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Federal Glover: Clearing the air about the early release of inmates

By Federal Glover
For the Contra Costa Times

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In recent months we've been hearing a lot about the pending influx of prisoners that will be released to comply with the court order to ease the overcrowding in California's prisons.

Depending on outcomes of state budget discussions and a case pending before the U.S. Supreme Court, counties could see upward of 40,000 state prison inmates gradually released into their communities over the next several years. Understandably, this has generated a lot of fear.

When inmates are let out of prison, they are returned to the community of their last known address. Since Antioch is the county's second largest city, it is not surprising that it will receive its share of returnees. Throw in Pittsburg and Bay Point, and East County matches the number of returning inmates in West County. Cities and counties have little say on this policy.

As it is today, prison inmates receive little, if any, support upon their release from prison. It's the proverbial \$200 and a bus ticket to their last legal residence. So none of us should be surprised at California's 70 to 75 percent recidivism rate, when we are doing very little to help offenders reintegrate

into our community.

We can throw up our hands and bury our heads in the sand, or we can find ways to reduce the recidivism rate by finding ways to help those individuals with this transition.

Since September of 2009, my office has been heavily involved in trying to

formulate a plan for that transition. It should be clear however, that the formerly incarcerated are already in our communities. You may already have met them — in classrooms, on the job or in church. Some are from our state prisons and some come from our county jail.

With such a high recidivism rate, it is obvious that the current system is not working. But there is still that small percentage who succeeds in breaking the cycle. What does it take to get off the criminal merry-go-round?

"The research shows that a big factor is employment — to come out and have some financial stability," said Barry Kisberk of the Center for Criminal Justice at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall.

"Another crucial factor is family connections," he continued in the Internet interview. Those inmates who stay connected to family members do substantially better upon release. "A third is transitional housing. In the last several years we've seen a growth of homelessness among formerly incarcerated people, both adults and youth. Providing housing for the first 90 days after release is critical — making sure that nobody leaves prison with just \$200 in their pocket and no place to go."

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Obviously, some communities are more affected by returning prisoners than others, but few are well prepared to provide the type of ideal re-entry system we should be striving for. Counties understand all too well that if we can't offer a strong network of supportive services — effective and plentiful alcohol and drug treatment, meaningful access to mental health services, to name a few — and if our public safety agencies are constrained by declining resources, we have little hope of helping turn the tide on the cycle of reoffending.

The poor economy and depleted county budget forces us to seek creative solutions by forming a stronger partnership between local governments and community-based nonprofit organizations. This is what we are trying to forge with the county's Re-Entry Initiative, a countywide planning process and resource assessment that will hopefully result in a strategic plan before the expected mass release of prisoners.

While the release of 40,000 inmates may seem overwhelming, representatives of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation told me in a recent meeting that only 18,000 inmates are eligible for early release. The rest of the inmates, they say, absolutely will not be let out early because that would place the community at risk.

It is hoped the series of meetings with our nonprofit partners, county services, law enforcement, the courts and city officials will create a strategic plan to help the formerly incarcerated work their way back into the community.

To clear the air surrounding this issue causing

understandable unease among East County residents, I am holding a town hall on the early release program for inmates and the possible impacts it will have on East County. Residents can hear what it might mean to our community and what the state and county is doing about it. Members of CDCR, county Probation and local law enforcement officials will be there to answer your questions.

The town hall will be held 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. May 26 in Community Room 109 at Los Medanos College.

I urge everyone to work with our community's local public safety, employment, social services, city and nonprofit partners to continue working on issues around prisoner re-entry and to collaborate to identify and address service gaps. This area is one that we can ill afford to ignore.

Glover is the District V supervisor on the Board of Supervisors. Reach him at dist5@bos.cccounty.us

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