

Contra Costa supervisors adopt plan for re-entry of released prisoners

By Paul Bugarino

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MARTINEZ -- Despite some concerns about a policy to ban disclosure of criminal history on employment applications, Contra Costa supervisors unanimously approved a plan this week to ease the path for recently released prisoners back into society.

The Contra Costa Strategic Reentry Plan provides a framework to connect convicts with substance-abuse treatment, job training and placement, adult education, subsidized housing and medical care.

Adoption of the plan acknowledges that there is a better way to provide support services for released convicts and reduce recidivism, said Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond.

Led by Gioia and fellow Supervisor Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, a task force of Contra Costa officials, service workers, formerly incarcerated residents and community groups worked over 18 months to create the blueprint. The plan was a response to state legislation that would send fewer parole violators back to prison and release low-risk prisoners before their sentence had been served.

According to 2009 data, 7,318 adults and juveniles in Contra Costa County are on parole or probation.

The biggest obstacle will be securing funding for elements of the plan, officials said. "This is meant to be the starting point, not the end point of this plan," Gioia said.

As with a plan adopted years ago for zero tolerance of domestic violence, the county first must find someone, preferably in its administrative department, to coordinate the re-entry program, he said. The county also must seek grant funding.

Before the decision, District Attorney Mark Peterson and Supervisors Gayle Uilkema and Mary Piepho raised questions about a proposed "ban the box" policy, meaning that initial employment applications for county agencies cannot ask about

criminal history. Exceptions would be granted for positions in public safety and children's services or as determined by the agency.

Background checks could be conducted once it is determined that a candidate is a serious prospect, according to the plan.

Supervisors changed the language in the plan approval to reflect that they would make a decision on the employment policy at a later date.

Alameda, San Francisco and San Mateo counties already have re-entry networks in place.