



Advocates aim to help ex-offenders stay out of penal system

by Bob Costantini

BALTIMORE, MD (2006-01-17) Governor Robert Ehrlich will unveil his full budget proposal for the coming fiscal year, today. He has announced that since the state's budget situation has improved major increases in spending will be doable. Hoping to take advantage of that situation, last Friday, public and private advocates for prisoners and ex-offenders met to exchange ideas. WYPR's Bob Costantini was there:

(ambs of meeting track 20)

THEY TALK IN TERMS OF "BEHIND THE FENCE" AND "OUTSIDE THE FENCE." TWO HUNDRED PEOPLE INVOLVED IN PROGRAMS TO MAKE EX-OFFENDERS STAY THAT WAY GATHER AT SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH IN NORTHWEST BALTIMORE.

(Vaughn ambs track 24)

IT'S THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD FOR RAYMOND VAUGHN, AGE 31, AND A HIGHLIGHTED SUCCESS STORY AT THE FORUM. HE SPENT A YEAR IN PRISON FOR DRUG POSSESSION, BUT WAS SMART ENOUGH NOT TO TAKE THE POISON HE WAS SELLING.

THE NORTHWESTERN HIGH DROPOUT CAME OUT OF PRISON IN 1995, GOT HIS GED, IS NOW A SOPHOMORE AT COPPIN STATE AND RUNS A FRANCHISE CLEANING BUSINESS.

VAUGHN IS AN EXCEPTION TO THE GENERAL RULE OF PEOPLE IN THE PENAL SYSTEM:

[TAPE :19 Vaughn intv. track 19, 5:12]

"Some people have written them off before they have even gotten a chance to see the new changes that they've made. It was a hard road...a lot of doors were closed in my face, a lot of jobs turned me down just because I had a blemish on my record. But again, I never gave up."

(Rodricks ambs track 21)

A KEYNOTE SPEAKER IS DAN RODRICKS, THE BALTIMORE SUN COLUMNIST, WHO LAUNCHED A MOVEMENT OUT OF A COLUMN LAST SUMMER, WHEN HE URGED DRUG DEALERS TO CONTACT HIM AND HE WOULD HELP THEM FIND MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT.

AT THE FORUM, RODRICKS SPEAKS OF BREAKING THE CYCLE OF PRISON, RELEASE, THE INABILITY TO GET LEGITIMATE WORK AND RETURN BACK TO PRISON, THAT AFFECTS AS MANY AS 50 PERCENT OF MARYLAND'S INMATES:

[TAPE :10 Rodricks from speech track 22, 1:27]

"We need public leadership on the cause of the ex-offender taken directly and loudly and clearly to the business community; a stated belief in the concept of redemption and second chances.

EX-OFFENDER RAYMOND VAUGHN SAYS THERE WERE FEW IN-PRISON PROGRAMS TO HELP HIM, BUT HE WAS LUCKY:

[TAPE:06 Vaughn intv. track 19, 3:05]

"I picked up some mentors to better give me that Big Brother guidance, who were actually positive role models."

AND THAT'S WHERE COLUMNIST RODRICKS IS TAKING THE NEXT PHASE OF HIS CRUSADE:

[TAPE :15 Rodricks intv. track 26, 0:33]

"And I think what would help them is if other people in the community who have jobs, who have cars and houses and clothes and food and are established in life took a minute of each week to contact them, see how their doing, serve as a mentor."

(Hiers ambs track 23)

ON THE OFFICIAL LEVEL, THOMASINA "TOMI" HIERS IS THE EHRLICH ADMINISTRATION'S POINT PERSON, WORKING WITHIN THE MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONAL SERVICES TO CHANGE THE CULTURE.

SHE LAUDS THE SO-CALLED RESTART PROGRAM, WHICH EMPHASIZES VOCATIONAL SKILLS BEFORE AN INMATE IS RELEASED, AS AN EXAMPLE OF SOMETHING THAT SEEMS TO WORK:

[TAPE:14 Hiers intv. track 25, 2:03]

IC: "Getting folks ready so that by the time they get out of prison they would have had the opportunity to receive drug treatment behind the fence; more importantly, cognitive programs, employment readiness to get that attitude in check before their out, to make sure they are, in fact, amenable to working."

RIGHT NOW, HOWEVER, RESTART IS ONLY AVAILABLE IN TWO STATE FACILITIES; HIERS ARGUES IT SHOULD BE EXPANDED UNIVERSALLY, BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND COULD BE DONE SO WITHOUT A DRASTIC INCREASE TO THE 10-MILLION DOLLARS THE STATE SPENDS ON INMATE TRAINING NOW.

KEVIN GRIFFIN MORENO OF THE JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE, WORKS WITH EX-OFFENDERS. HE HAS A WISH LIST FOR THE GOVERNOR AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY:

[TAPE:20 Moreno intv. track 18, 1:33]

"We are supporting a bill that would permit the removal of arrests without charges from a criminal history record, which would make it easier for people to get jobs in the mainstream workforce. And also, we're working with the state and employers on ways to lift barriers to employment through certificates of employability and other policy measures."

MORENO HAS HOPES FOR A GENERAL ASSEMBLY BILL CREATING A CONSTRUCTION TRAINING PROGRAM BEHIND THE FENCE, SO THOSE GETTING OUT HAVE PARTICULAR, IN-DEMAND SKILLS.

I'M BOB COSTANTINI, REPORTING FROM NORTHWEST BALTIMORE, FOR 88.1, WYPR.

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