

Reining in recidivism

Policymakers consider benefits of programs that ensure offenders have successful transition back into society

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This edition of *Firstline Midwest* is Part 2 of a two-part series on state corrections reform. Last month's edition focused on early-release programs, changes to sentencing policies and strategies to increase efficiency in state facilities. That publication is available at www.csgmidwest.org.

The Midwestern Office of the Council of State Governments supports several groups of state officials, including the Midwestern Governors Association and the Midwestern Legislative Conference, an association of all legislators in the region's 11 states. The Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan are affiliate members of the MLC.

With more than 5 million people in the United States on probation, parole and other forms of post-prison supervision, states are looking for ways to give offenders the tools they need to succeed — while reducing the likelihood that they will commit new crimes.

And this push for improvements in re-entry policy and reductions in recidivism rates has gained even more momentum in some states as a result of the current fiscal crisis, as part of overall efforts to find cost savings in the criminal justice system.

Today's budget problems, combined with longer-term spending trends (U.S. states' corrections budgets have risen 300 percent over the last 20 years), are leading a growing number of policymakers to seek these reforms.

One short-term cost-cutting idea has been to offer early-release plans to certain prisoners. Another strategy is to expand the use of sentencing alternatives to prison or jail, particularly in cases involving nonviolent offenders. (These strategies were highlighted in last month's edition of *Firstline Midwest*).

A third option is to try to reduce recidivism by changing state re-entry laws and strengthening related programs. This third strategy sometimes requires an up-front investment, with money that is hard to come by considering today's tough budget conditions.

Still, with states recognizing the need to make long-term improvements to their correc-

tions systems, efforts are being undertaken to improve re-entry policy and to stop the costly cycle of recidivism.

A much-cited federal study of released prisoners in 15 different states found that within three years, 68 percent had been re-arrested for a serious new crime and 52 percent were back in prison either because of a new crime or because they had violated parole conditions.

As a 2005 study on re-entry done by The Council of State Governments notes, offenders are being released from prison

and jail with "complex needs":

- the need to get a job and, often, to support a family (55 percent of these offenders have children age 18 or under),
- the need for job training or other education (2 out of 3 lack a high school diploma, and 40 percent have neither a diploma nor a GED), and
- the need to address substance-abuse problems, or mental and physical disabilities (3 out of 4 have a substance-abuse problem, and more than 1 out of 3 jail inmates report having a mental or physical disability).

These offenders, too, often return to neighborhoods that simply are not equipped to help with the transition from incarceration to society.

Inside, we highlight some of the strategies being used in Midwestern states to help keep offenders from a path that returns them to jail and prison — and instead on the road to success. ★



Programs provide key support

States revamp supervision, re-entry policies to address issues that can cause offenders to commit new crimes

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In response to the unprecedented numbers of people being released from prison and jail, high rates of recidivism, and increases in public spending on corrections, many states in the Midwest have made it a priority to improve re-entry policy.

The diverse mix of recent legislative actions and agency-initiated programs in this region underscores not only the importance of re-entry to public safety and state budgets, but the complexity of the issue as well.

More focus on “community-based corrections”

Earlier this decade, legislators in **NEBRASKA** set out to revamp the state’s criminal justice laws with the goals of improving re-entry policy and reducing recidivism rates.

The result was LB 46, passed in 2003, which called for the state to establish and invest in a new “community corrections infrastructure.” The law laid the groundwork for much of the community-corrections work completed in recent years.

Since the bill’s passage, Nebraska has launched a specialized substance-abuse supervision and treatment program for certain offenders and has opened “one-stop” reporting and re-entry support centers.

These community-based centers allow specially trained officers to monitor, on a daily basis, individuals on some form of community supervision. In turn, these individuals are able to receive a wide array of services at the centers, such as job referrals, vocational training, substance-abuse treatment and prevention, and life-skills classes.

A mix of state funds and fees levied against offenders have helped pay for the strengthening of Nebraska’s community corrections programs. The various initiatives are overseen by the independent Nebraska Community Corrections Council.

Like Nebraska, other states are creating community corrections or re-entry councils as a way to either develop new policy strategies or to oversee implementation of them.

Part of **OHIO**’s HB 130, passed by the legislature and signed into law earlier this year, calls for the establishment of the Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition. Composed of various state agencies, the coalition will identify social-service barriers that offenders face in areas such as housing, employment and education. It will then make recommendations to the legislature.

HB 130 also will remove some specific barriers for offenders returning to the community. The legislation calls for inmates to receive state identification before their release from incarceration and recommends disciplinary action for professional licensing

boards that refuse to issue licenses to former inmates.

In March, **SOUTH DAKOTA** Gov. Mike Rounds issued an executive order establishing the Governor’s Reentry Council. The measure was spurred in part by statistics showing that of the 2,000 South Dakota inmates that leave state custody annually, nearly 30 percent return to prison within one year because they have either committed a new crime or violated terms of their parole or suspended sentence.

The goal of the new re-entry council (made up primarily of state agency leaders) is to reduce recidivism rates by better addressing the needs of people released from state custody.

MINNESOTA’s Comprehensive Offender Reentry Plan identifies strategies to enhance the successful reintegration of offenders into the community. Led by the state Department of Corrections, the multi-agency initiative (which also includes state courts and three pilot counties) is working to implement evidence-based strategies and case-management plans that help reduce recidivism.

Approach focuses on meeting individual needs

In part, Minnesota’s new re-entry plan places greater emphasis on understanding and meeting the individual needs of offenders as they make the transition back to their communities. Case plans are developed based on each offender’s “criminogenic” needs (factors that, if not addressed, are likely to lead to recidivism).

Over the last several years, significant changes have been made to how **KANSAS** deals with individuals in prison or on some form of community supervision.

Starting in 2001, the state introduced a number of programs to help offenders acquire job skills, obtain drivers’ licenses, and stay off drugs and alcohol.

As part of a staff retraining program that took off in 2005, case managers in Kansas’ correctional system have been taught to adapt their supervision styles to what a particular offender does and does not respond to.

By integrating case-management skills and motivational interviewing, and by being trained in evidence-based practices, corrections staff moved away from a “one-size-fits all” enforcement model that simply reacted to negative behavior, according to Kansas Department of Corrections Secretary Roger Werholtz.

Another component of Kansas’ reforms came two years ago with passage of SB 14, which, in part, established a new performance-based grant initiative for local community cor-

rections programs.

The bill requires grant recipients to reduce by 20 percent parole and probation revocations (a major source of prison admissions in Kansas and across the country). To meet this performance standard, local corrections officials receive technical assistance from the state and are expected to implement evidence-based practices.

As another part of SB 14, the state began offering early-release incentives for certain offenders to successfully complete educational, vocational and treatment programs while still behind bars.

State officials say this combination of staff retraining, new state laws and greater investments in community corrections has yielded positive results. According to state statistics, the number of parolees being returned to prison dropped to 103 per month in 2007, compared to 203 per month in 2003. Furthermore, the number of parolees convicted of new crimes decreased from 424 per year in the late 1990s to 280 annually in the past several years.

The overall prison population in Kansas has fallen 7 percent from a historic high in 2004, Werholtz says.

The challenge now for Kansas corrections officials is to sustain some of the gains that have been made during a period when state fiscal resources are limited. According to Werholtz, budget cuts have caused the state to lose about 70 percent of its treatment, education and support capacity, including in areas such as substance abuse, education, and housing and programming for sex offenders.

With these cuts in state funding, Werholtz notes, his department will rely primarily on its individualized inmate supervision methods to improve outcomes and reduce recidivism rates.

States update key re-entry policies

Many other states have faced tough decisions on their corrections budgets, leading to some of the early-release plans and changes in sentencing laws seen in this region. (These proposals were highlighted in the first part of the *Firstline Midwest* series on corrections reform.)

WISCONSIN, for example, is offering a new early-release plan for certain classes of offenders who demonstrate good behavior during their time in prison and complete any required programming or treatment.

At the same time, Wisconsin lawmakers have appropriated \$10 million in the state's new budget to increase community-based services for high-risk offenders on supervision. Services such as substance-abuse treatment, employment training and placement, and housing and transportation assistance will be funded.

Supporters believe this increased investment will curb growth in the prison population and better rehabilitate offenders, while also keeping communities safe.

These same goals are behind an **ILLINOIS** corrections-reform bill signed into law in August.

Chicago Metropolis 2020, the business-based civic organiza-

tion that helped craft the legislation, says SB 1289 will help end “the cycle of locking up nonviolent people for short periods of time ... then sending them back to their home communities where they commit more violent crimes and return to the expensive state prison system.”

One provision in SB 1289 creates a program known as Adult Redeploy for nonviolent offenders. Modeled after an existing juvenile-justice initiative, Adult Redeploy will provide financial incentives to local communities that agree to treat and supervise offenders in the community rather than send them to prison.

The state, for example, will pay jurisdictions for establishing drug and mental-health treatment services and imposing “locally based” sanctions on offenders.

Under another part of the bill, the state will assess the needs of individual state prisoners and determine what types of community-based treatment they need. In addition, Illinois plans to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the drug and education services now available in the prison system.

Opening new drug, re-entry prisons

SB 1289 will also expand Illinois' use of “drug prisons.” Five years ago, the state turned an existing correctional facility into a “drug prison” that has become a national model of how to treat offenders with substance-abuse problems.

The “therapeutic” facility provides intensive, evidence-based treatment programs as well as vocational training and mental-health services. Substantial re-entry support also is offered to individuals as they return to the community.

According to Illinois corrections officials, recidivism rates for participants in the program are up to 40 percent lower than those of similar groups of offenders.

Other states, too, have been opening specialized facilities of their own.

In **INDIANA**, the Plainfield Re-Entry Educational Facility is designed for individuals serving the last few months or years of their sentences.

The facility, which opened three years ago, focuses on building the education and job skills of inmates. For example, it offers classes in vocational fields such as culinary arts, building trades, logistics and hospitality.

States are also opening re-entry centers to help offenders as they transition back into the community. The aforementioned “one-stop” reporting centers in Nebraska are one example.

IOWA, too, has opened re-entry centers in two of its counties.

One of the state's primary goals is reduce recidivism among African-Americans, who are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates. In 2008, 25 percent of the state's inmates were African-American. U.S. Census data show that racial group made up 2.5 percent of the state's total population.

The re-entry centers — which provide access to a range of community-based services, such as employment, family integration, mental health and substance-abuse treatment services — are located in high-crime, African-American neighborhoods. ★

Maximizing the value of re-entry spending

A recent policy brief from the Pew Center on the States suggests a three-tiered approach to addressing recidivism amongst offenders in the United States. The report, "Maximum Impact: Targeting Supervision on Higher-Risk People, Places and Times," is available at www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/Maximum_Impact_web.pdf.

- **Use "frontloaded" programs that direct resources toward offenders during high-risk times.** Offenders on probation and parole are most likely to re-offend shortly after entering community supervision. A 2008 National Research Council report reviewed prison-release records from 13 states and found that the probability of arrest is roughly twice as high in the first month of supervision as it is in the 15th month.
- **Target supervision at high-risk offenders.** Evidence-based risk assessment tools have been developed to help predict which individuals are likely to re-offend. The report suggests using this strategy to direct limited resources toward offenders who pose the greatest risk to the community.
- **Concentrate resources in high-risk areas.** According to the report, a disproportionate share of people on probation and parole live in "a small number of neighborhoods, where, research indicates, they are at an increased risk for re-offending." Policymakers can address this issue by assigning caseloads by geography and developing more program sites in high-risk areas.

SOURCE GUIDE

For more information on offender re-entry programs, please visit the following Web sites:

National Institute of Corrections - Offender Reentry/ Transition
www.nicic.org/TPJC

The Council of State Governments' Justice Center - Reentry Policy Council
www.reentrypolicy.org

The Pew Center on the States - Public Safety Performance Project
www.pewcenteronthestates.org

The Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center
www.urban.org/center/jpc/index.cfm

U.S. Department of Justice - Reentry programs
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm

Vera Institute of Justice
www.vera.org

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