

StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Sick and solitary

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Minnesota has always had trouble welcoming freed prisoners back home. What community doesn't? Landlords naturally think twice about renting to known law-breakers. Employers hesitate to hire them. And society as a whole seems not to know how to respond to people who just a few weeks back were sporting prison garb. The neighborhood Welcome Wagon simply isn't equipped to cater to ex-inmates — many of them plagued by serious psychiatric illness, poverty, poor health and addiction. Given the cold shoulder these ex-cons often get, flouting the law all over again can seem rather a sensible thing to do.

Indeed, that's just what happens. A report released last week by the Bureau of Justice Statistics says that more than two-thirds of Minnesota inmates released in 1994 were arrested again within three years. That's a higher recidivism rate than a decade earlier. According to a document from the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., prisoners are caught in a "cycle of removal and return." Trading one form of ostracism for another, released inmates too often end up friendless, jobless and homeless. They have little reason to stay straight.

The state must give them reason, says Minnesota Corrections Commissioner Sheryl Ramstad Hvass, and it can. Late last month she led a delegation of top state officials to study Maryland's model discharge-planning programs. Though careful supervision after release can curb recidivism, the surest strategy calls for preparing inmates for release from the moment they set foot in jail or prison. That's what Maryland tries to do — by assuring that inmates have access to top-notch treatment for mental disorders and addiction from Day One.

Maryland also helps prisoners plan a nearly seamless transition from imprisonment to freedom. Therapists who work with prisoners often continue managing their care after discharge — and typically nail down housing, schooling, work and mental-health

Mental health

Seeking a system

help before the inmate sets foot on pavement.

This is the sort of thing Minnesota should do more of, as Hvass is the first to insist. Her department has applied for a \$4 million grant from the federal Institute of Corrections to underwrite discharge-planning programs much like those in Maryland.

Minnesota faces special challenges in enacting such programs: Its community-based mental-health system isn't nearly as developed as Maryland's, and its Byzantine financing for mental-health care (some services are paid by counties, others by the state) seems to give everyone an excuse to let mentally ill ex-cons go untreated. In truth, there's very little official oversight of Minnesota's patchwork of mental-health programs, and the state traditionally has demanded little of counties in the way of accountability.

Minnesota's metro center also faces a monumental affordable-housing shortage — a circumstance sure to boggle caseworkers intent on finding proper homes for soon-to-be-released inmates. They have reason to worry: Two-thirds of the occupants in Minnesota's homeless shelters have been imprisoned or institutionalized — and homeless ex-cons are far more likely to land back in prison than those who are properly housed.

That is why Hvass is so keen on developing a transition system that serves the needs — and acknowledges the struggles — of people leaving prison.

Thousands of inmates will walk free from state correctional facilities this year. When they walk, they deserve more than a change of clothes. The mission may seem criminal-coddling to some, but that's the last thing it is. The surest way to keep all Minnesotans safe is to promise housing, support and mental-health care to the people stepping out of our jails and prisons right now.