

**Mentally Ill Offender Reentry:
The Silent Crisis in Our Communities**

by Gary Bembry

On May 22, Department of Corrections Secretary James R. McDonough announced a subtle, but significant, change to the agency's mission statement. Normally, such a change would not be compelling, but to those concerned with the safety of our communities and the well-being of its citizens, it is indeed an important – and noteworthy – change of direction.

The revision, according to Secretary McDonough, places a “renewed emphasis on the preparation of inmates for reentry into society as part of our mission. This is an anti-crime measure of the utmost importance to our state.”

We commend the secretary's vision, understanding of the problem and firm commitment to address the issue of offender reentry. But this is not a battle he – or any one person – can win on their own. He will need the help of our state Legislature, other state agencies and Florida's communities to accomplish this ambitious goal. Here's why.

Too many ex-offenders leave prison unprepared for life on the outside and eventually return. In fact, in April 2007 there were nearly 92,000 inmates in Florida's prisons, and more than 44 percent of them had been in prison before.

The issue of recidivism is especially troublesome for those incarcerated with a mental illness. It is estimated that 20 percent of the prison population has a serious mental illness and that nearly three-fourths of inmates with a mental illness have a co-occurring substance-abuse disorder. Mentally ill offenders also have a higher-than-average rate of recidivism, cycling in and out of criminal justice and corrections settings with alarming regularity.

It is easy to see why this is such a problem. In prison, those with mental illness often experience rapidly declining physical and mental health, which makes a life of homelessness, poverty and a pattern of recurring crime, arrest and re-incarceration all the more likely.

So what happens to them? The sad truth is that unless they are arrested again, we often have no idea. We do know, however, that we are setting them up to return. Because those with a mental illness are the most ill equipped to succeed in re-entry to society, we are indeed setting them up for failure.

As Secretary McDonough moves forward with his progressive plans, we hope that he focuses on issues such as having transitional housing for ex-offenders with a mental illness when they are released. If we don't, then we are placing them directly into homelessness, for which they can be sent back to jail. If we are trying to avoid seeing repeat offenders, this is an odd way to go about it.

Those with a known mental illness also should be connected to local mental health and substance abuse counseling services *before* they are released. We need to maintain some sort of tracking that may include a period of parole and a way to know if they are treated in a hospital emergency room or have an encounter with police. In fact, we need to work directly with law enforcement to explore additional means of intervention that can resolve issues in ways other than re-incarceration.

Establishing this tracking system is crucial as the highest risk of recidivism of mentally ill ex-offenders is in the first six months after release from prison. Mentally ill offenders who do not receive adequate discharge planning or a continuity of treatment and needed supports upon release are at a particular disadvantage during this critical readjustment period.

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In addition to being a public safety issue, our lack of success in keeping ex-offenders from re-entering the corrections system costs Florida taxpayers millions each year. With 20 percent of the 10,000 ex-offenders released every year having a significant mental illness, we are paying \$120 million annually for their reentry into the prison system.

That is more than our state spends on all children's mental health services in a year.

Investing in community-based mental health programs that can provide transitional centers and support staff is the key to tracking, counseling and guiding ex-offenders with mental illness toward safe and healthy actions and away from our prison gates.

It's what is best for them and our communities, and we applaud Secretary McDonough for taking the first steps to address this complicated issue. Now it is up to all of us to ensure that he is successful and that some of our most vulnerable citizens have a fighting chance to succeed.

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