

LOCAL COMMENT: MAKE REHABILITATION A BIGGER PART OF PRISON LIFE

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In light of the fact that Michigan taxpayers spend \$1.9 billion a year to incarcerate men and women, wouldn't this be a better investment if prisons were equipped with the necessary tools to rehabilitate?

With record job losses, home foreclosures soaring, gasoline prices and other financial concerns, it is understandable that most citizens may not be too concerned about rehabilitating convicted felons - unless, that is, they unknowingly come face to face with one who has just been released. Then the concern of whether he or she has been rehabilitated may become all too important.

I have been incarcerated for almost 25 years, so I have an inside view of this issue.

Every day I see young males entering prison. Though judged adults biologically, many are boys mentally - confused, illiterate and searching for self-identity. The mentality of most has been colored by the thug culture, the fads and facades of their favorite gangster rap video artists, which is evident in the way they walk around trying to mimic their illusory personalities - pants sagging, shoes untied, ominous tattoos - acting tough.

Lacking moral values, social etiquette and the intellectual capacity to make informed life choices, their only hope is prison programs, lest they fall prey to the ugly side of prison life, which is unforgiving and arbitrarily consumes and assimilates idle, impressionable, uneducated minds.

Like many older inmates, I obtained my GED and attended college after coming to prison in 1984, which enabled me to learn my civic responsibilities to my community, personal obligations to my family, and moral duties to myself. Unfortunately, in the mid 1990s, college programs were discontinued in Michigan prisons by lawmakers, relegating inmates to the opportunity of obtaining only their GED.

Although the Department of Corrections offers vocational programs, most are courses that do not provide the necessary skills to obtain meaningful employment upon release, so more are needed.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Department of Corrections Director Patricia Caruso should be commended for starting the Michigan Re-entry Program, which provides social and behavioral training for inmates scheduled to be released on parole. The focus is on the transition from prison to the community initiative, oriented toward determining what an inmate needs to do, and what the prison system needs to provide to ensure that when we get out, we stay out, and become productive citizens.

In a Detroit Free Press interview, Caruso stated that these initiatives would start the first day an

inmate enters the prison system. The problem is, they are not being implemented according to Caruso's vision. Administrators are providing these programs only to inmates who are within one year to six weeks of being released on parole.

Every day I see young inmates spending the vast majority of their time watching television - sports, music videos and other programs that glorify negative images, distort reality, and reinforce the behavior that caused many of us to come to prison. Like idle minds in society, the television becomes our teacher, and once these images become mentally reinforced, they become, in many respects, our reality.

So, does it make sense to expect that an idle, impressionable mind, after being programmed with years of television images glorifying guns, violence and degrading sexual portrayals of women, will be sufficiently susceptible to behavior modification within a few months of release?

Like Caruso, I believe that in order for the Transition to Community Initiative to be successful, it must begin on Day No. 1 of an inmate's reception into the prison system and continue until and after his or her release, with emphasis on multi-purpose, high-impact behavioral, social and vocational training to ensure sustained measurable progress, intensive mental preparedness, and job readiness.

One of the primary purposes of incarcerating a man or woman is to rehabilitate that person. So, with the \$1.9 billion spent on prisons, does the Department of Corrections have an obligation to fulfill its purpose and mandate to rehabilitate? And if so, does the public have a right to demand that they do?

The title Department of "Corrections" means just that - not solely to punish and confine and protect society. Smartly allocating financial resources and correctly applying re-entry initiatives are investments in crime prevention, public safety and community improvement. They will also reduce recidivism, resulting in lower prison costs and freeing up money for other public services.

Coming to prison can be an awakening of a man or woman's consciousness, a time to reflect, grow and change. But only if given the opportunity - and the tools.

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