

Federal and state officials organize Reentry Council to address recidivism

December 23, 2013

Officials spanning the spectrum of the criminal justice system as well as religious and civil liberties organizations gathered Thursday, Dec. 19, to begin work on a program to help former inmates become productive, law abiding citizens and to reduce prison recidivism.

U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett, Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Bill Waller Jr., U.S. Attorney Greg Davis and Attorney General Jim Hood met with more than 50 people to begin work toward organizing a Reentry Council. In attendance at the organizational meeting at the Mississippi Supreme Court were state and federal judges, state and federal prosecutors and public defenders, a representative of the Lieutenant Governor, legislative leaders, Jackson city officials, church leaders, the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP and the Pew Charitable Trust.

People who leave prison often have few skills and no resources as well as a felony record. "It is a very difficult time. A bus ticket and \$50 and an admonition to do right will not turn someone's life around," Judge Starrett said. "We are sending people home without the tools and without the resources they need to succeed as law abiding citizens. We are setting them up for failure."

Davis, U.S. Attorney for the 45-county Southern District of Mississippi, said about 95 percent of people who are sentenced to prison will get out some day. "When people get out...they need help with housing, they need help with transportation, they need help with employment."

The Reentry Council will work toward developing practices for evaluating prisoners and providing appropriate rehabilitation when they enter correctional systems, and identifying resources and connecting former inmates with those resources that can assist them after they leave prison.

Corrections Commissioner Christopher Epps said, "I'm on board 100 percent with what we are trying to accomplish." The state prison population has increased 455 percent since the 1980s and the Department of Corrections budget has grown 1,255 percent.

About 9,500 people are released from MDOC each year, Epps said. More than 77 percent have alcohol and drug problems; 15 percent have mental health problems. On average, their education skills are at a sixth grade level.

Work toward an inmate's reentry to the community has to start from the time a person is sentenced, Judge Starrett said. Inmates need to be directed into intervention which will help them, not make them worse. "Evaluation is crucial. It's not cookie-cutter," Judge Starrett said.

Betty Lou Jones of Meridian, a member of the State Parole Board, said she is thrilled to hear the front-end approach. "When we see them at the Parole Board, they have been in prison...wasting that time not really doing anything to prepare."

Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma and Texas are among states which have Reentry Councils. Texas, which was running out of inmate bed space, was able to close

some prison units after it adopted the comprehensive and focused approach, Judge Starrett said.

The Reentry Council is patterned after a program started by U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder in 2011. The Federal Interagency Reentry Council, made up of 20 federal agencies, works to:

- make communities safer by reducing recidivism and victimization;
- assist those who return from prison and jail in becoming productive citizens;
- save taxpayer dollars by lowering the direct and collateral costs of incarceration.

U.S. Attorneys in each of the 94 districts nationwide have a reentry coordinator.

Jeremy Sherer, Reentry Coordinator for the Northern District of Alabama, told the meeting that the growing prison population and cost to the state budget is unsustainable.

“Alabama prisons were strangling every other general fund institution,” Sherer said. At the same time, court dockets were backlogged and prosecutors and probation officers dealt with staggering caseloads.

“With every crime, there is a victim. We were allowing a perpetually escalating cycle of victims,” Sherer said. Reducing recidivism means fewer people become victims.

Two years of work in Alabama has produced reentry pilot projects. Work is underway to expand. “We are in the process of implementing better practices,” Sherer said.

Alabama has the fourth highest incarceration rate in the country. Mississippi is second.

“Both are unsustainable with available resources,” Judge Starrett said.

Part of what drives the numbers up is the same people committing crimes over and over.

Judge Starrett said that 40 percent of state prison inmates have been there before on previous convictions. “We need to have a goal to reduce recidivism.”

“It will require funding and it will require a culture change,” said Judge Starrett. Some may not embrace the concept immediately, he said, recalling that some people were not receptive to treatment-based drug courts after he started the state’s first felony drug court program in 1999. But he views directing funding to reentry programs as an investment in improving public safety and reducing the drain on the public treasury.

Judge Starrett, Chief Justice Waller, U.S. Attorney Davis and Attorney General Hood have put together an organizational structure of six work groups to start the Mississippi Reentry Council. Chief Justice Waller will lead court involvement. Attorney General Hood will lead the law enforcement group. Commissioner Epps will lead prisons and community corrections. U.S. Attorney Davis will lead federal partners. Carolyn Romano, chief probation officer for the Southern District of Mississippi, will lead community resources. Dr Jimmy Porter, executive director of the Mississippi Baptist Christian Action Commission, will lead faith based initiatives.

####