding necessary to reach all inmates, according to state prison officials and advocates.

In fact, only two prisons enroll inmates in the program.

Kevin Griffin Moreno, a senior policy advocate for the Job Opportunities Task Force of Baltimore, who is leading legislative efforts to reform the prison system, said that the state should focus support efforts on prisoners who are within three years of their release date.

Griffin Moreno said that the cost of adding services will be about \$10 million.

"But the alternative is to let people sit idle, and we already know that doesn't work," he said. "This is something the legislature should support. There's no real reason for them not to."

Griffin Moreno said that advocates are working with legislators to introduce a bill that would erase arrests from criminal records when no charges are filed.

Such arrests can haunt people for years and make it more difficult for them to find work or qualify for public housing, Griffin Moreno explained.

He said there are also efforts -- although more long-term -- to provide ex-offenders with a "certificate of employment" that would assure businesses that an individual was ready for work. Griffin Moreno said the state might some day provide employers with insurance that would cover loses incurred as a result of fraud or vandalism caused by a former inmate.

Those who attended the conference at the New Shiloh Baptist Church, 2100 N. Monroe St., applauded two former inmates -- Raymond Vaughn and Glynnis Gladden -- who shared their stories of triumph after years of incarceration and drug addiction.

Vaughn, 31, told the audience that after earning his General Educational Development certificate, or GED, he felt confident that he had finally put his old ways behind him.

Now he owns an office cleaning franchise and is going to school to earn a degree in social work.

"Now I can look my son in the eye and know that I am not living a lie," he said.

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