

East Bay braces for influx of released prisoners

By Paul Burgarino

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Bracing for an influx of newly released prisoners, East Bay leaders are working with social services groups to prevent the former inmates from returning to lives of crime.

The concern has reached a critical point because state legislation has relaxed restrictions on parolees and led to the early release of prisoners considered low risk. The state sought the changes to save money and to ease prison overcrowding and health care problems.

The state aims to decrease the prison population by tens of thousands over the next two to three years.

Though there is no way to know exactly how many will return to the East Bay, between 1,700 and 2,200 new state parolees are expected over the next three years in Alameda County, according to Supervisor Keith Carson's office.

As of January, Alameda County had about 3,800 state parolees while Contra Costa had about 1,400, according to figures from the state Department of Corrections.

Alameda County has an estimated 3,600 residents on felony probation from County Jail, and Contra Costa has 2,400.

Although the legislators promised to keep dangerous felons behind bars, The Associated Press reported this week that some violent offenders have been among those released.

Although county leaders acknowledge that many will revert to habits that landed them in prison in the first place, they believe others want to change and will need help to do so.

"The concern is those returning from

prison won't have a chance to be successful without services in place," said Contra Costa Supervisor Federal Glover, who represents much of East County.

Contra Costa officials have created a countywide task force that to integrate former prisoners into society and support those who seek it. The effort is being led by Glover and fellow Supervisor John Gioia as their districts in the east and west ends of the county are expected to absorb the most former inmates.

A meeting last month examined existing services and gaps that need to be addressed. The goal is to have a blueprint ready by July.

Similar efforts were taken in Alameda County about three years ago, county Supervisor Keith Carson said.

The idea is to develop the framework for a re-entry system with more coordination in planning and connection among service providers, said Bill Heiser of Urban Strategies Council, the Oakland-based group that is helping facilitate Contra Costa's efforts. It also provides staffing and technical assistance for Alameda County's re-entry network.

Creating such networks is not new; San Mateo and San Francisco counties are also among those throughout the state and nation that pool local resources to fight recidivism, Heiser said.

Isaac Taggart, Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums' re-entry employment specialist, said the city will probably receive 40 to 60 percent of Alameda County parolees from the early release program.

The city relies on programs from a 2004 public safety ballot measure and the Oakland Private Industry Council to help former prisoners with everything from resume preparation to anger management, said Taggart, who also holds twice-monthly orientations with convicts returning to Oakland.

Richmond has a similar network of re-entry programs that work with the city. The effort helps case workers for former inmates, while providing multiple channels for seeking funds, Barbara Becnel, executive director of nonprofit Neighborhood House of North Richmond, said the agency has worked with newly released prisoners for more than a decade, including meeting with them while incarcerated. Because of its high crime rate, Richmond has absorbed a disproportionate number of freed prisoners returning to the county, she said.

In general, California does not have a good system for re-entry because prisoners are not given the tools to succeed while incarcerated, said Gioia, the supervisor who represents West Contra Costa. Parolees looking for a fresh start when leaving prison have a "fear factor of what's it going to be like, is there going to be support," he said.

Former inmates need help accessing housing, job training and placement, health care and other mental health and rehabilitation services, said Eva Grenier, re-entry outreach coordinator with Rubicon Programs, a Richmond-based nonprofit that works primarily with the poor.

In Alameda County, the re-entry network has established a health clinic in West Oakland for former inmates and the homeless and applied for federal funding for other programs.

It's a challenge finding housing when neighbors often are worried about living near people who have done time behind bars. But the consequences of having freed criminals "roaming the streets" without secure housing is far greater to public safety, Oakland's Taggart said.

Richmond received a \$75,000 grant from the California Endowment to enhance re-entry services. But it became quickly apparent that a countywide program was needed, Becnel said.

"One of the things we've learned is that someone could be from West County but could conceivably get in trouble in East County. There's a lot of movement between the regions, and there needs to be a link," she said.

The goal is to provide the same level of services throughout the county, said Contra Costa Sheriff's Lt. Brian Kalinowski, who represented the agency in that county's effort and also is an Antioch councilman.

East Contra Costa leaders are creating a resource network from the ground up, looking at existing services in the area and how they can connect to the county effort.

Vernon Williams, the other facilitator in East Contra Costa, added: "This area's going to receive just as many as West County. We have a unique opportunity here to take inventory, go step-by-step and create a network that's unique to East County."

Existing service providers that already work with those at-risk may have the capacity to expand, Williams said.

East Contra Costa has "a long way to go," as there is only one program in the area that works on re-entry, Joseph said.