

Sheriff asks leaders for help

Wants community to aid in getting inmates on track

By **WILLIAM LAMB**
STAFF WRITER

HACKENSACK – Bergen County Sheriff Leo McGuire gathered more than 70 elected officials, community leaders and social services providers at the county jail on Monday night, asking for their help in curbing an alarming recidivism rate among inmates.

Citing a “continuum of care” in the county, from its highest ranking elected officials to advocates for the homeless, the hungry and the drug-addicted, McGuire said he is eager to change a pattern that suggests that more than 60 percent of inmates will end up back at the jail at some point after they are released.

With that in mind, McGuire conceived of Monday’s “reentry summit” as a chance for community and religious leaders, as well as social service agencies and politicians, to get a better understanding of how the jail works, and how they can help at-risk Bergen County residents get their lives back on track once they’re set free.

“The purpose is to challenge your assumptions about what is here, what it is we do, and what we can do together to change the dynamic of our community,” McGuire told his guests. “I’ve had the pleasure and privilege of working with many of you here. We’ve made some tremendous inroads into changing our community. But there is so much more that needs to be done.”

There are more than 800 inmates at the jail at any given time, McGuire said. Of those, 90 percent are male, 36 percent are white, 40 percent are black and 20 percent are Hispanic. The average age is 34. A quarter have been charged with violent crimes, the

sheriff said. A quarter are in for drugs, and nearly a quarter are in for theft and other property crimes. The rest have been accused of violating public-order laws.

About 9,000 inmates cycle through the jail every year, McGuire said. Of those, 80 percent are there less than a month. Seventy-three percent have previously been in jail or on probation, he said. About 70 percent have substance abuse issues, and 46 percent have a family member who has been locked up, McGuire said.

“Some of the people who are incarcerated here today will never see the light of day, and that’s a good thing because they can’t be rehabilitated,” McGuire said. “But most of the people that we have here today – most of the eight or nine thousand people that churn through the Bergen County Jail every year, have substance abuse issues, have mental health issues that maybe if we catch them early they won’t graduate to the state penitentiary.”

The guests were taken behind the jail’s reinforced metal doors to view the medical center where prisoners receive care, in some cases for the first time in their adult

lives, officials said.

They were given a look at the jail’s drug rehabilitation center, where those incarcerated are given help kicking the addictions that are a significant barrier to rehabilitation.

The tour ended in a vacant high-security wing where they sampled jail cuisine. (Monday’s menu for guests and prisoners alike consisted of barbecue chicken with rice and broccoli.)

Thomas M. Toronto, president of Bergen County’s United Way, said he was eager to help create a “continuum of service” to help released inmates complete their rehabilitation.

“The idea is to see if we can extend the care and the support in a comprehensive way after the inmate leaves jail so they don’t fall back into jail,” he said. “We think that there’s an opportunity here to create a common sense of purpose.”

McGuire urged his guests to “open your eyes” to possible community-based solutions to the recidivism problem.

“We want to integrate people back into society from whence they came,” McGuire said.

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THOMAS M. TORONTO,
BERGEN COUNTY UNITED WAY PRESIDENT





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A Bergen County Jail inmate addressing a group of community leaders and representatives Monday.