

Putting bars behind them

Bergen sheriff wants to reduce recidivism

IN America, jails tend to be run primarily as places of punishment, and not as places that prepare inmates to reenter society. So it's not surprising that released inmates often end up back behind bars.

It can be a vicious cycle: Recidivism not only derails lives, it also costs taxpayers money.

Breaking that cycle requires putting together a network of rehabilitation and support services, both in the jail and in the community. It takes extensive planning and coordination, but it can be done.

That's why **Bergen County Sheriff Leo McGuire** deserves credit for launching a "reentry" project that involves dozens of social service providers, community and religious leaders. They are working together to find ways to give inmates a chance to stay out of jail once they are released and get their lives together.

On Monday, about 70 people attended a "reentry summit" at the county jail in Hackensack to learn about the inmates, about the medical and drug treatment services the jail provides and about the needs of the inmates once they are released on their own. The participants then met the next morning at Bergen Community College for more discussion and planning.

The effort is ongoing and is already showing promise, according to Thomas Toronto, president of the Bergen County **United Way**. The concept, he said, is to "bring the community into the jail" in a sense, so that the support services both before and after release can be better coordinated.

The services already exist in Bergen County, Toronto said. What is

needed is an effective way to coordinate them so an inmate has a connected path that might include housing, education or job training and treatment for mental illness or addiction. Ideally, these services would not be provided piecemeal or in isolation, but in a way that would maximize the potential for turning a life around.

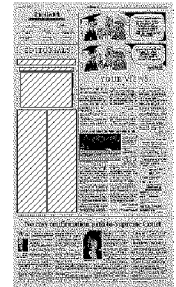
McGuire calls it a "continuum of care" that could possibly alter the current pattern of recidivism for inmates who have the potential to change. As of now, he said, more than 60 percent of inmates will end up back at the county jail at some point after they are released.

Such a continuum requires extending care and support services in a comprehensive way, **United Way's Toronto** said. He is optimistic about the sheriff's effort, about the thought that has gone into it and about bringing together people who represent so many different resources: "We think that there's an opportunity here to create a common sense of purpose."

Picking up their lives can be frustrating, even frightening, for some released inmates. They lapse into old ways with friends who lure them back into trouble. They may have no family support and little luck finding work. They may have good intentions in the short term but eventually lose their way.

Not every inmate can benefit from reentry help. McGuire said some can't be rehabilitated. But he believes most of the others who pass through the jail – such as those with addiction or mental health issues – may be able to be helped, and he wants to give them a realistic chance.

We applaud the effort.





A Bergen County Jail inmate addressing community leaders.